Creative writing for social research:
A practical guide

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Bristol, Policy Press, 2021
ISBN: 978-1-4473-5598, pp.211
Paperback $NZD91

"We say of a story that it 'rings true' (or doesn't). This metaphor, of a sound or a cracked bell, is a sensory metaphor of experience. Through stories we experience, vicariously, the experiences of others" (p. 126). In my dog-eared copy of *Creative Writing for Social Research: A Practical Guide,* these words float above a purple sticky note with the words "start review with this point?" For me, these words capture and convey much of the essence, if not the whole point, of an engaging exploration into the intersection of creative writing and social research.

This book has its genesis in 2018 during a two-day workshop in Sheffield, England, led by the authors Richard Phillips (University of Sheffield) and Helen Kara, a leading independent researcher, author and teacher (Kara, 2014). Each workshop presenter did a performative presentation, drawing on their areas of expertise. Collaborations with the presenters during and after the workshop contributed to the text, with a self-described and unapologetically "messy quality" expressing the "polygraphical" voices and styles of the two authors and 15 other contributors (p. xi). The collaborators are thanked for the creativity and fun they brought to the workshop. I wish I had been there! Fortunately, the insights and learnings about creative writing in social research from the workshop are made available through this book.

As a budding Artist✻Academic (University of Auckland, 2023), I jumped at the opportunity to review this book. For example, my interest in arts-based research methods is informed by researchers such as Leavy (2015), who wrote that "the arts can be highly engaging in part because they tap into emotions and may jar us into seeing or thinking differently" (p. 12). I found myself intrigued by the authors' promise to introduce the idea of *queer writing*: "Queer, in this sense, means to trouble, to unsettle, to destabilise, to see afresh" (p. xi).

Chapter 1, "Introduction", begins by questioning the compatibility of poetry and other forms of creative writing in social research. The authors take a balanced approach, advocating for the potential of creative writing in social research while cautioning that it should be used "where appropriate, rather than everywhere" (p. 3). The book is positioned as an introduction and a practical creative writing guide for social researchers. I personally experienced it as less of a "how to" manual and more as a creative inquiry, a challenge to reflect on how we might integrate the ideas and methods from the text into our writing practice. Moreover, the authors explicitly welcome amateurs like me to play in this space, citing DeLyser and Sui (2014, p. 297), who identify creative writing methods as a "work-in-progress, with plenty of space for innovation and contribution" (p. 3).

This invitation to play is built upon throughout the book. Each chapter consists of a narrative from the authors, augmented by creative writing exercises and practice sections from the other contributors. Each contributor piece is decorated with a delightful, and at times unsettling "inspiration doll" drawn by Alke Gröppel-Wegener (p. 11). Described as an "unruly pack of genre-bending figures", we are told they are not only there to decorate the text but also to "trouble and inspire us as writers" (p. 11). Mission accomplished, if you let them.

In Chapter 2, "Doing creative writing", the authors encourage readers to roll up their sleeves and try some of the techniques. The authors remind us that, by necessity, social researchers are also writers. Thus, one method for improving creative writing is simply to be more conscious of the act of writing. Easier said than done. One of my first forays into the world of arts-based methods in social research involved reading Faulkner (2009), who suggested that researchers using poetic methods demonstrate "some effort to understand poetry, even if one is not innately a great poet" (p. 71). The authors recognise this conundrum, ultimately arguing that, while social research should not be judged "by the standards of fine art" (p. 18), researchers should develop a basic competence with art techniques used in their research.

A palette of alternatives is presented for creative writing in social research. Observation and description; story and storying; essays. Lists. While researchers are encouraged to play with these methods, the authors acknowledge several possible barriers deterring social researchers from applying them. The authors introduce suggestions for how researchers can step out of their comfort zones. One example emphasised the significance of reading as a starting point for creative writing. The authors highlight works from influential social researchers such as bell hooks and Doreen Massey to provide examples of creative writing in social research.

In Chapter 3, "Doing research, generating data, working with participants", the authors emphasise that creative writing is a powerful tool for participant engagement. Creative writing methods may afford privacy and safe spaces for the research participants. The authors note that participants may become more deeply engaged in the research, with participatory creative writing methods having the potential to "reach beneath the conscious to the subconscious and latent, sometimes reaching banal blind spots" (p. 74). I believe the following quote from Freud underlines the value of this approach: "Art is a conventionally accepted reality in which, thanks to artistic illusion, symbols and substitutes are able to provoke real emotions" (Neelands, 2010, p. 154).

For social researchers working in Aotearoa New Zealand, it may be helpful to consider the role storytelling already plays within Kaupapa Māori research. For example, Skerrett (2023) explores the significance of Matauranga Māori for social research in Aotearoa New Zealand, emphasising that "You can't tell the story of anything without knowing its history. It provides us with the wayfinding signposts into the future" (p. 162). Here, Skerrett signals for practitioners to be mindful of context. Creative writing opens a world of exciting research opportunities. Further, Kaupapa Māori research challenges our conceptions of legitimate forms of knowledge production. However, the authors echo Skerrett's caution to be mindful of context in our writing, reminding readers that "no method is intrinsically ethical" and that "participatory creative writing requires as much ethical reflexivity and vigilance as any other method" (p. 77).

The chapter also provides practical guidance on inviting and recruiting participants and emphasises the importance of building trust and relationships. The authors offer tips for

getting started and warming up, highlight the effectiveness of adopting a playful approach when engaging with community groups, and suggest avoiding settings that may cause some participants to be uncomfortable, such as schools.

The authors round out the chapter with a discussion on the balance between process and product in creative writing for social research. While some researchers focus on the practice itself, others emphasise tangible outcomes. However, as we consider outcomes, the debate inevitably leads to the question of the legitimacy of creative writing in social research in the first place. The authors argue that creative writing can match social scientific analysis by revealing truths, noting that "creative writing is illustrative rather than representative" (p. 119). Moreover, the authors state "This is the point: though unreliable on some levels, creative writing is truthful on others" (p. 120). In support of this view, the authors cite Leavy (2015) who contends that fiction-based research "is about truthfulness more than truth" (p. 58).

And there it is! As this book review proceeds toward its conclusion, I find myself face-to-face again with the aforementioned purple sticky note. Chapter 4, "Exploring and articulating findings", gets to the point, "all research involves exploring and articulating phenomena" (p. 125). The authors build upon the idea of truth to help us understand the value of creative writing in social research. Drawing on Pickering and Kara (2017), the authors write: "Fiction offers what we might call 'authentic' truth, that is, the truth of experience, as opposed to 'literal' truth, that is, the truth of evidence-based or empirical work" (p. 125). Put simply, narratives that ring true can potentially deepen our understanding of the research subject.

The following quote from the poem "Life In A Suburban Garage" (Carroll et al., 2011) provides a striking example of the potential for creative writing to connect readers with

a research project. The poem draws from phrases and sentences that emerged from research into the experiences of people living in marginal housing in Aotearoa New Zealand:

> And your ten-year old begs you please
>
> to say "going home",
>
> not "back to the garage",
>
> in front of her friends. (p. 128)

Confronted with examples such as this poem, the authors' statement that "poetry can open windows that are otherwise closed" feels understated (p. 127). Chapter 4 considers several forms of creative writing for data analysis and dissemination, including screenplay writing, visual methods such as comics, graphic novels, and performance. Researchers can develop a more nuanced and engaging representation of their data through these creative approaches, fostering a deeper connection with readers and audiences.

In Chapter 5, "Searching and queer(ing) writing", the authors are honest and transparent in letting readers know that, in writing the book, they struggled with, and sometimes disagreed about, descriptions of creative writing. Moreover, the authors express an awareness that care should be taken to avoid creating barriers for researchers interested in exploring opportunities to use creative writing to enhance their work. The authors' approach opens an inquiry into the nature of creative writing, challenging readers to think beyond traditional academic writing conventions and consider the possibilities for new approaches to conducting and presenting research. This said, the authors view the idea of queer writing as an embrace of the messiness this approach can bring, while distinguishing it from merely sloppy writing (p. 177).

The authors quote Hillery Glasby to provocatively express the essence of queer

writing: "Mostly, I like to use my writing to fuck shit up" (Glasby, 2019, p. 24). This echoes the most memorable and impactful piece of advice on writing I ever received, which came from one of my Master's thesis supervisors who suggested that I needed to "fuck with my verbs". Queer writing is presented as an invitation to disrupt conventional aesthetics by unsettling "the seemingly immovable words on a page or a screen, words that can make phenomena seem permanent and knowable when they are nothing of the kind" (p. 178).

Would I recommend this book? Yes. My dog-eared and scribbled-upon copy of *Creative Writing for Social Research: A Practical Guide* sits within reach of my desk. I am beginning my creative writing adventure and fully anticipate its condition will worsen considerably as I progress through my research project. I think the authors would approve. I have attempted to be "more conscious" of my writing in this review, accepting the invitation to play and experimenting with what I have learnt from the text in subtle ways. More explicitly, here are my final thoughts on this superb book:

Words dance on pages

Stories woven, research blooms

A creative dawn

Reviewed by **Andrew Davidson**, University of Auckland

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