Spotlight
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What can Shakespeare, Mann, and Dickens teach us about family business?

Novels and plays illuminate the emotions and conflicts that shape family enterprises

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Family businesses exist at the intersection of economics and intimacy. The spreadsheet shows revenue trends. It cannot show a father's reluctance to hand over the keys to a company he built from nothing, or a daughter's resentment at being overlooked for her brother. These emotional undercurrents drive decisions every day in family firms—and the dominant research tradition in management has been ill-equipped to capture them.

In their editorial for *Family Business Review*, Mattias Nordqvist and William B. Gartner argue that literary fiction deserves a place in the family business scholar's toolkit. Novels and plays, they contend, offer narrative evidence about the internal lives of families in business—evidence that surveys and regressions routinely miss. The argument is not new in management studies broadly, but its application to family business research remains surprisingly thin.

WHAT WE STUDIED

This is a conceptual editorial, not an empirical study. Nordqvist and Gartner draw on interdisciplinary scholarship—management, the humanities, cognitive psychology—to make the case for literary fiction as a legitimate data source in family business research. They reference existing work on narrative methods and illustrate their argument with examples from classic and modern fiction: Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, Carl Johan Love Almqvist's *It's Acceptable!*, and others.

The piece builds on Rhodes and Brown's (2005) earlier argument that fictional stories can serve as valid empirical material. Where narrative approaches and qualitative methods have gained ground in recent years, the authors observe that fiction itself—as a form of "data"—remains largely untapped in the family business field. They draw a parallel with narrative medicine, where clinicians use literature to develop empathy and interpretive skill, and ask why family business scholars and practitioners have not done the same.

KEY INSIGHTS

Fiction as research tool, not decoration

Nordqvist and Gartner push beyond the idea of fiction as metaphor or illustration. Their argument: novels and plays can function as narrative evidence that reflects real organizational behaviors and emotional dynamics. Consider *Buddenbrooks*. Mann traces a merchant family's decline across four generations, detailing how internal tensions and shifting social norms erode the entrepreneurial legacy. Read with a researcher's eye, the novel operates as a longitudinal case study spanning decades—something no interview protocol can replicate.

The subjective side of business decisions

Traditional research methods struggle with internal experience. Fear, shame, hope, pride—these shape decisions in family firms profoundly, yet they tend to flatten in survey instruments or even qualitative interviews, where respondents may filter or rationalize. Fiction excels here. Through internal monologue, shifting perspectives, and emotionally charged dialogue, novels make subjective experience visible and relatable.

This matters because family business decisions frequently hinge on identity and emotion rather than financial calculus alone. A CEO who refuses to divest a loss-making division may be acting on grief, loyalty, or a promise made to a dying parent. Fiction gives us the

language and the lens to examine these dynamics without reducing them to variables.

Reading builds empathy—a leadership essential

Kidd and Castano (2013) demonstrated that reading literary fiction measurably enhances empathy and the ability to understand others' mental states. Short-term effects, yes. But the implication for family business leadership is worth taking seriously. Family firms run on relationships: between generations, between family and non-family managers, between branches of the family with competing interests. The ability to see a situation from someone else's perspective is not a soft skill in this context. It is a survival skill.

Fiction trains readers to sit with ambiguity, tolerate contradiction, and imagine alternatives. These are precisely the capacities that succession planning, family governance, and conflict mediation demand.

Historical and cultural context embedded in the text

Literary works capture the spirit of a time and place. This is valuable for researchers trying to understand how family businesses are shaped by broader societal forces. Almqvist's *It's Acceptable!* (1838) imagines a world where women can take over family firms—radical for its era, and a useful lens for understanding how gender norms have constrained ownership patterns over centuries. Shakespeare's *Henry IV* grapples with succession, identity, and readiness in ways that remain remarkably current.

Fiction as world-making

Novels do more than mirror reality. They create possible worlds. The authors invoke Wolfgang Iser's concept of fiction as "boundary-crossing"—literature's capacity to challenge dominant ideologies and propose alternatives. A utopian depiction of entrepreneurial daughters. A tragic tale of generational decline. Each invites the reader to ask: what could be different?

This is the most underappreciated dimension of the argument. Family business research tends to describe what is. Fiction imagines what might be. For a field grappling with questions about inclusivity, sustainability, and the future of ownership structures, that imaginative capacity has real strategic value.

TAKEAWAYS

For researchers

Fictional narratives can serve as valuable data that illuminates real-world business challenges—especially those involving emotions, relationships, and identity. Scholars should consider incorporating novels and plays into their research design, treating them as narrative evidence rather than mere illustration.

For educators and advisors

Fictional case studies offer emotionally resonant ways to teach business principles. Discussing succession through *King Lear*, or family governance through *A Thousand Acres*, provokes reflection and dialogue that traditional business cases rarely achieve. Executive education programs in family business should experiment with literature-based modules.

For family business owners

Reading fiction can sharpen your ability to understand the people around you—co-owners, successors, in-laws, non-family managers. Start a reading group within the family or the leadership team. Pick novels that deal with inheritance, generational conflict, or identity. The conversations that follow may be more productive than another strategy offsite.

IMPACT

Nordqvist and Gartner's editorial is a provocation in the best sense. It asks the family business research community to widen its aperture—to accept that a novel can yield insights as rigorous and relevant as an econometric study, provided we develop the interpretive tools to engage with it seriously. The argument extends beyond methodology. Fiction bridges the gap between academic research and the lived experience of family business owners. A novel about generational succession might reach a business owner who would never open an academic journal, yet find their own dilemmas reflected in the characters and conflicts on the page.

For practitioners, the takeaway is equally direct. The emotional and relational dynamics that fiction captures so well are the same dynamics that derail successions, fracture ownership groups, and erode trust between generations. Learning to read fiction with attention to these patterns is, in a real sense, learning to read your own family's business more clearly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Broaden the research toolkit:** Include literary analysis and narrative interpretation alongside established qualitative and quantitative methods in family business studies.
2. **Develop literature-based training:** Create workshops or executive sessions built around fictional narratives relevant to family business issues—succession, governance, identity, conflict.
3. **Start reading groups in family firms:** Use shared literary exploration to promote empathy, reflection, and intergenerational dialogue within the ownership group.

4. **Collaborate across disciplines:** Build partnerships between business schools and departments of literature, humanities, or cultural studies to enrich both research and teaching.

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