

# Fiction as Social Inquiry

**Sophie Woodward:** Welcome, everyone. I'm really excited to be introducing this keynote given by Dr. Ash Watson in the area of creative methods. My name is Sophie Woodward. I'm a professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester and I'm a co-investigator for the NCRM where I lead on creative methods. And I'm absolutely delighted to be able to introduce Dr. Ash Watson today. Dr. Ash Watson is a sociologist at the University of New South Wales in Australia. She is a member of the ARC, Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making in Society. She uses a combination of arts-based on broader qualitative methods to explore emerging technologies and the relationship that these have to futures. A particularly exciting area of Ash's work is her work on sociological fiction. And that's one of the main reasons that we've invited her to give this keynote today. She is the author of a wonderful novel called 'Into the sea', which explores the sociological imagination through fiction. It is a work of fiction, but it's based upon her ethnographic research. Sociological fiction is a method, a series of methods that are emerging and also one of the most exciting areas I think of methodological innovation in the social sciences at the moment. And Dr. Ash Watson is absolutely at the forefront of this. She launched the creative public sociology project called 'So Fi Zine', an open access publication for sociological fiction, poetry and visual art. She is the invited inaugural fiction editor of the Sociological Review. In this session today, Ash is based in Australia. So we're showing the recording of a talk to avoid giving a keynote in the middle of the night, which I don't think it's in anyone's interest. She won't therefore be able to respond to questions live, so we won't be able to have the discussion in that way afterwards. So instead, what we're asking is you put your questions in the q&a section here on Hoover, which should be visible for you on your screens. I will pass this on to Ash who will do a video response to all of your questions. And these will be released, this video will be released through Hoover, and you will be notified of that. So what I'm asking is, could you please put your questions in the q&a as you're listening to the talk as well as afterwards whilst the session is still live? You can also vote for your favourite question if someone else asked a question that you really want to hear Ash's response to. So now, over to Ash for her talk, which I'm sure like me, you are really, really looking forward to. It's entitled 'Fiction as Social Inquiry', which asks the question, why and how can we do social research with fiction? And I'm really looking forward to hearing Ash's answer to this.

**Ash Watson:** Hi, everyone, thank you so much for joining me today. I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land where I live in work, the Gadigal and Bidjigal peoples of the Eora nation. A beautiful place otherwise known as Sydney, Australia. Thank you so much for taking the time to be here. I'm very appreciative of the opportunity to give this talk today. And I look forward to continuing the conversation with you afterwards. As the many wonderful talks at this year's methods festival showcase, we are riding this great wave of creativity methodologically speaking in social research, as so much is being embraced, some of it new and some of it new here to us. And today I'm speaking on a practice that has been totally fundamental in my own scholarly development, and that I've been able to collaborate with so many brilliant people on and that is fiction writing. So my presentation today is on fiction as social inquiry. And I want to start by saying that fiction is a very broad thing, and has very blurry boundaries when we try to define it against other things, against what it is

not. So like truth or reality. But what it very much does involve is imagination, fabrication and narrative. And fiction takes many forms: books, TV shows, plays, or documentaries. Today, I'm going to focus on the textual, in written prose fiction as that's where my main experience lies. And I want to give some examples of how we can work with this practice and this medium as scholars.

So what underpins this work? Some of the things that I find really valuable about fiction is what the creative writing process allows us to attend to, in close, careful and different ways. Anonymity, distance, perspective, speculation and engagement. Translating research findings into fictional stories is one way that we can help preserve the anonymity of our participants, as we can draw from across their experiences rather than recounting personal specifics. And as a method where we ask participants to write, fiction can afford the cultivation of distance between people's own experiences and those they imagine or represent through storytelling. And narrative style of storytelling also allows authors to play with distances to show a scene from above, system from below, to help the reader feel right next to someone, or bring something right up close and hold attention on it. Fictional stories are a rich medium for playing with perspective, from bringing different things into view for a reader to putting characters' different points of view into dialogue. Fiction is also, I think, the richest medium for working with the question 'what if?'. Sustained engagement with people's speculations, their anticipations, hopes, expectations and possibilities can be centred in research with fiction-based activities. And as I've written about before, I think storytelling is so critical in public sociology, or however, engagement is conceptualised in your area of work. And because of the different kinds of relationships that exist between audiences and creative texts, compared to say, more official or informative documents, like journal articles that we're used to writing or even the news. So many people have written about fiction and creative practice by drawing together these elements in different ways. And fiction is by no means the only medium in method for us to engage with these kinds of concepts. But it is certainly I think, one of the great ones. And two people's work who I continually come back to Patricia Leavy and Ruha Benjamin, and these quotes in particular, are ones that I find really motivating, I draw on them all the time. When I think about what I'm doing, when I bring fiction into my research and why I'm doing it. What they can see is that the critical and creative work here is that of evoking meaning. And that one reason why we do this is to write much needed other ways and other worlds into being.

So I will draw now on a small number of examples from the massive landscape of creative research, rather than trying to give you an overview of the whole field or even offer my take on the most significant developments that are happening, which others have written very articulately about. Instead, I want to share with you just a handful of things that I love, work that has moved me and has challenged me and makes me think critically about the point and the purpose of social inquiry. So these sit in two kinds of camps, work that involves participants in writing fiction, and work that involves our own fiction writing. So these are not totally discreet. You can play with who was writing fiction and for what purposes throughout the lifecycle of a project and for various reasons. But for simplicity, today, I'll focus first on processes for asking others to write, and then on writing creatively ourselves.

One approach for using fiction in research is to engage research participants in writing fiction. There are a number of ways that you can do this depending on what you're seeking to understand and two ways that I really like, story completion and creative workshops. Story completion is quite self-explanatory. A researcher crafts the beginning to a fictional story on a decided theme, and asks

participants to complete it, to write what happens next. This prompt, which is often called a story stem, is typically quite short. Maybe even just a couple of sentences that say, introduce the character and an event or maybe a setting. They then leave the rest up to participants' imaginations. This method was initially conceived actually as a psychological testing mechanism, a kind of projective technique that's been compared to how ink blots work to probe things like individual personality traits and unconscious beliefs. But it has developed over time having been taken up and adapted by feminist scholars like Kitzinger and Powell, who, in the 90s brought a focus on social meaning-making into the approach. There are a number of ways that you can deliver story completion. So like using an online search tool to Google Forms is one way. So participants can complete the stories on a digital device in their own time, or also in a focus-group or workshop setting that kind of gives a group of participants time to complete a story, before discussing what they've written together. I worked on a project using this method, which was led by Professor Deborah Lupton, that sought to get around and address the issue that people, people genuinely not feeling really personally affected by digital privacy, with a kind of capital D, capital B style issue that is scary breaches that we can hear about in the news. Even though people are always negotiating and choreographing privacy in their relationships with others and with digital technologies. So rather than asking participants to reflect on their own experiences, they were asked to imagine what a series of fictional characters did in different scenarios. And this gave us some insight into the social imaginaries of privacy, how privacy unfolds through relationships and events as something meaningful. There has, in fact, been a whole special issue of a journal dedicated to story completion. This was like by Clarke, Braun, Frith and Moller, in qualitative research in psychology in 2019. As they highlight in the introduction to the issue, story completion offers, among other things, and I'm quoting here 'a way to access perceptions or constructions around your object of interest, a way of accessing participants' assumptions and an indirect way of accessing people's perspectives, potentially avoiding the social demands associated with self-reported data collection, and also a non-intrusive way of researching sensitive and ethically and morally complex topics'. So the other approach that I've selected here is what I've called 'creative workshops'. Now, people call this a few different things, definitely not always creative workshops. But in essence, what it involves, involves is asking participants to write creatively in a group setting. Rather than starting a story stem for them by giving kind of a set character or a scenario like in story completion, in this approach, participants tend to have a little bit more scope to write fiction involving whoever and whatever they like around a set theme or issue. These projects also often take up a participatory action style research ethos. So using the fiction as a process for collecting data, and as a standalone product, for wider dissemination, quite comparable in that sense to participatory theatre methods in social research. And one great example of this approach comes from the story in relationships project, which is a team I think of seven academics led by Richard Phillips at the University of Sheffield. Their project explores how young British Muslims and particularly those with Pakistani heritage, talk and think about their personal relationships. And the team engaged participants in a series of creative writing workshops and they worked with published Muslim writers who facilitated those writing sessions. The team have made some really great resources, including short videos from this project, and they've got a YouTube channel and Professor Ali gave a great talk that's actually available on the NCRM website, I highly recommend looking those up if you're not already familiar with them. As Richard talks about in one of these, they found creative writing a really useful method for exploring issues that aren't easy to talk about, indirectly anyway, cause they are using an interview approach for kind of getting at issues that are sensitive or taboo, or just more complex than our traditional ways of going about research allow for. Interestingly, but maybe

not surprisingly, many other projects, which use this approach focus on futures, and they draw on genres like sci-fi and speculative fiction. And one recent example I really like comes from Doyle, who used this method to engage a group of teenagers in the UK, in what they call 'a collective reimagining of climate change' that moves beyond individualistic and technocratic solutions to the issue. Another study by North American scholars, Jordan, Bernier and Zuiker engaged engineering teams in speculative fiction workshops to aid their development of solar power technologies. So in this case, the researchers worked, their aim was to expand their engineer participants' professional visions, so to include the socio-technical aspects of the anticipated innovations. As these researchers discuss in their respective publications and which I'll show, I'll show a link to at the end. This approach can be really valuable for engaging people in generating narratives about possible and shared socio-technical futures, that consent a relational and collective care.

Now, as well as asking participants to write fiction, we can also write fiction ourselves. One way and reason why we might do this is to communicate our research findings. So crafting a publication or an output that creatively translates findings through a story. And another is to use fiction to do research, so as an art space research method. And both result in a similar output say a short story or a novel. But when, why and how you do the creative writing differs. With communicating findings, you have your research material that you are generating a story from. So you've collected data and completed or at least started your analysis. You know what the findings are, and so you know what information you want us to share through the story medium. So, say you've done an interview study, you could draw from across people's experiences to craft a story that didn't happen, but could have happened within the context that you'd studied. Now, the didn't happen part is important here for me. We can collage together different parts of lots of participants' real experiences, and to make something bigger that is technically fiction, even though every part of the story is true. I think fiction though, allows more space to evoke the meaning of those true experiences and findings. What I mean is, I think fiction of this kind can do more than creatively condense a heap of data into one narrative. We can balance that recontextualizing and recharacterising of participant data with invention and imagination, to go beyond the project, data and create. And I think it's in that space, the creative labour of fiction, that we can illustrate and we can make effective, what matters about the social patterning of experience. So I guess what I'm saying is, don't be afraid to go beyond the data in order to tell a story that captures the meaning of your findings. Fiction does not have to factually represent the research in order to present the research. You can use mystery and elements of the fantastic, you can speed up and slow down time. You can make it rain if it feels like it should be raining. And a fourth form of fiction as social inquiry is about bringing this creative writing practice into a project as a research method. Our creative writing is increasingly used as a method across qualitative research for the production of data and knowledge rather than only or primarily for engagement with publics beyond the academy. Key approaches include auto slash ethnographic fiction, art, space research, collaborative storytelling, and also some creative writing prompts like the examples that I spoke about already. I think, real value in understanding this methodological approach notice something new, but as a creative return, and a reengagement with the roots of social research, that really generative space between science and literature that developed in the European tradition, across the scientific and industrial revolutions, and really deep into the romantic age. In my own work, I found it valuable to combine arts-based fiction methods, with qualitative and ethnographic methods in the same project. This is something I've written about as methods braiding, so cultivating a co-influence over project phases between different research activities. So in my case, I

braided together fiction writing with ethnographic fieldwork and literature analysis to produce a sociological novel. So I combined three and four here on the screen in a way, fictionalising from the findings from my qualitative methods, while also centering art space research data creation to explore my research questions. That novel that I wrote is called 'Into the sea' and it was published last year by Brill in their social fictions series. The novel is set mostly in Sydney, in Australia. And the story follows a group of 20 somethings over the course of a calendar year. So each of the chapters focus on a series of small moments, a family barbecue, a shopping trip to IKEA, a funeral, a dinner party with friends, there's a day trip to the beach, these almost micro and mundane scenes of life with global events that play out at the same time. I talk about the book as an experiment in sociological imagination. So I undertook an arts-based exploration of the public promise of sociology, taking up fiction as a sociological craft. The novel is an artefact that illustrates some of the workings of the sociological imagination outside academic spaces. And it was also a project through which I tried to interrogate the boundaries and the limitations of this method, this discipline revision. So with this approach, the creative methodological process is as important as the product or the creative text that is produced. And someone who speaks to the value of fiction as a product and a process in critical social research is K. Inckle. I really like her work on ethnographic fiction for a few reasons. One is that she uses fiction to explore issues of representation and embodiment. So to convey and I quote, 'the complexity, contradictions, pains, pleasures and politics' of her research, as well as how we come to make and privilege certain kinds of knowledge. And quite brilliantly in the journal article that I'm reading from here, instead of ending with the conclusion, she ends with a short piece of fiction. And reflecting on why she did this, she she writes, 'instead of concluding with a finite closed assertion or truth claim, I wanted to leave people with thinking feeling questions, to open a whole range of possible meanings and developments, which much more closely reflected the dynamic experiences of my research participants'. This is a point that a number of art space researchers make, that fiction and arts practices can generate multiple meanings. And often they intentionally do so. In Leavy's words, 'they open up multiplicities in meaning-making instead of pushing authoritative claims'. As I say in the introduction to my own novel is my hope that the book I wrote is a bid for sociologically imaginative questions to flower in as opposed to kind of offering up examples or arguments for sociology.

Okay, so now I have talked a fair bit about writing fiction and for a short while I am going to stop and we're going to write together. The task isn't to write something great or even to write something interesting, but simply to write so if you don't already have it on hand, please do grab some blank paper to handwrite or open a new Word document on your screen. I'm going to give you one minute first of all, and I'll time it I'll let you know when it's up to list out some topic ideas. So maybe think about what you are researching at the moment what you're reading about, or what you've been teaching. If you start big try to get specific as your list making goes on. So maybe from kind of migration to the problem of trying to fill out a complex form, from health to the difficulties of trying to book a vaccination appointment. Whatever comes to mind, the more ideas the better get them all down, one minute as many topic ideas as possible okay? All right, ready? And go. Okay, time is up. From what you've noted down, pick one idea, maybe underline it, something that stands out and that you can imagine a scenario without. Obviously, in another setting you'd pick and craft your story prompts or ideas in a much more careful and systematic way. But I think the immediate impression dump still always has a very useful place. So now that you have a topic or a theme, I want you to imagine a setting. Where is the story taking place? Write it down. Is it a room is it outside? Is it a public place? What is present, what can be sensed? Write

down your ideas as you come, as they come to you. Um it's fine to just do this in a very scribbly pointy way, I am at the moment. So also think about what objects are there and what time of day is it and what is the weather? Now that we have a space, let's invent some characters. So there might be people in the background of your scene but like let's focus on the main people. This will just be one person or maybe two people. So what are their names first of all? What are they wearing? What do they look like? What is this person or one of these two people doing in this space? Why are they here? There's no wrong answers. So, write down whatever comes to mind, we'll use it in a moment. Okay, so that is all of the basic details, a place, some people and the topic that you first came up with. So we're now going to take a few minutes to write a scene. Today, all that you are aiming to do is to write a single self-contained, hopefully paragraph, or a page kind of at most, really only involving kind of a single action or a single interaction. All you have to decide now is what event happens in your scene. The only way to know I think, is to write it out. So I'm going to set another timer just for a few quiet minutes. So that you can create and you can find out the answer to that question. So you want to describe the setting. Use as many kind of sensory elements as possible. You can see, hear, what's in the space, what's outside the space. You want to introduce the characters. So kind of personality and physical description and characterization as much as possible. What's their relationship like? Or what are they doing? Use as much action and movement as possible. I find it's always the best way to kind of get a story started or to write something does kind of micro paragraph length story. Use as much action and movement as possible. And I guess what you're trying to do is to bring that topic idea to life through some kind of interaction. So we'll set another timer and just give a couple of quiet minutes and we'll all write together.

Okay, it's been a few minutes. And hopefully you've got some fiction down on the page, but you're more than welcome to keep writing now. But to move towards an ending today, I just want to reflect on some of the things that I think fiction is great for, as a method of social inquiry specifically. At the level of story construction, that is voice context and meaning making. With fiction-based methods, we can bring multiple voices into dialogue, and shrug off that didactic academic voice that we're so much more used to communicating in. We can bring to life the contexts of what we study. So instead of abstracting, we can flesh out those everyday worlds where social issues play out, retrenched and are resisted. And we can also write out the practices and processes of meaning making. This is already a key focus in social inquiry. And in fiction, social meaning has to be navigated and made by characters for the story to unfold. So I think the work of creating that is an incredibly valuable one for us as researchers to practice. And kind of at the more meta-level, fiction in social inquiry affords an engagement with complexity, multiplicity and irresolution. As Barone and Eisner argue, the purpose of creating art is not to arrive at a singular and unchangeable slice of knowledge. It is to generate questions. And rather than trying to mirror reality, the epistemological value of using arts practices in research is in Camargo-Borges's words 'to explore the alternative possibilities for society organisations and communities'.

So, returning to Benjamin's work again, she writes, such fictions are not meant to convince others of what is. But to expand our visions of what is possible. This is not a conclusion that I want to offer in my talk today, but just to share the direction that I'm facing now in my work, and what fiction can do within futures research, and what we can creatively materialise, open up and make desirable and make possible.

Finally, I want to flag some of the publishing avenues that are amassing some amazing writing, some of which I've had the privilege of editing. And if you want to read some examples of the kind of work that I've talked about today, or looking for some places to submit, work yourself, these are some great places that I've found to start. So So Fi Zine and with the Sociological Review are two avenues that that I work with. So Fi Zine is an independent publication that I launched in 2017. It's a space for sociological fiction, poetry and visual art that is published online and also in a DIY print format. It's free to read, it's free to submit to, and the 10th edition is in the works at the moment. It's currently open for submissions until the end of October. So do check it out. If you're interested in reading any of the previous editions that are all online, or maybe submitting work yourself. The Sociological Review has, since 2018, had a short story series. I'm the editor of the series. And so far since then, we published I think, 22 short stories now. So these short stories around 3000 words, and authors also published a 500 word exegesis with a piece which is a kind of like a behind the scenes explanation of the story. So what research went into it, or the kind of writing process and reflecting on the story itself. Also, with the Sociological Review, something new that I'm really excited about is I'm collaborating with Charlotte Bates was the reviews editor. And over my summer, your winter, we are hosting a reviews by fiction section, so we're seeking reviews of fictional texts. So if that sounds something that you'd be interested in writing, please do check out. Do check out the website. There's heaps of information there. And Charlotte is a great person to, to reach out. And the Brill social fiction series I briefly mentioned before, it's a series that my own novel was published in last year. This is an incredible body of work now, there are, at my last check, 45 volumes in the series. So full length novels and plays that have come from social research. It's a series that's edited by Patricia Leavy. And I don't even know how to kind of sum up the series really nicely. Beyond that, do check it out. There's such incredible pieces of work there, different to the first two which are you know, very short works of fiction. Yeah, some, some amazing full length novels and plays there on various different topics. Riffs is actually a popular music journal that comes out of Birmingham City University and an experimental writing group there there who homed in the popular music department. The editors are Sara Raine and Craig Hamilton. There's a heap of great others involved, including Iain Taylor, David Kane, the whole editorial board is great. I've been a big fan of theirs for a number of years. And earlier this year, I collaborated with them to produce a special issue of fiction. So short stories in there that take up lots of different forms and engage with music in different ways, including a fictional PhD chapter from a fictional PhD thesis published in 2015. It's a really cool speculative work that plays with the form. Another great avenue, another great scholarly journal is Art Research International. This has been kicking around for about six years now. I think a new editor has just taken over. So they come out of Canada, but obviously an international journal. And earlier this year, Jess Smartt Gullion and I edited a special issue on fiction as research. I'm just kind of, I'm so impressed by the authors who submitted in to this special issue. I kind of can't talk about their work enough. It's such a great collection, the authors, in their own ways and in very different ways draw on fiction to explore critical themes from marginalisation, racism, incarceration, colonialism, climate emergency, and of course, very timely, a global pandemic. The authors across the edition attend to issues that are really at the heart of how and why we tell fictional stories, to imagine, to communicate, and to connect. And also just to share some of the other academic journals that I've, I love reading, though, they're kind of really starting to increase the amount of work that they're publishing that is from arts-based research, or that is about or uses fiction in various ways. This includes qualitative research, qualitative inquiry, cultural sociology, and sociological research online. I'm a sociologist, they're kind of the main great journals that I found that a publishing this work, but if there are other ones, I'd love to

hear about them. So please do reach out or share, share in the chat function. Other great places that you have been reading this work, that you'd like to cite or maybe where you publish yourself. Thank you so much for tuning in today. I hope the talk was interesting and that maybe you got started some great new writing yourself, or got to experiment with something that maybe you're not so familiar with. It's always nice to start the day trying something new.

I would just leave up the cited works and a couple of other references that I spoke around today. There's so many excellent works of fiction and social inquiry out there. Just like sharing journals, I'd so love if you would share any other resources that you found really useful. Thank you again, and I really look forward to responding to your questions.