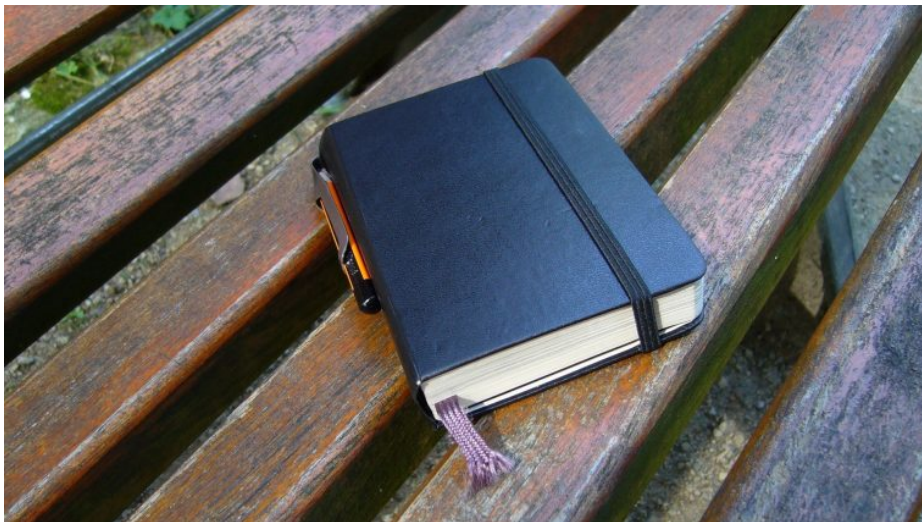


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"Beyond Sleep" – The orphaned notebook

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The fictional fieldwork used as example in this blog series depicts two research projects that have not been finalized for different reason. From a data management perspective one of the important questions would be: What happens to the collected data?



In the novel *Beyond Sleep* – originally published in Dutch as *Nooit meer slapen*, by W.F. Hermans in 1966 [1] the doctoral candidates Alfred from the Netherlands and Arne from Norway both do not finish their geological fieldwork in the north of Norway.

Suitability for re-use

In the fictional example several factors influencing the quality and suitability for re-use of research data are being mentioned. Alfred considers his own research as not easy to understand for others. Besides it lacks (documentation of) a sample selection strategy.

"Illegible handwriting. Badly executed drawings. What a mess!" (p. 188);

"I discard the rocks. Afraid of him asking: What did you collect those for? I wouldn't know what to tell him" (p. 148).

Being aware of his own shortcomings as researcher, Alfred very much admires his friend's skills and values his drawing and research notes:

"his notebook (...) is shielded from the rain by a piece of clear plastic. He is drawing with his hand under the plastic" (p. 148)

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"Arne uses the right-hand pages of his notebook for illustrations and the left for his notes, which I can't read because they're in Norwegian. But they look very neat and self-assured. Nothing crossed out, no smudges. Clearly numbered, well spaced. Not the kind of illegible jottings that can only be deciphered by the person who made them. These will keep their value even if Arne loses the notebook and it isn't found again for fifty years. Even if he drops dead." (p. 149)

The orphaned notebook

Both PhD candidates get separated during their trip and Alfred has to find his way back to the camp location without a compass. When he finds his friend again he realizes that fate has struck and Arne has fallen down a slope *"Sprawled on his back, one leg bent, the other flung out. I can clearly see the smooth, worn-down sole of his boot, which has come loose. (...) But this is not sleep. This is beyond sleep" (p. 214) [2].*

Alfred is trying to care as good as he can for his dead friend, his possessions and the research equipment. Even though exhausted, hungry and without a compass, the only thing that he takes with him when he leaves the location to give notice to the authorities is the research notebook of his friend (p. 215).

Personal data

Research datasets and their documentation can contain personal data, even though humans are not the main focus of the discipline. In the fictional fieldwork example, this seems to come as a surprise to Alfred. Arne used the same notebook for data collection – drawings and descriptions – and journaling about the fieldwork trip.

"When I take a break – and when the rain lifts somewhat – I leaf through his notebook. All those wonderful drawings going to waste. All those neat entries which I can't read because they're in Norwegian, although I try deciphering the occasional word. I see my own name twice in the last of his entries. What did he say about me?" (p. 217) As the police did not request to keep the notebook (p. 226), Alfred keeps it and asks a girl that he meets in the bus for a translation of the entry about himself. He learns that his friend admired him for his perseverance (p. 229).

Advancing science

Alfred does not continue his own research in Norway. Before leaving to the Netherlands he visits Arne's supervisor Prof. Nummedal. He expresses the wish to continue the project that Arne has been working on, a proposal that is being dismissed by the professor.[3] Handing over the notebook for the sake of science Alfred acts against his own feelings and interests: *"(...) It might be interesting to know how far Arne progressed with this research. Maybe you have another pupil who could continue his work. I would like to have kept it as a souvenir, but then I don't know Norwegian. Besides, the information might be useful to someone." (p. 234)*

A good guardian?

[Previous parts of this series](#) have dealt with data archives and the findability of research data for re-use. Alfred is strongly interested in the continuation of the work of his friend, but starts doubting that this would happen.

Noting the professors severe visual impairment, he soon regrets his action of handing over the notebook: *"Now his work, unfinished, is in the hands of a blind man" (p. 235).* The retiring professor has previously shown that he sees academic work from a different perspective than the young PhD candidate: *"I have seen a great deal of scientific work done to no avail. Warehouses filled*

with collections no-one takes any notice of, until the day that they are thrown out for lack of space. I have seen theories come and go like wild geese or swallows" (p.8)

Concluding remarks

What happens to the data collected by Alfred? His wishes to continue Arne's research and start a new life suggest that he has let go of his own research question and does not look for evidence for the meteorite hypothesis. There are hints in the narrative that he actually might find evidence for a meteor strike in the region (p. 229, 243).

How would this fictional example of a geology fieldwork trip relate to research done in other disciplines? It contains a lot of interesting questions and food for thought:

- Which factors influence the understandability of the datasets that you are collecting or creating?
- Do datasets or the documentation that you work with contain any personal data that outsiders might not expect to be there?
- What would researchers in your discipline do with the datasets collected in a project that has been stopped?
- Who has a responsibility to care for datasets that have lost the primary person responsible for them?

This blog post is part of the series "[Research in fiction through the lens of data management](#)".

The next post about research data management continues with this topic and relates it to today's research: Research...When life gets in between

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Footnotes

[1] For international readers this blog post refers to an English translation Hermans, W.F. (2007). *Beyond Sleep*. (I. Rilke, Trans.). New York, NY: The Overlook Press. (Original work published 1966, translation of the 27th impression published in 2003 by De Bezige Bij).

[2] The mentioning of the state his boots are in, could be understood as indication that the accident might have been caused by the choice not to acquire any new equipment for the trip as pointed out in the blog "Equipment don't fail me now".

[3] Given the scope of the blog, it is not possible to provide an analysis of the relationships between the characters and a more detailed interpretation of the specific scene mentioned.



