

The Popular Culture Studies Journal Interview with PATRICIA LEAVY

With NORMA JONES

About Patricia

Patricia Leavy, PhD is an independent scholar (formerly Associate Professor of Sociology, Chair of Sociology & Criminology and Founding Director of Gender Studies at Stonehill College). She received her PhD in sociology from Boston College. She is an internationally recognized leader in the fields of arts-based research and qualitative inquiry. Her eighteen published books include *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (Guilford Press), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press), *Fiction as Research Practice* (Left Coast Press), *Essentials of Transdisciplinary Research* (Left Coast Press), *Gender & Pop Culture: A Text-Reader* (co-edited with Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, Sense Publishers), and the best-selling novels *Low-Fat Love* (first and second editions, Sense Publishers) and *American Circumstance* (Sense Publishers). She is series creator and editor for five book series including *Social Fictions*, *Teaching Gender*, *Teaching Race & Ethnicity*, and *Teaching Writing* for Sense Publishers and *Understanding Qualitative Research* for Oxford University Press. She is Co-Founding Editor-in-Chief of *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*. The *Journal* may be found online at <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/ari/index>.

Known for her commitment to public scholarship, she is frequently called on by the national news media and has regular blogs for *The Huffington Post*, *The Creativity Post*, and *We Are the Real Deal. Examiner*

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called her “the high priestess of pop feminism.” She has also written articles for numerous newspapers, magazines, and online media sites as well as academic forums including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She received the New England Sociological Association 2010 New England Sociologist of the Year Award, the American Creativity Association 2014 Special Achievement Award, the American Educational Research Association Qualitative SIG 2015 Egon Guba Memorial Keynote Lecture Award, and the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry 2015 Special Career Award (she is the youngest recipient). Dr. Leavy delivers invited talks and keynote lectures at universities, private events, and national and international conferences. Please visit www.patricialeavy.com for more information about Dr. Leavy or find her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/WomenWhoWrite>.

What attracted you, initially, to academia?

The discipline of sociology. After changing my major as an undergrad from theatre arts to sociology, I decided to pursue graduate school. The general expectation once you’re in a sociology PhD program is that you will go into academia, which suited me well because my primary passion was conducting research and publishing. As a single mother, when I was in graduate school, I also needed to earn additional income and so I was an adjunct at local colleges. During about a two and half year period I taught approximately 25 undergraduate courses. So, between my passion for publishing sociological research and my considerable teaching experience, an academic appointment seemed like the logical next step and I was fortunate to secure a tenure track job right out of grad school.

You left a tenured position to become a public intellectual. How did you come to the decision to leave academia?

I was at a point in my career during which I had significant publishing opportunities both as an author and book series editor. Since there are only so many hours in a day, I was going to have to turn down some publishing opportunities I had been working toward for over a decade. I had just finished my tenth year in my institution and was being promoted to full professor. It seemed like the perfect time to leave academia and work as a full-time author and independent sociologist.

Because I get asked about this a lot, I would add two things about my particular situation. First, I was already an income-producing author, otherwise I would not have given up my tenured position. I had probably published more than ten books by the time I left my job and had secured a flow of advances, signing bonuses, and royalties. Further, in the couple of years leading up to leaving academia, I created book series with two academic publishers, which I edit. The idea was partly that my livelihood would never be based on my writing alone, because that is a slippery slope in terms of the freedom to write what I want to write and not be constrained by material considerations. Second, I'm married with a working spouse. If I weren't married I probably would not have given up my tenured position at that specific time, just for benefits alone, like health insurance. I share all of this because often people coming straight out of graduate school ask me how they can build the kind of career I have and it's important to be open, that it took me a decade and advance planning to be able to pursue this path.

Was it hard leaving teaching?

No. While I was at my institution for 10 years, the reality is that between the high teaching load I had, the additional winter session and summer session

courses I routinely taught, and the extensive teaching I did as an adjunct during graduate school, if you count the actual number of courses I taught, it's almost as many as some professors teach in a traditionally full career as a professor. I think I accomplished what I wanted to in the classroom to the best of my ability and that teaching helped me enormously as a writer and thinker, but it was time for me to move on.

I'm fortunate to be invited as a guest speaker at various universities and conferences and I also routinely Skype into classes that have adopted one of my books for an author Q&A. I also serve as a graduate student advisor on theses and PhD projects. So in many ways, I feel like I'm able to get optimal contact with students while having enough time to focus properly on my publishing projects. Right after leaving my academic position I also co-edited a book called *Gender & Pop Culture: A Text-Reader* with my colleague Adrienne Trier-Bieniek (Sense Publishers, 2013). The book gets at the heart of what I taught for over 12 years. By putting the book out I felt like I chronicled the major lessons in my teaching and made it available for others to use.

On public scholarship

What do you consider public scholarship and why is it so important?

Public scholarship is accessible to people outside of academia. I mean accessible in two respects. First, the work has to be understandable to people outside of academia. Public scholarship is jargon-free and written or expressed in formats that large numbers of people can understand and

engage with. Second, the work has to be available to people outside of academia. In other words, it needs to circulate in places that non-academics are likely to find it. When you're engaging in public scholarship it's important to think about the relevant stakeholders, given whatever your substantive topic is, and how you are going to reach those stakeholders, including in what format.

Public scholarship might include blogs, op-eds, and other popular forms of writing, or it might include appearances on radio, television, podcasts, or it might include artistic formats from literary genres such as poetry, short stories, or novels or visual genres such as photography, photoblogs, or visual art exhibitions, or performative genres such as film, theatre, dance, or music. I believe that there are ethical and practical imperatives for making our work publicly accessible.

Research should not circulate within the confines of the academy alone. When you consider all of the resources – human and financial – that go into academic research articles that generally have an audience of 3-8 readers, most of whom are simply citing the work to advance their own research agenda, you really need to ask yourself whether this system makes sense. For me, there are serious issues of elitism and ideas about who is entitled to knowledge. I believe that knowledge should belong to the many, not the few. There is also the issue of impact. What kind of impact do you want your work to have? Do you want it to be useful to actual people in some real-world setting?

In my own work I engage in public scholarship in two primary ways. One, as a means of participating in discussions about current events. This is a part of social justice work and usually takes the form of op-eds, blogs, or radio. When a teaching moment in the country occurs, meaning a moment when a sociological lens can help societal understanding or change, it's important to use our tools to be part of that conversation. Two, as a means of sharing my research with broad audiences, which usually takes an artistic

form such as a novel. My novels are grounded in a feminist, sociological perspective so this too has a social justice component.

As a very vocal and recognized advocate of public scholarship, what advice do you have for others about how to engage in public scholarship?

I have a few bits of advice for people who want to engage in public scholarship. First, you need to start off small. I often receive emails from people who wrote their first op-ed and want to submit it to the *New York Times* or who wrote their first book and expect phone calls from NPR or CNN. Start with blogs in your subject area, local newspapers, and local radio to build your portfolio and to gain some experience. Early in my career I was quoted in more than 200 newspaper stories in newspapers all over the country but that you never would've heard if you didn't live in that location. I was glad to be asked and never saw a media opportunity as too small. I actively pursued small-scale opportunities and learned a lot in the process. Second, for each project you need to think about the audience you most want to reach. Who are the relevant stakeholders and what media platforms do they engage with? Third, you need to develop a thick skin. When you put yourself out there, you get all kinds of responses back. Internet culture emboldens people to write particularly extreme, and often harsh, comments. Divorce yourself from it. Frankly, while the positive feedback can be inspiring, it can be dangerous as well.

My best advice as you build larger and more diverse audiences for your work is this: develop your own relationship with your work that isn't dependent on external validation. Get feedback before you put your work out in public forums, but then make peace with it and let it go.

About arts-based research:

For those unfamiliar, what is arts-based research (ABR) and how may we learn more about it?

Arts-based research (ABR) is a set of research practices that involve adapting the tenets of the creative arts in social research projects. There are numerous strengths of these research practices, including: tapping issues that are otherwise difficult to reach, getting at and expressing the feeling-based dimensions of social life, disrupting or unsettling stereotypes, fostering self or social awareness and reflection, crystallizing macro-micro connections, and producing research that is publicly accessible and useful. Since this is a popular culture journal, consider an example from everyday life that shows the power of the arts to transform and educate.

Think of the emotional impact and learning you might experience seeing a dramatic film, let's say one about a historical event. If it's a good film, you might talk about it with friends after and continue to think about it. You may learn to think about a time or group differently than you had before, imagining yourself in someone else's shoes.

Going to the movies is fun and something people elect to do for entertainment, but movies can also be vehicles for self and social reflection, learning, and making emotional connections. Imagine now the power of using this form in research perhaps in sociology or health care, how we might reach new audiences and reach traditional academic audiences in new ways.

For people interested in learning more my book *Method Meets Art* (Guilford Press), now in its second edition, is a comprehensive introduction to arts-based research that includes significant methodological instruction for the different genres of ABR, textual and online exemplars, evaluation

criteria, and additional resources. More details are available on the Guilford Press site: <http://www.guilford.com/books/Method-Meets-Art/Patricia-Leavy/9781462513321>

Why is creativity and art so important in research, for you?
(What are we losing by being too “academic-y?”)

Research should be useful and not just a line on a CV. When we are too academic, we fail to engage relevant stakeholders in the process and benefits of research, which makes no sense at all. That’s why so many people think academics are out of touch and in ivory towers. But beyond this, creativity is also vital to problem-solving and exploration. When we apply creative ways of thinking we see problems, issues, or experiences from new perspectives. Progress doesn’t come with innovation. I also think there are implications for education.

Learning can be pleasurable, and when possible, it ought to be. Learning can be fun. The idea that if it’s fun it isn’t rigorous is not only misguided, it’s sad. We are active agents in our learning and the more participatory or engaging the methods and texts used are, the more students get out of it. For example, I edit five academic book series, so I see a lot of responses to different books. I have never experienced a response to anything like to the *Social Fictions Series*, nor has the publisher. The series publishes scholarly research written in literary forms, so anyone can read them. Professors rave about the books, routinely saying that students participated more in discussions and their assignments showed deep engagement and reflection. The reason is simple. They enjoyed what they were reading. So whether it is how we share our research with those outside of the academy or within our classrooms, creativity and artful approaches are powerful tools. And from a totally selfish point of view, one should derive pleasure in their own research experiences, which can come from creativity.

As someone who has done both traditional and creative work, I can attest that my best work has happened when I was having fun doing it. That doesn't mean it isn't rigorous, that's a false dichotomy. People needn't fear fun. I have been most challenged and experienced the most pleasure writing arts-based novels. Creativity takes discipline. It's about trial, error, and risk, not a bolt of lightning from the sky. The creativity I was pushed to has also influenced how I see and think about everything else. As others have noted, creativity is a bottomless well. The more you take from it, the more you have.

This interview is featured in an academic journal yet, we are discussing arts-based research. What do you see as a future for academia and ABR?

The traditional journal system is on its way out, or to lesser supremacy within the academic system because it simply doesn't make sense. A system in which people spend years, using up human and financial resources, to produce work that is read by an audience of three, can't be sustained forever. You can see by the plethora of online and open source journals, social media platforms for sharing scholarship (like academia.edu for example), and increases in tenure and promotion requirements globally to show the "impact" of work, the tide is turning. Within the emerging academic landscape, arts-based research will increase, as one of many paradigms. This is already happening as evidenced by book publications, citations, conferences, and online journals that allow all mediums to be represented. As someone enmeshed in the publishing world, I can say that publishers uninterested in ABR a decade ago are investing greatly in it now because they see the audience response. It is clearly on the rise. Obviously there's some pushback, as there always is when people privileged in the current system feel threatened by innovation and change. But posterity

favors the innovators so I encourage people to be unafraid to take some risks and be a part of expanding the bounds.

About popular culture, social fictions, and novels

Your books, *American Circumstance* and *Low-Fat Love* are bestselling fictions and you are the editor of the Social Fictions Series at Sense Publishers. How did you make the “transition” from academic writing to “fiction?” What advice do you have for others?

In the beginning it was actually sort of an accident. I spent years writing about emergent research methodologies including arts-based research, which I was particularly drawn to. I was on a sabbatical and started doing some creative writing just for myself. I thought at best I might write a short story, but as I progressed the project grew. That book was my first novel *Low-Fat Love* and it wasn't until it was finished that I knew I wanted to try to publish it. *Low-Fat Love* was informed by a decade of interview research and teaching experiences, as well as my own autoethnographic reflections. Therefore, it was important to me to publish it as a piece of research, even though it can be read purely as a novel. I spent several months thinking about it and came up with the idea for the *Social Fictions book series* so that my novel would be a part of something larger. The first publisher I approached turned me down, although he was intrigued and encouraged me to pursue it further. The second publisher, Sense Publishers, signed me to a deal for both the book series and my novel as the launch title. The series publishes full-length works of ABR including novels, short story and poetry

collections, plays, and other literary genres. We are the first book series published by an academic publisher of this kind and it is the professional accomplishment I am most proud of.

While my transition from academic to writing to fiction was very much learn-as-you-go, I did make a concerted effort to seek more feedback and learn more about my craft as I worked on my second novel, *American Circumstance*. For example, I joined a local writing group where I read pieces of the novel out loud and solicited feedback. I also found a local writing buddy with whom I meet weekly. She read every word of *American Circumstance* and provided feedback along the way, and has continued to do so on all of my fiction. The new edition of *Method Meets Art* provides instruction on how to write fiction-based research for those interested, as does my book *Fiction as a Research Practice*. If you just want to get into the habit of creative writing there are free daily writing prompts available online that might be a good place to start.

Popular culture plays a central role in your novels. How do you weave popular culture into your novels?

Popular culture is really the subtext in my novels. There are loads of popular culture references throughout the books and each one was selected with intent. This is a primary way that I bring my sociological and feminist perspectives into my fiction. For example, in *Low-Fat Love* I used popular culture and women's media in particular as signposts throughout the book in order to make visible the context in which women come to think of themselves, as well as the men and women in their lives. Our ideas about beauty, appearance, romance, love, and so forth, are shaped in a context not just in our own heads. I wanted to show how that context is internalized by some people. As a feminist sociologist, I attempted to offer a critical commentary about popular culture and the social construction of femininity.

For instance, the protagonist is repeatedly engaged in consuming media targeted at women, such as tabloid TV, home shopping, Lifetime movies, plays, books, and even music videos. The sociologist in me was trying to link the macro context with people's individual, micro-level experiences. Media culture, which is the macro level, impacts the character personally, which is the micro level. I also used popular culture to mirror what was going on with the characters, including their relationship and life mistakes. In *American Circumstance* I referenced popular culture and visual art in particular to add another layer of meaning to the book. If readers are unfamiliar with a particular reference, then the novel also becomes a vehicle to experience other pieces of art. I've been told that some book clubs and classes who have used my novels have looked up the art references and I think that's fantastic. If a piece of literature can expose us to other art the potential for personal growth expands which is exciting. The novel I am writing now, which is my favorite project to date, is in some ways a love letter to popular culture. It's absolutely loaded with references, especially to film and visual art. There's a big 1980s pop culture theme throughout the book, which helps me articulate the characters' stories and moves the plot forward. In other words, popular culture is active in the plot.

Future endeavors?

What are some ongoing important issues you want to explore in your writing and public scholarship?

I want to continue exploring what arts-based research might be in my own work and to advocate for its place in academia and publishing. I also want to use the platforms available to me to speak out against sexism, racism,

classism, and homophobia, and their interconnections, in academic organizations and the larger society.

You have so many exciting projects and have been hinting at secret book projects, what's next for you, any hints?

I have one project that isn't secret that I'm very excited about, which is my first collaboration with a visual artist. I'm working with Victoria Scotti on a book called *Low-Fat Love Stories*, which is based on interview research I conducted, and combines fictionalized short stories and visual art. The work Victoria is doing is expanding the bounds of what arts-based research is and it's changed the way I think and see. It's been an amazing collaborative journey. I'm also editing a handbook of arts-based research for Guilford Press and a handbook of methods for public scholarship for Oxford University Press.

Then there are the secret projects. I've come to value how important it is to nurture the creative process and to be free to explore without others getting inside your head and imposing their views, especially those on the industry side. So I've made a conscious effort to keep some of my projects private. Because I'm grateful and appreciative that my friends on social media and publishing partners are interested in what I'm doing, and because having folks cheering you on can be motivational, I came up with the hashtag #SecretBookProjects so I could post things online about my writing process, without having to reveal details. For example, when I'm having a tough day of writing it's helpful for me to be able to put that out there and dialogue with people, but I don't necessarily need to say what the specific project is. All this said, here's a little scoop on one of my secret projects. As I mentioned earlier, I will soon be releasing a new novel in the *Social Fictions* series. The title of my new novel is, *Blue*. It is absolutely my favorite thing I have ever done. I started writing it the day my daughter's

father died after a long battle with cancer. It began as a way to use creativity to get through the pain that day, but it took on a life of its own.

Notwithstanding the painful impetus, it's actually the most lighthearted and joyful book I have ever written. Popular culture junkies like me should enjoy it because the subtext celebrates popular culture and pays tribute to 1980s popular culture specifically. In addition to many film and television references, there are also nods to the art scene in 1980s SoHo, New York. I expect it will be out this November or December. If interested, check-in on my Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/WomenWhoWrite>) or check-out the *Social Fictions* page on the Sense Publishers website (<https://www.sensepublishers.com/catalogs/bookseries/social-fictions-series/>)