

Foreword

By Dana R. Ferris, University of California–Davis

In a 2016 episode (Season 7, Episode 12) of the CBS TV courtroom drama, *The Good Wife*, the main character Alicia Florrick and her partner are representing a singer-songwriter being sued by his recording label for breach of contract. The plaintiff's claim is that the artist's second album is not in the same musical genre (pop music) as his first, thus violating the terms of his agreement with the record company. Both sides bring in their own expert witnesses, music professors at renowned institutions. Here is part of the testimony of the first expert witness, brought by the plaintiff (the recording company):

Plaintiff's Attorney: Doctor, what is "popular music"?

Expert Witness #1: A genre of popular music based in rock 'n' roll of the '50s and '60s.

PA: And how would you recognize a pop song?

EW #1: Through its hooks. Pop songs are all full of hooks. There's one in the intro, another in the chorus, another in the bridge....

[...]

PA: And that's all there is to it? The hooks?

EW #1: No. Pop songs also tend to be non-harmonic, with pronounced timbral dissonance, four-bar phrasing, a beat-per-minute range between 72 and 85....

PA: So you're saying that [name of defendant]'s new album didn't have most of these hallmarks.

EW #1: I'm saying it had none of them.

After a cross-examination in which Alicia's partner gets the expert witness to admit that the iconic pop song "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen violates the specific genre conventions he had just described, the defense puts its own expert witness on the stand:

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- Defendant's Attorney:* Would you agree that [defendant]'s second album is not in the same pop genre as his first album?
- Expert Witness #2:* I don't think I'd agree with any part of that. His first album wasn't exactly 100% pop, and I don't think his second is all that different.
- DA:* Can you explain?
- EW #2:* Well, yeah. Genres aren't fixed, right? They ebb and flow over time, and then there's this give and take between genres.
- [...]
- DA:* So is this the same or different than [name of another song written by defendant]?
- EW #2:* I don't know....it's both, man. [Defendant]'s an artist. He's exploring. Both those songs are written by the same person, but they're not identical. And no album should be identical, like Picasso...you see him going through his Blue Period or his Crystal Period....

This exchange about music captures in a nutshell Christine Tardy's argument in this new book on *genre innovation*: Genres are recognizable because they do have characteristics and boundaries, but genres "aren't fixed" and "they ebb and flow over time." A third and critical part of her argument is that neither genre constraints nor innovations are objective realities by themselves; they may be accepted or rejected depending upon the larger social system into which they are introduced. Thus, "Bohemian Rhapsody," despite its violating of pop music genre boundaries, is widely accepted as being a pop song—and its innovation arguably is what makes it stand out as a hit.

What does all of this mean for genre researchers and writing instructors? That is the question with which I approached reading this book. With the exception of a few pages in a book chapter I wrote several years ago (Ferris, 2011), I am not a researcher of or expert on genre. However, I am a genre *practitioner*. Beyond the obvious—I consume and produce a wide range of written genres as an academic writer, editor, teacher, and social media user—I have enthusiastically adopted genre pedagogy in my own teaching of writing and in curriculum development as a writing program administrator in several different roles: as a first-year writing director, as the director of a large developmental writing program for multilingual students, and as a teacher of advanced writing courses for upper-division and graduate students.

Tardy's book has something for everyone. For genre scholars, the first several chapters carefully lay the groundwork and present a theoretical framework for examining both genre theory and genre innovation, and the final chapter outlines directions for further research on innovation. For hands-on genre researchers, Chapter 4 presents a compelling narrative of Tardy's own primary research on genre innovation and how it is both encouraged and discouraged by a professor in an environmental science class for students preparing to research and write their senior theses. This chapter is especially notable because the research (like all of Tardy's empirical work) is carefully designed and explained and engagingly described, so it is a good model for classroom writing researchers in general and genre researchers in particular. This chapter was also extremely interesting for me as I further envisioned how genre instruction in a writing class might better prepare students for a wide range of disciplinary writing innovations.

For classroom teachers, though, Chapter 5 is the real payoff. As I mentioned, I am already an enthusiastic genre practitioner as a teacher, program administrator, and teacher educator, but I got some great new practical ideas for teaching from this chapter—not only about how better to present genre awareness/knowledge concepts but especially about authentic and organic ways to introduce the notion of innovation (which Tardy also calls “genre play”) into the writing course syllabus. I am already imagining how my own advanced composition course (which is based on building genre awareness and genre knowledge for upper-division university students from a wide range of disciplines) will benefit from the added insights of this chapter.

Until I read this book, I didn't realize how much I myself enjoy genre innovation, both as a consumer and as a writer. One of my current favorite Twitter accounts to follow is a parody account known as @manwhohasitall. Its anonymous author tweets pithy bits of advice and inspiration to busy working husbands and fathers that imitate the kinds of “wisdom” that women's publications (magazines, websites, blogs, etc.) try to impart so that women can “have it all”—juggle the demands of a spouse, children, a career, a household, and health and physical perfection. Here are a couple of examples from the Twitter account:

From Jan. 24, 2016: “The plight of the over-committed dad remains an epidemic. Try getting up an hour earlier than you wife & kids to get everything done.”

From Jan. 19, 2016: “FRAZZLED working dad? Curl up on the sofa in your pjs with a plain yoghurt, half a walnut and a good book. ‘Me time.’”

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Reading this Twitter account, one quickly realizes how ridiculous such advice sounds when it is aimed at men rather than women. It successfully mimics the genre of “advice to busy working wives/mothers” so that it is recognizable but then “innovates” by changing the target audience from men to women. The great success of this Twitter account (its author is now getting invitations to publish humorous “advice columns” for men in newspapers) attests to both sides of Tardy’s argument in the book: The parody works because the genre is recognizable, and the innovation is well received by its audience of Twitter followers (more than 100,000 at the time of this writing).

Not only do I enjoy genre innovation, I also participate in it as a writer. In Chapter 3, Tardy talks about the ways different types of innovation have emerged in usually stodgy academic writing genres. Reading this chapter, I realized that I myself have produced some of these genre innovations, most notably autobiographical chapters or portions of chapters (e.g., detailing my journey as a researcher or my experiences as an applied linguist). I also became aware that in my own writing and in my work with student writers, I tend to resist convention and encourage innovation. For example, my PhD students would attest that I am always reminding them to make their writing more accessible by avoiding passive voice and excessively long sentences, and by minimizing jargon or at least defining their terms in context. I have often encouraged students to bring first-person narratives into their academic writing as well. Finally, of course, in the spirit of the book I am introducing, I have chosen to write this foreword in a rather innovative way(!).

Reading this book did more than just make me more aware of something I already, somewhat subconsciously, was doing, however. It pushed my thinking about if, when, and how writing teachers should encourage students to push genre boundaries and to innovate. I came away convinced that I need to do more to explicitly teach this and to intentionally ask students to experiment. Without genre innovation, we do risk (as Tardy notes) falling into deadening, formulaic views of and approaches to teaching genre knowledge and are painting only a partial picture of genre for our students.

NOTE

Permission to use @manwhohasitall tweets granted by United Agents LLP.

REFERENCE

- Ferris, D.R. (2011). Written discourse analysis and L2 teaching. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*, Vol. II (pp. 643–662). New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis