

Paper Proposal from Dr Sara Read: s.l.read@lboro.ac.uk

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### **Beyond the Archive: Writing Fiction as a Research Method for Recovering Early Modern Women's Lives**

This reflective paper traces my journey of discovering new historical knowledge through the act of writing fiction. It argues that practice-as-research offers a powerful scholarly intervention for recovering women's lives, particularly in periods where archival records are often incomplete or obscured by patriarchal norms. Drawing on my practice-as-research novels *The Gossips' Choice* (2020) and *The Midwife's Truth* (2023) about an invented seventeenth-century midwife and my reflective scholarship on the process, I will discuss how creative writing becomes a site of knowledge production rather than a vehicle for dissemination alone.

Writing fiction required me to move beyond textual analysis into an embodied, sensory, and affective engagement with early modern women's experiences: imagining the physical labour of midwives, the material textures of the birthing chamber, and the emotional dynamics of communal childbirth. These insights emerged only through the imaginative work of creative writing, revealing aspects of women's lives that scholarship had not previously prompted me to consider.

The practice-based research method also exposes the interpretive negotiations inherent in reconstructing women's histories. Working with midwifery manuals, case notes, and fragmentary biographical traces demanded a continual balancing of accuracy, authenticity, and narrative plausibility. Creative practice allowed me to restore personhood to women who appear in the record only through their husbands' occupations, to explore the complexities of marriage and authority in Restoration households, and to illuminate the everyday practices that shaped women's reproductive lives. In doing so, historical fiction about the lives of women does not simply illustrate historical research; it generates new historical understanding.

### **Biography**

Dr Sara Read is a senior lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Loughborough University, where her work bridges early modern women's writing, health humanities with a focus on reproductive health history, and practice-as-research methodologies. Her scholarship includes *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* (2013), and several articles on pregnancy and miscarriage. Alongside this research, she develops historically grounded fiction as a mode of knowledge production; her novels *The Gossips' Choice* (2020) and *The Midwife's Truth* (2023), will be followed by a biofictional third novel based on the life of Restoration celebrity criminal Mary Carleton.