

Trauma Memoir as
Mechanism to Recovery:
How Alice Sebold's *Lucky*
Crafts Cathartic Space

By Annie Hidley

The “Story” of My Paper

- Working in a community where many students have had adverse childhood experiences, it is important to me as a teacher of adolescents to explore texts that creatively express how their authors found connection in their lives after trauma
- The goal: Expose students to these types of works with the hope that they might not feel so alone, and can gain practical tools for building stronger networks
- My analysis illuminated to me that, as important as healing is to an individual, so is also their connection to community and their sense of place in it

- Aims of this conference are to build community through open-mindedness, self-awareness, and celebration of diversity
- When I think about community, I think about the 16, 17 and 18 year old students I teach every day who live in and have the opportunity to add value to the Brockport community
- Are they existing in and contributing to a just and equitable environment?
- I believe that one pathway to community building, open-mindedness, self-awareness and celebration of diversity is through reading and discussing literature

- Our high school community → Focus this year at Brockport High School is on character building and resilience through adversity
- Superintendent's conference day tomorrow invites teachers to hear lecture by Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, pediatrician and behavioral science investigator, whose mission is: "Fostering resilience-- preparing teens to thrive through good and challenging times"
- Many of Brockport's high school students continue on to SUNY Brockport, and discussing diversity and resilience at this level is essential
- Literature offers a unique platform for those discussions

- While I am not necessarily promoting that *Lucky* be read by high school students as a classroom text, this was an interesting piece for me to explore trauma retelling through the lens of intersectionality, in a memoir that discusses events that happen to a young adult woman
- Important to note that Sebold, as an author, can only speak to her own experiences, and I, as a literary scholar, can only speak to the extent of my literary criticism research
- Using literature as a means of understanding trauma has strengths and weaknesses
- For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss the way in which literature might be used as a vehicle of social critique, and a tool to combat inequality

- Researched complex trauma, trauma processing in the brain, PTSD, and cognitive strategies used by therapists to aid in the healing of trauma
- Could reading do that for someone—and what role might memoir reading play in recovery?
- Where does literary trauma theory fall short of making a comprehensive connection to the psychology models being put into practice today?
- Despite interdisciplinary research, I am still approaching this paper through the lens of literary criticism, and analyze the text from that vantage point
- Literature's representation of trauma → literature as a mechanism for trauma healing
- How can we use psychology's current best practices to understand the form of memoir, and therefore better understand how literature can serve its audience?

Main Argument

- Memoirs can function as mechanisms of reclamation
- Healing can transpire in the interactive space between writer and reader
- When an author is willing to share her own story as it is a product of her lifetime, and therefore make herself vulnerable for the purpose of connecting herself and her reader, through this space both author and reader gain more accessibility to finding their voice.
- This is demonstrated by Alice Sebold's *Lucky*
- The narrative form of this memoir parallels the genuine experience of processing trauma
- This form allows readers access to new and shared language where they may name their injuries and begin to heal

Why it Matters

- *Lucky* is important because it was published for an audience that spans decades
- Experiences of an audience may be different, and yet, through memoir, something concrete is offered with which to connect
- If, as Judith Herman says, “trauma is trauma in the way that it inspires helplessness and terror” (34), then memoirs can be used as mechanisms of reclamation in that they inspire healing and recovery

Defining My Terms

Intersectionality

- Women, men and people of other gender identities experience trauma and may benefit from writing and reading memoirs as well
- This paper addresses how gender specifically affects trauma and healing
- I argue that cultural expectations for women's bodies are an important consideration for studying trauma, and, since trauma is tied to gender, I will address specifically the trauma of women here, and focus on Sebold's intersection between her race, age, gender, and class

Trauma

- The shocking, isolated incident happening to an individual
- AND ALSO:
- The repetitive relational patterns (between the author and others in her life) stemming from this event that work to continually communicate to her that the world is an unsafe place in which she is ill-equipped to fit and function with maximum potential

Trauma Reasoning

- “Shared sense of trauma reasoning” → the way that a group of individuals collaboratively work through similar traumas with the same set of reasoning skills and language, gaining an understanding of fragmented memory, without necessarily projecting their own traumas onto one another
- Not “shared sense of trauma,” but rather “shared sense of trauma reasoning”
- I do not believe that merely sharing in each other’s trauma is mutually beneficial or effective in order to heal
- Actually sharing trauma becomes problematic for both the storyteller and listener
- Sebald’s text function as a way for the reader’s own trauma to be expounded and understood

Overview of Relevant Scholarship

- Using psychology to inform our understanding of an author's internal process allows us to more closely examine the way in which a multi-genre narrative illuminates and parallels the healing process
- I draw on two psychology models to inform my understanding of trauma processing
- I use literary theory to solidify these models

Judith Herman

- Stages of recovery for a trauma victim: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning (reconstructing the trauma story within the space of therapist and patient), and reconnecting with ordinary life (restoring the connection between survivor and community through participation in support groups) (155)
- My analysis of the trauma memoir *Lucky* can help solidify this model. I believe that in order to establish safety, a traumatized woman must reclaim her sense of her right to be in her body. In order to reconstruct the story, a woman must find a shared language. Finally, in order to restore connections, she must establish a mentor or a network that is not exclusively part of a support group of people with similar traumas.
- Herman claims that a “highly emotional, contradictory and fragmented manner” of retelling an experience risks the story’s integrity (1). I believe that the most authentic story is the fragmented retelling. Non-fiction memoir writing of this sort allows a writer to figure out organically what she hadn’t previously understood, to get started on the path to reclamation, while at the same time illuminating for her readers examples of the way in which the development of identity can guide the narrative structure itself

Richard Schwartz

- Internal Family System's Model to understand an individual's ability to cope with trauma based on relational patterns that have been developing throughout their entire lives
- An individual's internal relation, or their "parts", is shaped by interaction patterns of their family...The way many people react to trauma sets up a polarization between parts...so they resort to more extreme methods of suppression" (Schwartz 47)
- In this way, I believe that trauma can be defined as not just one event but the series of patterns that then unfold. We recognize in the memoir that family relations, and the way Sebold functions within her family unit, play a major role in the way she is able to process her trauma. Sebold copes with their trauma in different ways, and we can better understand why when we explore her family system pre-trauma.
- Schwartz's model builds on Herman's in understanding how the role of the individual before their trauma impacts their ability to process their trauma. Gender, specifically, impacts this ability.
- Schwartz establishes that, "Just like people in a family or countries in international politics, parts cannot and will not change unilaterally. This points to the importance of viewing a part in the context of the system in which it is embedded...with a systematic awareness, parts can depolarize" (44).
- Considering how all parts of an individual's system function together → When we read memoirs in this way, we understand that the fragmented, non-linear structure of Sebold's memoir more authentically represent the healing process

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

- “The stories we collectively know shape the material world, inform human relations, and mold our sense of who we are. [Prevailing narratives] restrict the lives and govern the bodies” (1567)
- While a woman may not have words to explain her traumatic experience, by contributing discourse that shifts the consequences of trauma away from normative expectations, an author has the ability to allow women readers to connect
- Sebald encourages women to break their silence by setting up a memoir structured in a way that illustrates the authentic order of memories
- Sebald uses her art to demonstrate willingness to be vulnerable, commitment to sharing stories, and ability to do language to cultivate healing and survival in communities of women
- They steadfastly continue to reimagine the narratives that surround women’s trauma, and pledge to pave the way for women’s voices to be heard

Textual Examples that Fortify
My Claim

- Sebold navigates her sense of self within her community after undergoing trauma, and what her sharing of her navigation could mean to that community
- Sebold courageously sounds her voice into a community whose accepted rhetoric has, at times, challenged and destabilized her
- Through her exploration of language in the form of observation of the confines of societal discourse, insightful reflection, and personal poetry, Sebold offers her readers the gift of an authentic voice, and promising stories of discovery

Journaling

- Sebold did not journal

Dismissive Rhetoric and Women's Reality

- Incorporating others' voices into the text allows an author to position her own language to contrast the acceptable rhetoric proves that new language must become accessed in order for victims of trauma to begin to experience healing
- The language used by doctors that insists a patient focus attention on the problem with her body, strip individuals of time to consider the problem with society and reflect
- Instead, she must labor to fit back in to a society who has discriminated her based on her difference—a society that has named her “different”, or outside the norm
- When women can acknowledge that the real language of their experiences has been buried, they can work together to reimagine the discourse that surrounds women's experiences in places of care

Dismissive Rhetoric and Women's Reality

- Nurse → cleans her wounds, tells her that “being beaten up (like she had) would make the cops listen to (her) more attentively” (18)
- Doctor → scoffs at her when she requests not to take Valium
- Police officer → “All that doesn't matter, we just need the gist of it. As soon as you sign it, you can go home. I did” (32)
- Law → tell her to look more “virginal” and that her whiteness would make the jury feel sorry for her
- Sebold was asked to recall the night's events in one cohesive and linear way—this proved to be an inauthentic account of her experience
- This dialogue at times rejected her own reality, replacing her stories instead, with normal and accepted narratives

Incorporation of Poetry

- Bridge between the narrative and the narrative's implied meaning
- “If They Caught You,” creative writing workshop with Tess Gallagher at Syracuse University
- Speaks directly to her rapist in her poem, commands the reader's attention
- Imperative language— parallels the way memories intrude into one's consciousness
- “I want to make my hatred large and whole” (99)
- First time since her rape Sebold is able to give voice to her emotions, accepting them as her own rather than pushing them silently under the surface
- Shows the reader that it took time for her to find her voice—and it took the encouragement and support of her mentor, Tess Gallagher
- In acknowledging and exposing her raw emotions by assigning them language, and then sending them out into the universe rather than feel guilty and try to ignore them, Sebold allows women readers to do the same

Conclusion

- By weaving elements together, authors reconstruct the trauma narrative in order to illustrate and encourage resilient and informed communities of women
- The true order of memories is not as important to them as the impact those memories have when retold in the order that most effected the author
- When a reader can take part in the cathartic journey of the author, she too may feel, at the end, that she has arrived at a sort of solace
- This type of taking part requires the reader have the ability to differentiate between her own experiences and the experiences of the author, while still finding validation in the memoir's words
- The goal then, would not be that the reader better understand the author's experience, but rather that she better understand her own experience once she has a context with which she can relate and language to which she can access

Conclusion

- By incorporating poetry with prose, flashback with imperative language, and reflection with dominant societal rhetoric, Sebald continues to pave the way for discourse surrounding trauma to shift to be more accessible for women
- Sebald commits to her work and renders herself to be of use by her community of readers
- Offers words into the space between author and reader, encouraging women through future decades to give voice to their trauma and to move forward. Explains the value of reclamation through reimagining
- When a writer constructs a memoir that takes a parallel shape to the fragments of her own traumatic memory, that writer finds a healing source in the process.
- Correspondingly, by reading a multi-genre memoir infused with discourse accessible to a female reader who has also suffered trauma, she too experiences healing
- Therefore, the interactive space between reader and writer—the space between words on a page—is a mechanism that creates connections, builds communities, and heals.

Conclusion

- Recently, I wrote my own trauma memoir of sorts—a creative non-fiction, poetic and fragmented narrative of rather traumatic experiences in my own life
- Underwent evaluation in my creative writing workshop → Words taken verbatim from several of my female classmates' feedback: "This piece caused me to reflect on myself at times and realize a few things," "You've come to very real conclusions that had such an impact on me that they've made me re-think certain aspects of my life," and, finally, one woman wrote to me an intimate anecdote about her own experiences, and then she said, "...And your essay makes this makes sense." She drew a heart, and wrote, "Thank you. "