

Book Review

Heller, C. E., & Hansen, D. T. (2022). *Telling the story in the data: Narrative writing for doctoral students and qualitative researchers*. Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0-8077-6734-4.

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Doctoral students and researchers new to the world of qualitative research need extensive reading, help, and support through the iterative process that characterizes qualitative research methodology's data collection, analysis, and reporting process. Emerging researchers do this with courses that speak to the details of qualitative research and, in many cases, mentorship sessions with an experienced professor or advisor in a process identified by Feldon (2016) as “cognitive apprenticeship” (p.4). Caroline Heller embodies cognitive apprenticeship in this book which documents the experiences of nine of her students in the 2019 narrative writing seminar class that culminated in this 12-chapter book, each chapter written by a student. There are recurrent themes whose variations appear in each chapter and provide guidance and examples of qualitative writing by telling the story in the data. This review will highlight each chapter's essential pieces, including the author's positionality and the prevalent theme.

Heller and Hansen (2022), in the background about Caroline, the book's editor, and authors' professor, shared her journey into qualitative writing and how writers influenced it within and outside academia. Her relationship with writers beyond academia and the writing workshop was championed by the “Tenderloin women” (Heller & Hansen, 2022, p.2). This fueled the need to develop the Narrative Writing Course for Qualitative Researchers course, providing a context for her ability to teach and compile a book about narrative writing. Betit (2022) introduced chapter 1 with the story of her first year as a doctoral student who had insecurities about her writing despite being a high school English teacher. This chapter allays the fears of writing by emphasizing the importance of being a beginner at every point of research writing. She framed writing as the “currency of doctoral work and the communication of qualitative research” Betit (2022, p. 19). Saraydrian (2022) extended this idea in chapter 2 with a story on how he utilized prompts to create a personal story where he thought there was none. In response to a course assignment, he focused on using narrative glue to create connections that define aspects of his fatherhood experience using three components: “wide angle and focused angle lens, implicit and explicit analysis, backstory and front story.” Saraydrian (2022) encouraged emerging narrative writers by using artifacts from his class projects to show a progressive development of writing skills and confidence in his journey as a doctoral student. Furthermore, chapter 2 emphasized the importance of communicating meaning to the reader while representing the participants in a way that empathically presents their vulnerability. This was reiterated in the concluding chapter, which he co-authored with Redlon (2022).

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Mytko (2022) pointed out the responsibility of reporting the data in chapter 3 by highlighting how the writing skills developed in the class helped close the gaps in prose. This chapter stressed the need to stay true to the data and tame the chaos by going through the data to align with pre-conceived themes. Although the emerging themes may alter the direction of the study, “every data that does not advance the readers’ understanding of the research theme should be left out” (Mytko, 2022, p.41). While the focus of chapter 3 is the process of sorting, coding, and analyzing data, the need to “paint a nonjudgmental picture of the participants rather than assigning value to their actions” (p. 43) was reiterated. In another example of data sorting, Shimsoni (2022) also gave an example in chapter 9 of identifying placement and sequencing while deciding which data to keep and what to leave out. Redlon (2022) supported this in chapter 4 by focusing on the necessity of the researcher to think small and big and be present on every scale to capture the complexity of a phenomenon. She highlighted the need for qualitative researchers to desist from sentimentality and rely on objective correlation to evoke the right kind of emotion in the reader. Betit (2022) also corroborated this idea in chapter 5 using an autoethnographic approach. She wrote about her experiences with a classroom visit from an anthropologist who emphasized the need for qualitative researchers to view research as “an ongoing sense of respectful, honorable immersion in and openness to what surrounds them” (p. 68). Lima (2022) also talked about representation adequacy in chapter 6, reiterating the need to use sharp characteristics that inspire the framing of participants by providing live scenarios that appeal to academia and other kinds of audiences.

Horvath-Tucker’s (2022) experience with the narrative writing course was encapsulated with a description of the power of film and documentaries as practice tools when developing qualitative writing skills. She opined that it would guide the researcher to report the data through the lens of the reader, committee members, and librarian. Chapter 8 furthers this concept with Goldberg’s (2022) narrative on how her positionality as a mourner influenced the lens through which she viewed a documentary film, which was part of course artifacts. She opined that “participants see the researcher as the narrator of their own stories” (Horvath-Tucker, 2022, p.99), which warrants participants’ data to be narrated descriptively to the readers without the influence of the researcher’s opinion. In addition to this concept, Shimsoni (2022), in chapter 9, elaborated on the importance of meaningful writing by finding the narrative through placement and sequencing (p. 115). This chapter used the framework of film to compare readers to viewers, suggesting that just like viewers, readers of qualitative narrative writing should be offered “the opportunity to look, feel, contemplate and interpret for themselves” (Shimsoni, 2022, p. 116). Marsh (2022), in chapters 10 and 11, expatiated this by spotlighting the importance of the researcher’s positionality and use of emblematic episodes to connect the larger picture of the research to the little details of the participant’s life to create a whole picture. Chapter 11 concluded with an emphasis on avoiding characterizing participants as heroes or villains; readers should be left with multiple thoughts rather than preemptive conclusions.

The book’s major strength is the journey it takes the reader through as a doctoral student and qualitative researcher. The book’s central tenet is telling the story in the data by drawing the readers’ attention with a writing strategy that shows a delicate balance between storytelling for a public audience and academic writing. The book projected this with each author writing about their interactions with the course using story-telling methods with autoethnographic or case study approaches. In addition to the above, the book recommends collaboration and codependence in qualitative writing (Redlon, 2022), which was apparent in the writing collaborations of Redlon, R., & Saraydarian, G. (2022) for chapter 12. Furthermore, each chapter has questions that guide the reader through reflection before moving on to the next chapter as well as artifacts like the course syllabus, revision worksheets, and resources on topics like “taming the chaos of your data,”

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“thoughts on characterization,” “sentiment and sentimentality” (Heller & Danson, 2022, Appendices B, C, D).

Moreover, the book emphasizes ethical participant representation and a consideration of the reader’s perceptions, a core principle highlighted by all authors. Some suggested ways are using artifacts, creating emblematic episodes, and connecting with the participant through “doing, knowing, and writing” (Marsh, 2022, p. 127). Also, the authors expressed their strengths, limitations, vulnerability, and biases as they detailed their professional, scholarly, and personal experiences, which gives the readers the principles of narrative writing and examples of its application. Apart from the corpus, the book added artifacts like the course syllabus with its detailed weekly activities. The authors’ reflection questions at the end of each chapter remind the reader of the important concepts and lead them on a path where their research and writing journey is documented through the major themes in each chapter. Lastly, chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 12 provide personal writing samples for the readers’ perusal (Saraydarian, 2022; Mytko, 2022; Redlon, 2022; Goldberg, 2022; Marsh, 2022; Redlon & Saraydarian, 2022).

The weakness of this book is that nearly all the chapters present different versions of the same set of writing principles emphasized in Heller’s class. Although significant themes occur across each chapter, each author represented them from their lenses and personal interactions with the class. While this could be a weakness because of the repetitive concepts, it is also a strength because it allows readers to inhabit the core ideas portrayed in the book. Another weakness is the varying use of language from one chapter to the next. Heller and Hanson (2022) stated that “adequate and well-informed knowledge that informs the public and far-reaching readership that traditional dissertation does not offer” (p.5). This implies that the qualitative researchers should write in a language that informs the public, which was not fully represented in the book. For example, the chapters authored by Mytko (2022) and Redlon (2022) were written with nuances of formal academic language; this writing style may pose some slight difficulties for people outside academia.

This compilation, authored by multiple individuals who employed case studies and ethnographic or narrative approaches to document their experiences in a narrative writing course, reveals striking similarities with critical principles of qualitative research methodology found in prior literature. Specifically, the interview procedures presented in chapter 9 by Shimsoni (2022) and Marsh’s (2022) portrayal of the symbolic relationship between interviewer and interviewee align with the principles of qualitative interviewing described in Rubin and Rubin (2012), as well as Saldana and Omasta (2018). Additionally, chapters 3, 4, and 9 emphasize the importance of sorting, coding, and analyzing data while highlighting the crucial need for meaningful and ethical representation. These principles are also discussed in Saldana and Omaste (2018). Furthermore, the concept of cultural immersion in ethnographic studies, as emphasized in chapter 10 by Marsh (2022), closely mirrors Merriam and Grenier’s (2019) description of ethnographic work as an approach that involves immersing oneself into the participants’ world to gain a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of their culture and behavior.

This book is recommended for researchers interested in discovering ways to represent people meaningfully and ethically in their reports with readers and audiences in and beyond the academic world. It also points to the need for researchers to find and invest in a tribe or community where collaborations can lead to growth and multiple constructive criticisms of each other’s work. This book is suggested for doctoral students who need to find their voice in academics or qualitative research and write in ways that leave the reader with multiple thoughts rather than pre-emptive conclusions. This compilation of first-hand experiences exemplifies self and professional development through classroom teachings, cognitive apprenticeship, and guided review of qualitative literature outside academia. This book is recommended for doctoral students, professors

in charge of qualitative research method classes, teachers, and organizers of writing classes in colleges and universities.

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