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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Fiction: bridging academic enquiry and creative writing

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The evolution of research methodologies across disciplines has prompted a re-evaluation of knowledge creation and dissemination. This article examines Social Fiction writing as an innovative Practice As Research method that integrates academic enquiry and creative writing. Social Fiction offers a compelling medium to critically engage with complex social issues through fostering dialogue, disrupting entrenched narratives, and supporting inclusive knowledge production. By engaging with this approach, researchers can craft nuanced narratives that resonate across disciplines, catalysing meaningful reflection and social transformation. This article outlines Social Fiction's principles, including its speculative nature, focus on verisimilitude, and reader engagement, as well as its transformative impact on research and representation. Drawing on practical applications from the authors' experiences, we explore the challenges, including ethical considerations, issues of recognizability, the writers' and readers' roles, and the need for balancing creativity with truthfulness. Strategies such as composite character creation, co-authoring with participants, writing as community, and interdisciplinary collaboration are proposed to strengthen this practice. In doing so, we position Social Fiction as a valuable tool for advancing inclusive and socially engaged research.

Keywords Social Fiction • Practice As Research • creative writing in research • activist storytelling • writing as community • ethical representation • narrative methodologies • collaborative writing

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Introduction

The research landscape within the social sciences and humanities, but also within the STEM subjects, has undergone significant changes. Initiatives relating to a more inclusive research culture for researchers and participants (for example, [Walmsley et al, 2018](#); [Nind, 2020](#); [He et al, 2024](#)) and trends to a more equitable approach to dissemination so that everyone may benefit from research (for example, [Edwards, 2015](#); [Ramanadhan et al, 2023](#); [Parent-Johnson and Duncan, 2024](#)) have resulted in researchers rethinking what counts as research and how we value knowledge generation and dissemination. As a consequence, research approaches that focus on collaborative efforts and that respect practitioner experience and tacit knowledge emerge as more commonly applied. Practice As Research is based on the inextricable connection between research and practice, thereby recognizing the value of practical, professional knowledge alongside academic, scholarly expertise. Practice As Research requires researchers to engage in thinking-doing-being; thus, to immerse themselves in praxis in order to make sense of experiences.

In this article, we explore Social Fiction writing as one approach to Practice As Research. We argue that Social Fiction is a powerful approach that integrates creative writing with academic enquiry to illuminate societal issues, such as inequalities and social injustice, while amplifying the voices from the margins. We contend that the universal appeal and emotional resonance of Social Fiction allows researchers to challenge traditional boundaries of research. By doing so, it offers a more humane form of knowledge, one that is deeply relatable and rooted in lived experiences, but also embraces a transformative approach, fostering critical insights that challenge conventional paradigms and contribute to more inclusive and equitable solutions.

Social Fiction is a genre of academic writing based on and steeped in research practice that enables researchers to draw out specificities of the social world. Social Fiction blends imaginative storytelling with reflections on societal structures, behaviours, and potential futures. It aims to illuminate the human condition, critique societal norms, and explore alternative possibilities. Social Fiction problematizes conventional research approaches, encouraging a polyphonic textual climate that offers a creative space to explore societal issues, fostering dialogue and understanding, and bringing about social change. The practice is therefore closely related to autoethnography, poetic enquiry, and embodied enquiry, but also recognizes the value of professional knowledge and praxis. Like in (auto)ethnographic writing, this emotional appeal to the reader requires the author's willingly risking revealing the self in pursuit of trust ([Carr et al, 2025](#)). The Social Fiction writer-researcher moulds their research participants' multiple realities in such a way that there is a meaningful message for the reader. Irrespective of how Social Fiction is created, as a solitary or joint project, it is an intrinsically collaborative endeavour between the writer-researcher and the reader.

In effect, the writer-researcher builds a conversation with the reader to foster the reader's engagement with the story and the entire research, more generally.

We begin our article with a brief overview of the principles of Social Fiction before offering an insight into the Social Fiction writing practice. Drawing on work generated through our Social Fiction writing group, Hakan and Nicki present practical examples from their own practices to highlight opportunities and challenges of expanding conventional academic writing within the context of a Practice As Research framework. This section is followed by an analytical Social Fiction, in which

we explore the communal aspect of writing. In the discussion section, we consider the challenges of Social Fiction, such as ethical considerations, issues of recognizability, the roles of readers and writers, and the need for honing the craft of writing. We also highlight the importance of balancing ethnographic truthfulness with sensitive representation of multiple truths. We conclude with recommendations for how to pursue Social Fiction as a Practice As Research approach.

Principles of Social Fiction

Connecting scientific research and creative writing in fiction or non-fiction has a rich history. Scholars frequently cite the centrality of narratives or stories as a fundamental mechanism of human communication, a phenomenon observed ubiquitously (Fisher, 1987; Barthes, 1975). Within research contexts, storytelling serves as a vital instrument for researchers to depict and rationalize reality (Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). Social Fiction, as a genre, weaves imaginative storytelling with profound reflections on societal structures, behaviours, and potential futures. At its core, Social Fiction aims to illuminate the human condition, critique societal norms, and explore alternative possibilities. Its roots lie in philosophical thought, literary theory, and historical developments that have shaped our understanding of society and the human psyche. These disciplines offer tools to understand how fiction reflects and reshapes societal norms and ideologies. The term ‘sociological imagination’ coined in 1959 (Mills, 2000) captures the essence of Social Fiction writing. It refers to the ability to connect personal experiences to larger societal structures. Social Fiction writers often use this perspective to reveal the interdependence of individual lives and systemic forces, crafting characters and plots that expose power dynamics, cultural norms, and institutional challenges. The rationale for employing fiction as a medium in this endeavour arises from three key attributes:

- the fundamental appeal of stories;
- fiction’s potential in relation to the politics of representation; and
- fiction as a way to go beyond research data through speculating or imagining (Tipper and Gilman, 2024: 23).

This rich tradition underpins the emergence of Social Fiction, a dynamic research approach situated at the confluence of research, teaching, and practice. It foregrounds critical and creative methods of social enquiry, knowledge production, and dissemination. For some practitioners, Social Fiction began as an effort to present anthropological or sociological ethnographic findings to broader audiences. For others, storytelling extended beyond reporting research, becoming the research itself. This approach embodies thinking with stories (Frank, 2013) and writing as a method of enquiry (Richardson, 2000; 2003). It offers researchers a means to understand the world and their existence within it.

Social Fiction in practice

As Social Fiction writers we each have our own personal and individual practices, but we also come together in collaborative sessions, which are not unlike writing workshops commonly used in creative writing settings. We discuss the aim and purpose

of our writing, we identify the effect our writing has on others, and we share feedback and strategies to further develop our craft. In our communal approach to writing, we produce joint outputs that represent analytical stepping stones offering connections, which we would not be able to make as individuals. Some of these stepping stones may be developed for dissemination (for example, [McAllister and Brown, 2023](#); [Brown et al, 2024](#)), whereas others are used to advance individual projects. In the following, we offer extracts from longer historical and contemporary Social Fiction pieces to explore two different purposes of and for Social Fiction writing: to foster emotional connections for researchers, their participants, and the audiences, as well as to depersonalize individual stories so that experiences may become more universally applicable and generalizable. Through the analysis of our writing, we discuss what happens when an author's creative writing of short stories or 'notes to self' in field diaries infiltrate the tightly knit fabric of an academic manuscript (or vice versa). We advocate that Social Fiction is not simply a creative method of addressing societal issues. With its inherent speculative and reflective nature, Social Fiction is one of the most convincing and elucidating ways of interrogating and explaining human experience: it allows authors to perceptively depict human emotions, values semantic gaps, silences, uncertainties, and speculations, and as such, invites both the reader and the author to collaborate in creating and interpreting the potential meanings. What Tim Ingold argues for anthropological learning may perfectly be argued for Social Fiction: it 'disarms us; it leaves us feeling exposed, literally "out of position" ... It opens us up to the possibilities of life' ([Ingold, 2017](#)). Social Fiction allows us to imagine the 'possible': its power lies in its ability to construct a convincing reality of the possibilities in everyday life.

Hakan's Social Fiction

I discuss how seemingly distinct writing conventions (that is, academic and creative writing) can benefit from one another in social research settings when the channels of communication between them are intentionally kept open, and how Social Fiction as a form of social investigation can help explore and crystallize the societal concerns we engage with.

Let me consider two examples of such learning practice. The first comes from my ethnographic fieldwork. The short extract that follows originally appeared as part of 'notes to self' in my field diary, alongside other informal elements, such as insights from interviews and self-reflections. It then appeared in an anthology of stories. Note that, when it was poured out onto paper for the first time, I was unaware that these fragments would eventually become part of a literary genre – hence, no secret motive for utilizing this material as a 'seed' for creative writing. The objective was simple: to create a reflective, critical space of monologue where the 'I' could connect with and challenge my own anthropological positioning in the field – perhaps as a form of disarming or 'literary displacement' ([Gammeltoft, 2022: 597](#)) – and, through that, to provide the readers with a vivid glimpse of the topic under investigation. My fieldwork was interested in the question of how Japanese television 'successfully turns into a persuasive, intimate, local, and national member of a televisual audience-family through carefully engineered televisual discourses, linguistic strategies, and economic and cultural elements, some of which

extend back to the pre-television era' (Ergül, 2018: 14). Could the answer lie in the medium's success in blurring the boundaries between the chaotic, multi-faceted, and colourful social reality 'outside' and the overtly emotionalized, extravagant, mangaesque televisual content on the screen?

Just behind the television, on the window that almost entirely covers the wall, the lights of the city's most flirtatious boulevard come and go. The boulevard is lined with imposing buildings with steel and glass facades, without histories ... It is a fire of light, screen and colour this boulevard, from every hole the eye can see nightclubs, *izakayas*¹ spill out, a temple of neon lights where sinless but busy *sararīman*² come to be cleansed after a long working day, where on the narrow streets the mind is sacrificed to the heart; that's *Kokubunchō*³ ... Infantile-looking, *kawaii*⁴ hostesses cut out carelessly from the pages of a manga or stripped away from a late-night TV show at club doors. Take the [TV] screen in front of me and paste it on this ephemeral image of urban life behind; it would immediately dissolve into fine-tuned disharmony without notice.

These notes were written just after a long day of participant observation at a national TV station in Tokyo. I first transcribed them in the middle of the night in a tiny room with a window opening onto the city's red-light district. The text then appeared in a variety of formats, including a section in my PhD thesis (that is, researcher's positionality), an academic book on Japanese TV, and eventually a short story. For some, the extract may sound too experimental, subjective, or fictitious to be included in an academic enquiry. But I believe that the text's subjective aspect is precisely what allowed it to properly transmit (and visualize) the multi-layered social reality it discusses. The text, on the other hand, had a single objective: to carve out sociological knowledge by utilizing the possibilities of a language that is thought to best describe the phenomenon under question, and to do so without sacrificing critical thinking, relationality, and reflexivity. Let us remember the obvious: ethnographic writing is not far from Social Fiction in that it is not an innocent practice. Writing ethnography is an attempt to construct a simulacrum of the so-called external, observable world, hence it is a fiction, too. Employing the conventional techniques of ethnographic storytelling, we narrate our 'tales from the field' (van Maanen, 1988) in a convincing and perfectly coherent form. As such, we first define and then demarcate the boundaries of the social realities we aim to interpret. Just like other forms of artistic expression (for example, short story, performance, or documentary), ethnographic tone in Social Fiction writing attempts to translate the observations into the readers' linguistic universe.

The second fiction, on the other hand, was written as a response to the ongoing discussion in our Social Fiction sessions about 'writing Social Fiction about writing Social Fiction'. The aim was to problematize the writing process itself and discuss the challenges we face when crafting Social Fiction. Drawing from my previous ethnographic fieldwork (Ergül, 2025) and my observations about digital storytelling in a refugee emergency context, I set out to explore the question of *voice* – particularly the political dynamics between voice and representation, selection and agency, and, obviously, power.

The Invite

Here I am again. Behind my desk. I thought I'd do some writing, finish the story I started weeks ago, but I can't. I see you there again, staring at me from behind my words, again with the same empty green eyes, wondering what I am doing, why I'm writing about you, your life, your despair. How can you ask me this! I was there, with you, with others; I saw your refuge, I heard your story, and I want others to hear you too.

I see you getting closer and closer, with your empty green eyes, staring at me from behind my words. I hear you whisper, 'but that's not me, not my voice, not my pain'. You never scream, do you? You never punch? You hide in the silence, you always whisper from within, so I can't ignore you.

You're right; I give up. Please come, come and join me, let's write your story together. I will make you some tea ... the sun-dried-black-tea you gave me. And I promise, at some point, I will leave the room so you can also write about me.

The central question in this fiction is: 'Whose voice?' In most cases, the answer is inevitably that of the author. However, the story aims to bring to light societal injustices – in particular, the displacement of communities on the move – by intertwining voices in ways that challenge the traditional power structures inherent in writing about others' experiences.

In this short narrative, I suggest that co-creative collaborations with the communities at the heart of the fiction – such as writing fiction as community or writing about one another – can offer a more pluralistic, decolonial approach. The 'invite' in the title is not just an invitation to collaboration but also a call to reimagine the act of storytelling itself.

Through both examples, I demonstrate how Social Fiction offers a creative space to explore Ingold's 'possibilities of life' (2018: 158) by enabling alternative ways of thinking-doing-being.

Nicki's Social Fiction

Micro-fiction is a sub-genre of flash fiction or the 'short short story'. Its growing popularity has been linked to the ease of consuming short articles on mobile devices, but flash fiction has existed since fables were written. Micro-fiction depicts distinct fragments of stories (Kiosses, 2021), without fully fleshed characters or richly painted contexts. It compresses the action within the storytelling into around 300 words. An example from my PhD research follows.

A Space Set Apart

I. The boardroom

Colonies built on urban edges to confine your sort.

"A productive idyll to keep you safe", the warden's clipped words echoed in your empty mind. He marched you away from the dark-wooded grandeur of the foyer to the drab 'Villa'. The place you'd learn to call home.

The tall red-brick walls allow us to suffocate the fear that plagues us.
Duped, you're our stooge.
A woman's whisper: "Sure they're better off in there, God's little children."
Her words hang in the fetid air as I walk away.
Learn-ed men gather around the art you made.
"Disturbing indeed" the gaunt one mutters. He drops your painting onto
the polished boardroom table. The others nod, concurring silently, before
they scribe their judgement. 'A fit case to be confined' it reads.
You are not there to witness nor to speak.

II. The studio space

The paint-spattered door clatters behind you. The culture shifts almost
imperceptibly. A space where there is light chasing away the shadows. A time
to pause and not be ruled by the tick-tock of the counting clock.
No demand to do. Just to be.
"Whatever mark you make, I have no doubt it will improve the blank page"
he says gently. You notice the gathering wrinkles around his kind eyes. He
passes you a paintbrush, his hands like spade-heads.
You stay a while. In the making you smile.

III. The professional space

The artists cloak themselves in medical jargon.
They borrow tomes from the library of psychology.
These robes are itchy. They nag where limbs bend, leaving the skin raw.
The formal attire makes cheeks burn and saturates pits. Yet, the artists pass.
This mask for some, becomes fused to their face; an identity is forged.
Others continue to try to make sense through turn-taking and mess-making.
In time, the artists became professionals.
Allied to healthcare. Individuals in the system.
Like you, but not.
You remain on the margins.
Institutions closed and scandals arose.
Your voice was there, hushed but heard.

This micro-fiction emerged as a creative response to screening articles while conducting my systematic review (Power et al, 2023). The clinical accounts written in the 1980s had a profound emotional impact as I read about people's lives marked by trauma. Language tended to be deficit focussed. Medical terminology, reflective of the era, read as derogatory labels now. Patient voice was largely absent. Although much progress has been made in the intervening decades, in terms of positive socio-political change for people with learning disabilities, both societal prejudice and significant health inequalities persist (Emerson et al, 2011; Pelleboer-Gunnink et al, 2021).

Fiction became a translational tool for communicating the broader socio-political context of my research (Watson, 2022). Unlike the objectivity required by the systematic review, I could occupy a more subjective position using this form of writing. This approach allowed me to reflect critically on the socio-political dimensions of the research while maintaining a creative lens. However, this piece emerged only after employing other creative techniques to process the weight of individual stories.

Elsewhere, I have written about using response art (Fish, 2012) and found poetry (Furman, 2022) as reflexive tools in my research practice (Jayne et al, 2024), which provided catharsis, facilitated perspective-taking, and revealed blind spots in my thinking. The process moved iteratively from deeply personal reflections and sense-making through individual stories to the broader social justice implications that could be conveyed through Social Fiction.

The narrative unfolds in three distinct settings. The dehumanizing institution represents systemic power structures that perpetuate stigma. Here, the protagonist is cast as having a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963), an individual flaw that violates social norms. The sparse dialogue underscores the silencing of people with learning disabilities, mirroring their invisibility in literature both historical and contemporary. The supportive studio environment reframes stigma as a socially constructed phenomenon. The empathic engagement as a dyad and the potential for collective action suggested by drawing the reader of the story seeks to challenge enacted stigma (Aranda et al, 2023). Finally, the focus deliberately shifts from individual experiences to collective identity. This frames a liminal space where art therapists' professional identity developed, negotiating the tensions within a system that both marginalizes and seeks to humanize. The narrative highlights the intersections between personal stories and broader system-level critiques, illustrating the iterative process of reflecting on stigma and social justice through fiction. The disconnection from the intimacy of individual stories earlier underscores the tension between relational connection and systemic representation.

Afterwards, I realized that fragments of my own experience were embedded in the fiction. I had participated in multi-disciplinary meetings around a huge oak table, rescued from an asylum before it was converted into plush apartments. Growing up in Ireland, the term 'God's little children' seemed a harmless euphemism. People with learning disabilities were still contained in long-stay hospitals when I was a teenager. Now, through my work with co-researchers with learning disabilities (Power et al, 2022), I revisited this socio-politically charged label. Recognizing how common parlance reinforces institutional power structures, I juxtaposed this language with the words of the art therapist, signalling contrasting power dynamics inside the art therapy room. A counter-cultural space was created, where art provided an opportunity for personal expression and growth. Here I was drawing on Adamson's (1984) seminal work in the field of art therapy, which focussed on art as therapeutic practice within institutional settings.

This reflexive blurring of boundaries between life and research mirrors what Back described as being a 'student of the social rhythms' (2015: 821) of specific contexts. Fiction offered me a way to translate the everyday into a meaningful critique, capturing the subtle interplay between personal memory, professional insight, and societal structures. Lukin's (2019) use of micro-stories to build inclusion and engagement – although focussed on education – I also found relevant. The sparse vignettes in the fiction echo this technique, crafting scenes that challenge power dynamics while inviting empathic engagement from the reader. The process of acting reflexively (Benson and O'Reilly, 2020), just like the practice of art making, demands sustained, iterative effort – a relational interplay between artist and product. Through Social Fiction I can confront my own internal biases, continually re-evaluating my role within the field of disability and social justice, set against the complexities of healthcare research. However, Social Fiction illuminated much more to me. It became

the vehicle that cemented the philosophical foundations of my PhD and led me to implement accessible research methods with people with learning disabilities as co-researchers. This process not only shaped my approach, but also has reinforced the importance of inclusive, participatory research, in ensuring that those most affected by the systems we inhabit are central to shaping change.

Social Fiction as, and in, analysis

Analysis in qualitative research is commonly equated with finding patterns in data and making sense of data (Saldaña, 2014) in a process of manipulating, assembling, and reassembling the data (Deleuze and Guattari, 2016). Although there is a general recognition nowadays pervading the qualitative research methods community that ‘themes do not emerge’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 123, 128), analysis is often still taking the form of conventional coding. In our Social Fiction writing group, however, we regularly examine how and in how far the creation of fiction pieces is analysis. Here, we would like to offer a jointly written example to demonstrate the collaborative analytical Social Fiction writing:

Fragments of Truth

In the café, the young researcher stares at her laptop. The whirring and hissing of the coffee machine remind her of the coal miners’ daily grind – the relentless rhythm of work that shaped generations. She wants to tell their stories, the real, raw experiences hidden behind the statistics of systemic injustices. The voices in her notebook call to her: *We are more than numbers.*

Lucy’s hands tremble. What if I misrepresent them? What if I turn their pain into spectacle?

Her phone vibrates against the table, a small, insistent buzz cutting through her thoughts. It’s a text from her writing collaborative: *Truth isn’t always in the facts; it’s in how we see the world. Write their truth.* A flicker of a smile flits across her lips.

She revisits her notes, seeing not the words but the calloused hands of those hunched-over men of few words. She recalls their wives, the proud posture belied by faces etched with the burden of years of watchful silence. But as she reads, doubt creeps in. *Is this my story to tell?*

A few new words added to the screen, another coffee, then several scribbled lines. The hum of the coffee machine blends with the chaotic questions in Lucy’s mind. A cold heaviness grips her chest. She stands, breath tight, fumbles with her belongings and rushes outside. She gasps in the cold evening air, but the pressure in her ribs remains. *I need to step away. To get away. Just for a moment.*

By the time she realizes her notebook is gone, morning has come. SHIT! So much for a fresh start today. I can’t even keep my data safe; how can I possibly write about these people’s lives?

Hoping that she left her notebook in the café, she pulls on her wool coat and races back there.

Behind the reclaimed wood counter between the humming espresso machine and the carefully curated glass jars of beans, the barista sees her, clocks her and waves the notebook – *her notebook* – in her direction.

“I read it,” he says.

Then, with a soft smile, he adds, “I’m the only one in my family who isn’t a coal miner,” like he’s explaining a choice he still questions. He hands her the notebook, hesitantly showing a new page tucked inside: “Here. First time I wrote something about my family – just wanted to offer you something in return.”

Lucy flips to the fresh page. Sees his rough handwriting. A memory. His grandfather’s grime-smothered boots cast off by the door. The way his father smelled of black-earth and sweat when they’d traipse back up the hill hand-in-hand after knocking off sometimes. Heavy sighs around the silent dinner table as his grandmother ladled out the hearty *cawl*.

She looks up, meeting the barista’s gaze. *Their stories live in all of us.*

A few weeks later, Lucy stands before an audience, her work laid bare. A fictionalized story grounded in real struggles. The room is silent. That familiar heaviness begins to creep up her chest.

A gruff voice, somewhere near the back says, “This is our story.” Morgan – a research participant and activist – steps forward. “And now people listen.” Lucy exhales.

She realizes that stories don’t belong to one person. They survive in those who share them.

The above narrative evolved collaboratively as part of our ongoing exploration of how fiction can serve as a powerful tool for analysis within qualitative research. The story emerged from initial reflections shared following a peer review of this article. It began with a seed of an idea from Nicole, was expanded upon by Hakan, and added to by Nicki. All three authors and contributors continued to add and edit until we all felt satisfied that the story told what we needed it to. Through the process of co-writing, we were able to intertwine our perspectives, drawing on our individual experiences and collective understanding of the themes we wanted to explore. This collaborative effort reflects the central tenet of Social Fiction: that the creation of stories is not a separate process from analysis, but rather a way of engaging with and deepening our understanding of the complex realities we aim to represent. In this case, our fictionalized narrative mirrors the lived struggles of the individuals whose stories we seek to honour, while offering a lens through which to reflect on the ethical considerations of storytelling in research.

Discussion

Social Fiction problematizes the conventional approaches to ‘data’ and ‘observation’ in a critical manner. It achieves this by erasing, or at least blurring, the boundaries between the phases of identifying, describing, and analysing a societal issue. In this process, Social Fiction creates a polyphonic textual space where the researcher, the fictional character, and the observed become intricately intertwined. The boundaries between them dissolve and shift, echoing one another within the fluidity of creative writing. By exploiting the potential of narrative construction in the fictionalization process, Social Fiction invites the author to cross the lines, the realms, thereby relieving the burden of showing what was observed or gathered in data. This in turn is experienced as more creative and freeing, leading the writer to engage with the evolving, fluid state of ‘becoming’ within that space. The sample fictions shared earlier offer examples of this dynamic: in both Hakan’s and Nicki’s cases, we witness the moments of sudden awareness and surprise experienced by the researchers as they employ and experiment with Social Fiction in their research. Similarly, the jointly written piece speaks to the authors’ concerns of representing voice appropriately. Some of the significant insights emerge precisely when the fragile interface between fact and fiction, or the observed and the imagined, shatters, offering a profound contribution to their analysis, one that is, perhaps paradoxically, closer to the factual despite being fictional.

This process fosters a new learning insight drawn from the act of fictional co-existence, or ‘catharsis’ as Nicki puts it, rather than mere observation. Through these alternative ‘ways of seeing’, in the spirit of John Berger’s book (1972), or interpreting, the researcher-author uncovers novel opportunities to challenge the existing orthodoxies in research conventions. This resonates closely with other contemporary forms of storytelling, such as digital storytelling, another creative form of ‘everyday activism’ (Vivienne, 2016; Ergül, 2024), as both proactively encourage the articulation of the unspeakable, using ethnographic and creative narrative techniques to expose and explore marginalized or often silenced voices in social worlds.

If authority and power of writers in literary production have long been subjects of debate, particularly in relation to questions of authorship, control, and interpretation, Social Fiction writers are even more consciously aware of their role in knowledge production. Traditionally, authors have been positioned as the primary agent of meaning, endowed with the authority to craft narratives that readers interpret. An author’s name functions as a marker of legitimacy, shaping how texts are received, interpreted, and valued. In short, writers are seen as holding substantial authority over their works, allowing them to dictate not only the content but also the ideological and aesthetic frameworks within which their texts are interpreted. Collective writing disrupts the traditional power dynamics of literary authority, democratizing the production of meaning and challenging the notion of the singular, sovereign author by distributing creative agency across multiple contributors, who engage in the co-production of meaning, making it difficult to ascribe authority to any one individual. Collective writing shifts literary production from an individualized act to a networked, communal process. While collective writing can challenge dominant power structures, it can also reproduce new forms of exclusion, as writing communities are often shaped by implicit norms and hierarchies that privilege certain voices over others. The ideal of collective authorship can sometimes mask underlying inequalities,

particularly in contexts where certain contributors wield more influence due to social capital, technical expertise, or institutional affiliations (Brouillette, 2014). By decentralizing control and embracing participatory forms of storytelling, collective writing reconfigures the relationship between writers, readers, and texts, opening new possibilities for inclusive and collaborative literary practices. It needs to be said that the relationship between readers and writers of Social Fiction is a dynamic and co-constitutive process, shaped by interpretive practices, affective engagements, and the socio-political contexts in which texts circulate. Again, Social Fiction writers are even more consciously aware of that relationship. For Social Fiction writers, human actions are not dictated by pre-established plans; instead, they see actions unfold in response to emergent contingencies, emphasizing the importance of situatedness (Suchman, 1987). This insight has profound implications for understanding the relationship between writers, text, and readers. Writing, rather than being a mere transmission of a predetermined message, is an act embedded in specific contexts, shaped by the Social Fiction writer's positionality, intentions, and constraints. Text is where an observation or an idea is encoded as a certain representation, which is an attempt to intervene and privilege one of the potential meanings among countless others (Hall, 1997: 228). Similarly, reading is not a neutral act of decoding but a situated engagement that depends on the reader's historical moment, cultural background, and interpretive frameworks. As such, readers who are consumers of Social Fiction wield significant power and authority in shaping the interpretation, circulation, and cultural impact of fiction (Barthes, 2016). The reader is not a passive recipient of a writer's intent, just as the writer does not exercise unilateral authority over a text's significance. Rather, meaning emerges in the interplay between textual production and reception, where the affective investments of readers, the situated practices of writing, and the contingencies of interpretation collectively shape the life of a text. Once a text is published, the author loses control over its interpretation, as meaning is generated through the act of reading rather than the act of writing (Barthes, 2016). This perspective shifts power to the reader, who becomes an active participant in shaping the significance of a work. Social Fiction, therefore, does not present a single, authoritative interpretation but instead invites multiple possible readings, allowing readers to exert significant interpretive authority (Iser, 1978). As different readers bring varied experiences, backgrounds, and expectations to a text, they create diverse and sometimes contradictory meanings, demonstrating that the power of Social Fiction is not solely in its writing but in its reception. The gaps and indeterminacies within a text require the engagement of an 'implied reader' to complete meaning (Iser, 1978). The relationship between writers, texts, and readers in Social Fiction is not a one-way transmission of meaning but a dynamic exchange, in which narratives gain power not simply through their content but through the affective responses they elicit and the histories of feeling they engage (Hemmings, 2011). Social Fiction is not merely an intellectual engagement; it is an affective experience that binds readers and writers in networks of desire, identification, frustration, and longing. The emotional dimensions of reading suggest that meaning is not just cognitively constructed but also felt. Readers bring their own emotional histories to texts, which influence their interpretations and attachments. It is these emotional connections that Social Fiction writers consider in their work. For example, Nicki seeks to overcome medicalization and psychological distancing that often comes with that. Hakan, by contrast, critiques academization of voice and language by deliberately

de-complicating matters. Similarly, the jointly written analytical piece connects all authors' experiences with voice and adherence to fact. Social Fiction writers may attempt to evoke specific emotional responses, such as empathy, anger, and catharsis, but the readers may experience unexpected or unintended affective reactions. This affective unpredictability underscores that readers do not merely consume meaning but participate in its making. Through interpretation, collective meaning-making, and creative reappropriation, readers challenge the authority of authors and assert their own agency. Social Fiction, in this sense, is never static; it lives through the engagements, emotions, and contestations of its audiences. The act of writing initiates a dialogue, but it is through the act of reading, situated, affective, and communal, that stories continue to matter, transform, and take on new lives.

Much like its strengths and enablers, Social Fiction is also susceptible to the limitations of ethnography, particularly its colonial baggage. Both forms are influenced by Western postulates and the legacy of a privileged intellectual canon; as such, both necessitate a commitment to self-reflexivity and criticality. In Social Fiction, the author, working within this creative genre, may choose to take on another's voice – but while doing so, is also embedded in an academic tradition that inherently carries the weight of its hegemonic power. To amplify the subaltern's voice rather than speaking for them (Spivak, 1988), a Social Fiction writer should consider the politics of voice when representing a marginalized group.

Social Fiction, like all narrative forms, faces critiques, particularly around balancing fact and fiction. Scholars expect rigour and truthfulness in research, yet storytelling inherently involves subjective interpretation, insisting that the truth is not limited to the 'facts'. In fact, the truth resides beyond 'the observable' and, as a form of subjective representation, often escapes from fixed connotations and measurable certainties. Memories, for instance, are shaped by context and perspective, resulting in situated moments of truths that are subjective and fluid rather than objective and fixed, yet by no means less insightful than any quantifiable aspect of the lived experience recalled. Reflecting on his research observations about the refugee emergency and the traumatic experience of displacement, Hakan goes back to his memories and draws some parallels between the question of 'voice' in this research and in his fiction. Nicki uncovers the blurred lines between the personal, the fictional, and the accessible truths of memory from the past, revisiting the moments and labels from childhood, now redefined with new meanings and socio-political connotations, shaped by the 'truth' observed in the present.

This aligns Social Fiction with ethnographic and qualitative traditions, which similarly distil social complexities into situated, subjective interpretations (Van Maanen, 1988; Denzin, 2001). These interpretations, though partial, grant experiences their situated meanings and subjective truths. Researchers engaged in Social Fiction must critically reflect on their positionality and its influence on their narratives (Leavy, 2022). Positionality, shaped by intersectional identities, is dynamic and evolving, demanding continuous introspection to ensure ethical storytelling (Holmes, 2020). This mindfulness enriches narratives, enabling them to represent diverse experiences authentically. Another challenge lies in the blurred boundary between fictional narratives and the author's lived experiences. While all fiction reflects its creator's imagination, Social Fiction resists direct autobiographical interpretation. The previous fictional samples make this clearer. While explaining how they use Social Fiction in their respective sections, the

researcher-storytellers anchor their approach within the context of their own academic, personal, and social histories. However, the connection between the ‘personal’ (or autoethnographic) and the fictional is not defined by Social Fiction per se. Rather, it emerges only when the author, much like in the relevant case studies earlier, takes a step back from their own creative narrative and engages in a reflective analysis, allowing for a deeper understanding. This distinction is crucial for maintaining the genre’s integrity as a mediated form of enquiry. Unlike autoethnography, which intertwines the researcher’s voice with the field (Ellis, 2004), Social Fiction reorients the narrative focus to encompass broader societal experiences (Vána, 2020). This mediated lens is particularly valuable for representing marginalized communities, allowing their stories to gain prominence within a crafted, aesthetic framework.

Social Fiction addresses perennial challenges in ethnographic writing, particularly the inability to verbalize certain cultural experiences (Fabian, 1990). By incorporating creative and aesthetic methodologies, Social Fiction articulates the ‘unspeakable’, emphasizing the author’s positionality and political stance as integral to data collection and interpretation.

While sharing elements with fictionalization, narrative construction, and vignette writing, Social Fiction is distinguished by four defining features outlined as follows.

Speculative practice as research

Social Fiction begins with the writer’s ‘hunch’ about a universal truth, which may stem from observation or research data. The process is fluid, conflating data collection, analysis, and dissemination into an integrated practice-research methodology common in creative and performing arts (Barrett and Bolt, 2007; Smith and Dean, 2009; Nelson, 2013). This integrated approach enables researchers to explore truths through a speculative lens, allowing creative interpretations to enrich theoretical insights (Tipper and Gilman, 2024).

Presentation of multiple realities

Social Fiction writers construct realities by combining familiar details in innovative ways, unveiling truths (Iser, 1990; 1997). The writing process involves drafting, revising, and editing to create meaningful narratives that reflect a multiplicity of experiences (Harper and Kroll, 2020). These constructed realities encourage readers to engage with diverse perspectives and reconsider their understanding of societal truths.

Reader engagement through verisimilitude

Social Fiction aims to foster a relationship between writer and reader, offering insights into the human condition through coexistence of real, possible, and alternative truths. This approach emphasizes verisimilitude – a quality that enables stories to resonate universally without being strictly factual (Bruner, 1986; Leavy, 2013; 2022; Gibson, 2021). By prioritizing the resonance of truths over factual accuracy, Social Fiction invites readers into a ‘play space’ of possibilities, enriching their understanding of the world and their place within it (Iser, 1990: 953).

Activist intent

Rooted in arts-based research (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015), Social Fiction seeks to transform readers' attitudes and perceptions. By making visible the overlooked or marginalized, it challenges readers to reconsider their views and assumptions. Its purpose extends beyond entertainment to fostering awareness and inspiring action, reflecting its activist ethos.

In short, Social Fiction offers unparalleled opportunities for exploring societal issues. It bridges academic rigour and creative expression, enabling researchers to address complex topics through accessible narratives. By crafting stories that resonate across disciplines and audiences, Social Fiction fosters dialogue, understanding, and social change.

Recommendations for Social Fiction practices

Working at the intersection of practice and research within and across disciplinary boundaries means that Social Fiction authors' ways of working are somewhat different from typical academic conventions. In this final section, therefore, we would like to offer some practical recommendations for how researchers may incorporate Social Fiction into their research practice.

Honing the creative writing craft

Translating academic findings into Social Fiction necessitates developing skills as a creative writer, which can seem at odds with more traditional academic output. However, to truly harness the potential of Social Fiction a researcher must have the tools required to construct a compelling narrative. This involves developing a fiction writing practice, testing out commonly used techniques (such as pacing, building tension, character development, constructing setting and atmosphere), and, ideally, engaging with others who write creatively, for peer support and critical feedback to further develop writing skills.

Developing reflexive practice

Qualitative researchers will be familiar with the essential need for reflexivity in all aspects of conducting research; this is no different when employing Social Fiction. Using a reflexive practice, such as journalling, in parallel with writing, will support researchers to critically engage with their positionality, bias, and influences on the narrative. Expanding this reflexivity to include discussions with peers or with research participants (where appropriate) about issues such as power and positionality will further strengthen critical reflection.

Implementing ethical approaches to representation

The role of researcher imbues certain power, perhaps most obvious when writing up findings (or composing a Social Fiction). The researcher makes many decisions regarding representation. These decisions about what to include and what to leave out are at the core of whether a narrative will be an authentic representation of

participant experiences or not. Researchers can use approaches such as co-creating narratives with participants through participatory methods or using member checking techniques to mitigate the risks and harm of misrepresentation.

Finding the balance between creativity and truthfulness

While Social Fiction can bring readers closer to both the lived and felt experiences of participants, researchers hold an ethical responsibility to protect people's identities. The use of narrative techniques, such as composite characters or fictionalized settings, can preserve anonymity yet maintain the essence of experiences. Ethical guidance, such as those for visual and/or creative research (for example, [Cox et al, 2014](#); [Pickering and Kara, 2017](#); [Khoo, 2024](#)), could also be used both to strengthen credibility and maintain research integrity. As researcher-writers we are privileged to bear witness to people's stories and capture the intimate aspects of lived-lives in our research; this then becomes our responsibility to ethically represent those whom we have shared the field with.

Collaborate across disciplines to strengthen Social Fiction

Collaborating across disciplines enhances Social Fiction writing by integrating diverse perspectives, methodologies, and expertise. Social Fiction commonly explores complex societal issues, requiring an understanding of sociocultural, psychological, political, and economic dimensions, and thrives on reflecting the intricate realities of society. Social Fiction writers benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration as it enriches their narratives with authenticity and depth, and challenges them to step outside their comfort zones. Collaborating with sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and policy makers allows Social Fiction writers to ground their stories in robust, evidence-based insights. For instance, a sociologist's analysis of systemic inequality can deepen a writer's portrayal of social hierarchies, while a psychologist's understanding of trauma can lend authenticity to characters navigating personal struggles. Such partnerships bridge the gap between creative expression and academic rigour, creating narratives that resonate with readers and stimulate societal reflection. Similarly, an anthropologist can help the writer develop an ethnographic gaze, which can assist in understanding how people make sense of their own experiences, from their own perspective and in their own language. Social Fiction writers can adopt techniques such as co-creation workshops or scenario planning with colleagues from different disciplines in order to foster a dynamic interplay between theory and storytelling.

Ultimately, for any researcher keen to incorporate Social Fiction as a means to support data collection, analysis, and/or dissemination, they need to cultivate open communication, respect for diverse expertise, and a commitment to ongoing learning.

Conclusion

This article's radical contribution lies in its ability to recast fiction as a legitimate and rigorous mode of enquiry – one that transcends representation to become interventionist. It makes a compelling case for recognizing fiction's potential to not only reflect but also reconstitute social realities, drawing on its imaginative freedom to critique, amplify, and revise our collective understandings of the world.

By positioning Social Fiction as a means of engaging with complexity, multiplicity, and uncertainty, the article opens new methodological pathways for scholars seeking to do research that is as ethically nuanced as it is creatively rich. In this way, it challenges researchers to move beyond description or diagnosis towards imaginative transformation. We ask to use fiction not as an escape or exemplar, but as confrontation and possibility. Our work on Social Fiction as a research method fundamentally transforms and radicalizes conventional methodologies by positioning fiction not as an ancillary or illustrative component of academic research, but as a central and generative epistemological tool. Traditionally, fictional narratives have been utilized in the social sciences as metaphorical devices or supplementary case examples in the form of vignettes. Our approach reclaims fiction as a core analytical and methodological strategy – one that both produces and interprets social knowledge. Departing from rigid empirical paradigms that treat fictional narratives as separate or lesser than factual data, we argue that Social Fiction enables researchers to imaginatively and ethically explore lived experiences, structural inequalities, and alternative futures. As a creative mode of enquiry, Social Fiction offers a unique space for speculative thought; one that resists the closure of empirical certainty and instead opens up the affective undercurrents of how we imagine, interpret, and live through the social world. This reorientation transforms fiction into a form of scholarly enquiry that does not aim to mirror reality, but to interrogate, reframe, and potentially reshape it. What radicalizes this approach to research is its insistence on blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, between researcher and subject, and between observation and representation. Fiction here is not a distortion of reality but a way of reconstituting it and thereby offering a lens through which the silenced, the invisible, and the marginal can be heard and seen. As such, fiction becomes a powerful tool for sociological imagination (Mills, 2000) rendering visible the ‘not-yet-real’ or the ‘what-could-be’ by dramatizing possibilities that conventional methods may exclude due to their focus on replicable, observable, and measurable outcomes. By integrating the creative process into the epistemological heart of research, the method invites scholars to engage more deeply with their own positionalities and to write in ways that are embodied, emotive, and socially accountable. Rather than merely analysing texts, researchers are called to craft them, to fictionalize with purpose, and in doing so, to co-create meaning with imagined or marginalized communities. We further suggest that the power of Social Fiction lies in its verisimilitude; that is, its ability to feel true even if not factually accurate, thus fostering a deeper empathic connection and broader public engagement. Social Fiction in that respect engages in a participatory dialogue between writer and reader, thereby decentralizing authorial authority and democratizing meaning-making while also inviting readers to not just understand, but also to feel and reimagine the complexities of social life. This radical reframing compels a shift from passive observation to active imagination, from detached analysis to immersive co-creation. Fiction here is not simply consumed but inhabited, reshaping both the reader’s and writer’s understanding of social realities. In short, this article pushes beyond existing paradigms by treating fictional writing not as a mirror of society, but as a transformative space where the possible becomes thinkable, where multiple truths coexist, and where new ways of seeing and being in the world are actively constructed. As such, Social Fiction emerges as not just a method, but also a radical reimagining of what research can be and do.

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Notes

¹ Ubiquitous Japanese pubs with casual setting.

² A term that is derived from the English words ‘salary’ and ‘man’, refers to Japanese office workers who have lengthy working hours and little or no social life.

³ With thousands of restaurants and pubs, *Kokubunchō* represents the liveliest district of the city of Sendai. It is the largest entertainment district of the entire Tohoku region in Japan.

⁴ Cute or lovely. Depending on the context, *kawaii* may connote pretty, attractive, sexy, or charming.

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Research ethics statement

The research article is based on our joint practice as research work within the context of Social Fiction writing, and the ‘data’ are of and from our own research work across several years. We all have obtained ethical approval for the projects, upon which we draw for this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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