**'Compulsively readable and deeply moving': Women's Middlebrow Trauma Fiction**

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## Introduction

Since the huge rise in interest in the 'trauma novel' from the late 1980s onwards, literary trauma studies have provided a detailed account of the ways in which traumas of various kinds have been represented in literature. The majority of these accounts have focused on highly literary fiction and have emphasized both the fundamental unrepresentability of trauma and its deforming effect on narrative. However, it is also the case that there has been a veritable outpouring of trauma texts in the popular arena of mass market and middlebrow fiction. Within contemporary women's writing, for example, novels about forms of grief as a response to trauma seem to abound. In particular, I have noticed a proliferation of narratives in which women characters come to terms, or fail to, with the traumatic loss of children. Significantly, this preoccupation with the representation of maternal bereavement seems to obtain across generic boundaries within women's writing as a whole. For example, recent narratives of maternal loss have taken the form of the gothic novel, like Julie Myerson's *The Story of You* (2007); the crime thriller (Louise Doughty's *Whatever You Love* (2010) and Julie Myerson's *Something Might Happen* (2004); and the domestic melodrama, such as Kim Edwards' *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* (2007). Taken together, these novels could be seen as forming another emerging literary genre – women's trauma fiction.

Far from foregrounding the unspeakability of trauma therefore, their very numbers suggest a positive incitement to speech. Just as for Foucault (1987) sexuality in the nineteenth century was not, as the repressive hypothesis would have it, silenced and repressed but was rather produced in a multitude of discursive formations, so the traumatic event in contemporary culture is the subject of diverse literary and cultural productions (Luckhurst, 2003). This recognition prompts a series of pertinent questions: in what terms do women's trauma narratives speak about traumatic events? Do they represent an 'acting out' and a 'working through' of trauma in the psychoanalytic sense or are

they, as some literary reviewers seem to suggest, merely a form of emotional self-indulgence which, far from enlightening or empowering the reading subject, feeds a mawkish obsession with bad news and other people's tragedy? If, as trauma critics argue, trauma narratives derive from an ethical turn in literary studies, a concern with otherness and a listening to the pain of others, then what does the recent plethora of women's trauma narratives suggest about the ways in which we are listening to other women's trauma? Is it a case of empathetic bearing witness or more akin to rubber-necking the scene of a car crash? Moreover, does the popular commercialization of female trauma culture pose a danger of blurring the distinction between specific traumatic events and a kind of generalized trauma affect in the culture? How helpful is it if women's writing as a whole is increasingly recast as a literature of trauma?

The purpose of this chapter is to address these questions while advocating women's middlebrow literature as a significant site of contemporary trauma narratives. Taking my cue from Roger Luckhurst's book, *The Trauma Question*, I want to problematize the dominant trauma aesthetic, suggesting that this represents only one aspect of many articulations of trauma in the cultural sphere, and that there are a variety of trauma narratives exploring diverse kinds of traumatic event and experience. I want to argue that women's middlebrow trauma fiction provides an opportunity to imaginatively explore contemporary cultural traumas, particularly those which affect women. Rather than offering the kind of narrative difficulty, aporia, and 'empathic unsettlement' (LaCapra, 2001, p.78) of canonical trauma literature, they arguably offer a more restitutive reading experience in which narrative concordance is more or less pleasurably redeemed from traumatic discordance (Luckhurst, 2008); and provide for readers something akin to a Kristevan (1989) 'counter-depressant' thereby palliating the affects of sorrow and paralysis induced by trauma. In sum, rather than being seen as a form of dumbed down 'mum's lit', these texts deserve to be taken seriously as imaginative negotiations of trauma.

**The Trauma novel and the aesthetics of rupture and aporia**

In her path-breaking text, 'Introduction to psychoanalysis, trauma and culture', Cathy Caruth drew together the Freudian literature in order to outline a theory of contemporary trauma culture. Like the early psychoanalysts, Freud, Breuer, and Pierre Janet, she emphasized the characteristics of belatedness, the difficulties of gaining access to the traumatic story, and the unspeakability of trauma in trauma victims (1991). As Caruth subsequently stated in *Unclaimed Experience*, "the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, only in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (1995, pp.4-5). Drawing on the work of Caruth *inter alia*, Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004) identifies the trauma novel as an emerging genre characterised by a fragmented, modernist aesthetic, which foregrounds unrepresentability and aporia. Pointing to the central paradox at the heart of trauma studies, Whitehead asks, if trauma is unrepresentable, then how can it be narrativized? 'If trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence' (Whitehead, 2004, p.6). As a result, trauma fictions typically exhibit formal features of temporal dislocation, narrative rupture, compulsive retelling, and resistance to closure. Similarly, the characters of trauma narratives experience a range of symptoms which mimic those of trauma sufferers including dissociation, paralysis, nightmares, and the sense of something missing. The concomitant post-traumatic effects represented in the trauma novel include failed relationships, frozen affect, and mental breakdown.

The so-called trauma plot revolves around a delayed central secret whose revelation then retrospectively rewrites the narrative. The trauma novel typically presents a model of history which coincides with the idea of traumatic occlusion and the belated recovery of memory. Well-known examples include Ann Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1998), W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), and of course Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). *Beloved* is seen by many as the exemplary trauma fiction. It incorporates what have become three paradigmatic aspects of the genre: the disarticulation of linear narrative; the figuration of trauma in the ghost; and the idea of transgenerational transmission of trauma. In addition, these kind of works set out to promote what Dominick LaCapra calls 'empathic unsettlement' in the reader, whereby the reader is encouraged to respond to the traumatic experience

of others, not through a process of identification that elides difference, but by putting themselves 'in the other's place while recognising the difference of that position' (2001, p.78).

As with high modernism, trauma fiction has in part been constructed as antithetical or inimical to mainstream or mass cultural forms. For example, Laurie Vickroy (2002) opposes a 'serious' and 'authentic' trauma fiction against an exploitative popular culture, which she sees as frequently peddling tales of terror, suspense and prurience. Aporia therefore becomes the mark of authenticity, and literary experimentation is valued as a means of resisting the supposed domestication and hence numbing of traumatic effects. As Luckhurst (2008) points out, there is another schism between literary models of trauma informed by post-structuralism and psychological models of trauma invested in a range of therapeutic and healing discourses. In particular, their approach to narrative is diametrically opposed: whereas the former insist on trauma as the total rupture of narrative, the latter promotes the possibility of 'narrative repair' (Nelson, 2001, pxii). One example of therapeutic discourse on trauma is the work of the psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman. Herman (1992) identifies three main symptoms of trauma: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, which refer respectively to irritability and sleep disruption; continual reliving of the traumatic event; and the inability to act. She also identifies three main stages in the recovery process: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. As she suggests, the last two features can be represented in literature through characters who struggle to transform their traumatic memories into narrative memories. Echoing Pierre Janet, Herman distinguishes between traumatic memory, which is 'wordless and static' (p.175) and narrative memory, which involves the conscious organisation of traumatic material into narrative form. She states that 'the reconstruction of the trauma requires immersion in a past experience of frozen time, the descent into mourning feels like surrender to tears that are endless' (p.195). While from a post-structuralist and literary critical perspective Herman's model may seem overly positive and integrationist, it does offer a convincing account of the ways in which the experience of trauma is represented in popular and middlebrow fiction and, arguably, the ways in which the texts themselves function for readers. Moreover, it is not so far removed from the

account of mourning and melancholia articulated by post-structuralist theorist Julia Kristeva in her study of depression, *Black Sun*.

Although Kristeva is writing about depression rather than trauma, the triggers of depression are not dissimilar to those of the 'shock' of trauma: they include 'some setback or other in my love life or my profession, some sorrow or bereavement affecting my relationship with close relatives […], [a] betrayal, a fatal illness, some accident or handicap that abruptly wrestles me away from what seemed to me the normal category of normal people' (pp.3-4). Similarly, the symptoms of depression and trauma resemble each other: bodily paralysis, withdrawal from society, psychological fragmentation, and the inability to speak of the trauma. The title of Kristeva's work is taken from a poem by the French poet Gerard de Nerval which refers to melancholy as a black sun, light and dark at the same time or, as Kristeva puts it, a 'light without representation' (Kristeva, p.13). Taking this image as her starting point, Kristeva attempts to theorise this unnameable object: 'I am trying to address an abyss of sorrow, a non-communicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself' (p.3). Whatever the original trigger, the sufferer is plunged into another life: 'A life that is unliveable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back or shed, a total despair, scorching at times, then wan and empty. In short a devitalised existence…' (p.4). As in Herman's account of traumatic constriction, the body's rhythms appear slowed down or interrupted; it is as if time itself has been suspended, as reality becomes 'absorbed into sorrow' (p.4). Moreover, the body feels as if it has been wounded; 'it is bleeding, cadaverised' (p.4). Significantly the melancholic subject turns away from the realm of signs: melancholic discourse is repetitive and monotonous because sufferers are unable to 'concatenate', that is link signifiers together in a meaningful chain. Speech delivery becomes slowed and silences are long and frequent. In extreme cases, even that 'frugal musicality' becomes exhausted and 'the melancholy subject appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos' (p.33). Having given up on language, the wounded persons are, in Kristeva's phrase, 'prisoners of affect' (p.14). If the problem of melancholia may be summed up in the unwillingness of the subject to substitute signs for the lost object then,

according to Kristeva, the only means of mitigating loss is through sublimation of one kind or another. One possible route is the poetic form, which 'through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, […] decomposes and recomposes signs, [and] is the sole container seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing' (p.14). In the absence of psychoanalytic treatment, argues Kristeva, signifying practices such as literature, poetry and music can act as a counter-depressant. In the interplay between semiotic and symbolic processes, the wounded psyche may be salved. Kristeva thus advocates literary production as an alternative treatment for forms of melancholia.

**The Middlebrow Trauma Paradigm**

Kristeva, in common with the majority of trauma critics, privileges those texts which foreground experimentalism or literary deformation. It is self-consciously 'writerly' works, which mimic the effects of trauma, which supposedly prove the most effective at mitigating sadness. However, as Luckhurst (2008) points out, low, popular and middlebrow forms which seek to represent traumas of various kinds have proliferated in contemporary culture. While cultural and aesthetic theory emphasizes difficulty, rupture and aporia, the cultural sphere is saturated with stories of trauma as a spur to narrative:

> Beyond post-structuralist trauma theory and its trauma canon, a wide diversity of high, middle and low cultural forms have provided a repertoire of compelling ways to articulate that apparently paradoxical thing, the trauma narrative. These work from a different aspect of the same problem: if trauma is a crisis in representation, then this generates narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*, a compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge. (Luckhurst, p.83, original emphasis)

Luckhurst argues that middlebrow fiction tests the limits of the trauma paradigm in adopting popular and, therefore accessible, mainstream forms. While sharing motifs and features with the trauma canon, such texts clearly pose a challenge to its prescriptive modernist aesthetics of rupture and unrepresentability. Thus, moving the focus from narrative rupture to possibility and 'the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative' (p. 89), suggests a different kind of cultural

work that trauma narratives perform. Trauma fiction should not be viewed therefore as a narrow canon of literary works, but rather 'as a mass of narratives that have exploded across high, middle and low brow fiction since the late 1980s, texts with wildly different ambitions but that frequently share the same narrative devices' (p. 90).

According to Luckhurst, this trauma paradigm goes all the way through culture, transforming narrative, trope and characterization in contemporary writing as a whole. Writing about the mass of mainstream fiction that appeared in the 1990s, he identifies a whole genre of fictions in which traumatic subjectivity is the main thematic and sometimes formal concern, and which demonstrates 'how quickly formal conventions were established: narrative anachrony as a symptom of buried trauma; belated revelation that regressively rewrites the significance of motifs; discordance that is reintegrated to find different levels of concordant narrative coherence' (p. 105). In particular, Luckhurst offers the very suggestive claim that this kind of popular fiction functions as a form of surrogate public history since, finally attuned to the *Zeitgeist*, it has the ability to reconfigure traumatic subjectivity in terms of contemporary cultural anxieties and crises. As well as offering a case study of Stephen King's Gothic Horror, he cites a range of recent texts including Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991); Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes of the Museum* (1996); Nicci French's *The Memory Game* (1997), and Helen Dunmore's *Talking to the Dead* (1997).

Significantly, many of these examples are by women writers and what unites them is their positioning as mainstream and middlebrow. 'Middlebrow' is a pejorative term coined in the 1920s to describe a largely feminine, middleclass, safely unexperimental, commercial and critically ignored writing. Nicola Humble's study of midcentury middlebrow women's writing argues that the genre worked to transform class and gender identities, yet she is also somewhat apologetic about their readerly pleasures and lack of intellectual challenge:

> [T]he middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance and the thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenged novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort.

> It is an essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights… (Humble, 2001, pp.11-12)

If this middlebrow paradigm is mapped onto that of trauma, it raises interesting questions about the multiplicity of trauma narratives, the ways in which they represent trauma, the functions they serve, and the readerly pleasures they provide. As Luckhurst states:

> There must be a contradiction to identifying something like a middlebrow trauma fiction, however, or else its allegedly undemanding textual pleasures need to be rethought. The disarticulation of identity and narrative temporality may not be as extreme as high or low fictions […]. But they still imply serious cultural work to manage the depredations to the contemporary subject (and predominately female subjectivity) marked by trauma. (Luckhurst, p. 110)

In contradistinction to the etiolated and aporetic narratives of the trauma novel as defined by Whitehead (2004) among others, middlebrow forms represent an eager narrativisation or putting into discourse of traumatic experience, and a positive spur to storytelling. They encourage, not alienation, but shared listening, and a witnessing of suffering and pain. If, underlying the trauma paradigm, there is an assumption that formal radicalism and difficulty equates to political radicalism, it could be argued that such works are critically marginalised and denigrated precisely because their narrative pleasures are too explicit for a trauma aesthetic that privileges difficulty and aporia.

**Women's Middlebrow Trauma Fiction**

The middlebrow is a significant site of the narrativisation of trauma, particularly female trauma, partly because it is a liminal category positioned between literary fiction and commercial fiction. It draws on the resources of literary fiction and shares some of its audience, while at the same time its close relation to the mass media means that is particularly well attuned to the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary issues and cultural anxieties, and therefore picks up on these quickly. Since the new millennium, women's middlebrow trauma fiction has explored parental, and specifically maternal, fears about the

loss, abduction or violent death of children, and the effects of such losses on the family, arguably exploiting and reflecting media coverage of child abduction cases — such as the cases of Madeleine McCann, Sarah Payne and the Soham murders case in the UK. In addition, greater public awareness of road safety campaigns as a response to the large number of child deaths on the roads has arguably led to an increased concern over child safety generally. Women's trauma fiction about these issues utilises a variety of genres including the gothic novel, the crime thriller, the family saga, and the domestic melodrama. What then do different genres offer in terms of strategies, devices and mechanisms to represent the acting out and working through of trauma? In each case, the generic conventions affect the representation of grief and the depiction of maternal trauma in turn impacts on the narrative trajectory. The family saga concerns traumatic relationships through time; the Gothic allows for the expression of illicit, repressed and/or unconscious emotions and feelings; and crime is about vicariously experiencing danger and re-establishing equilibrium. For example, Myerson's *Something Might Happen* explores anxiety about women's and children's safety; Kim Edwards' *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* charts over a 25 year period the impact on a US family of giving away a baby with Down's Syndrome; and Louise Doughty's *Whatever You Love* explores the traumatic impact and repercussions of the death of a child in car accident.

In Doughty's *Whatever You Love* (2010), a study of mourning which turns into a crime thriller and tale of obsession, Laura, the first person narrator's nine-year-old daughter Betty has been killed in a 'hit-and-run' accident. The novel follows the by now familiar trajectory of a traumatic event, which opens up old wounds and leads to the belated revelation of a buried secret or event from the past. On being informed of her daughter's death, Laura's initial response is one of incomprehension and denial; 'I am very very calm' (Doughty, p4). In the police car on the way to the hospital to identify Betty's body, Laura feels nauseous and vomits. Then, after listening to the doctor's insensitive account of Betty's injuries, Laura is overcome by a feeling of weightlessness:

> I rise from my chair, and have the sensation that I keep on rising, up and up above what is happening to me, soaring through the air, high above the hospital. […] all bodily feeling has left me and it is as if I am floating above myself. […] As we walk down the corridor, I have

> the distinct impression that my new weightlessness extends to my hair and that it must be floating around my head. (Doughty, p9)

It is only on approaching the bed on which Betty lies and being asked to identify her that she reaches a 'tipping point' and releases a 'tidal wave of tears': '"Betty … Betty" I say, and I sob and sob as I stroke her temple, oh so softly, and my knees give way and the policewoman is holding me up and the sound of my crying fills the room, the air, the world beyond' (Doughty, p.10). As in more high brow forms of the trauma novel, the narrative represents temporality as disrupted by the traumatic event and Laura experiences time as frozen: 'Betty's death stopped time. The line dissolved and life became a fixed point, fixed on the day that Betty died' (Doughty, p.282). Similarly, Laura experiences intrusion or the continual reliving of the traumatic event; every morning she wakes up, it is the first thing she thinks about: 'I know the second I am awake. As soon as I register consciousness, the knowledge comes upon me, like a huge dark wave, so huge and dark it pins me to the bed' (p.218). Moreover, it plunges her into asymbolia and constriction as she shuts herself up in the house, regressively clings to Betty's things, and avoids speaking to people. As for Kristeva's melancholic subjects, her dominant emotions are sorrow and hatred.

Following the account of Laura's reaction to the news of Betty's death, the novel then cuts back to Laura's childhood as a carer for her mother who suffered from Parkinsons, the death of her father at any early age, and an account of her passionate love affair with Betty's father David, which came to an end when he left her for another woman. Laura's grief reopens old wounds, which, as Freud and Kristeva suggest, resurface forcibly after a period of latency. However, whereas Kristeva's melancholics retreat into asymbolia and paralysis, Doughty has her heroine take a different route and the narrative mode shifts into another gear. When the prosecution case against the man responsible for killing Betty begins to falter, and the charge is reduced from causing death by dangerous driving to leaving the scene of an accident, Laura decides to take matters into her own hands and begins to track down the man, known as Mr A. The novel turns from a study of maternal grief into a detective quest as Laura researches the case, finds a photo of Mr A and makes him a promise: 'I am going to find out what you love, then whatever it is, I am going to track it down and I am going to take it away from

you' (p.122). Motivated by grief, rage and a desire for vengeance, Laura tracks him down to the caravan park where he lives in temporary accommodation and, in a dramatic turn of events, she abducts his nephew, threatening to throw him over the cliff, and only relenting at the last minute. Subsequently, Mr A comes to Laura's house to make restitution and it transpires that he is a refugee from the war in Kosova with his own trauma narrative to tell. 'Empathic unsettlement' arguably operates within the text for Laura as addressee of this man's traumatic story; she is forced to listen to another's pain and consequently re-evaluate where the blame for Betty's death lies: 'There is another long silence between us and I realise that Mr A has come to an end—not that his story is complete, it will never be complete, but that he has simply come to the end of his ability to speak (Doughty, p. 256-7). Further, this becomes an empathic act for the reader who becomes a witness to both Laura and Mr. A's suffering.

Significantly, the narrative does not reveal the nature of the compact reached between victim and perpetrator; however, David's new wife Chloe disappears soon afterwards, Mr A and his family vanish from the town, and Laura is arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to murder. Although this turn of events may strike readers as far-fetched and melodramatic (and shows the novel pushing at several genre boundaries), it also successfully demonstrates the other-worldliness of trauma and grief as it plunges Laura into an experience which takes her away from 'the normal life of normal people' (Kristeva, p.4). Chloe's body is never found and eventually the police drop the case against Laura through lack of evidence. As readers, our powers of identification are tested to the limit; how can we sympathise with a woman who has possibly planned to kill two people? Ultimately, Laura is vindicated and the final pages reveal that she did not conspire with Mr A and that Chloe most likely committed suicide. Although the thriller-like turn taken by the novel reflects the narrative possibilities of trauma, and challenges the paradigm of aporia and rupture, it does not wholly mitigate the 'abyss of sorrow' experienced by the wounded subject (Kristeva, 1989, p. 3). The active part — both in terms of intervening in events and organising traumatic into narrative memory ― taken by the protagonist in Doughty's novel does not banish the pervading sense of parental responsibility for child death. The theme of self-blaming is foregrounded throughout the text: David blames himself for Betty's death

and sees it as a punishment for leaving Laura: 'It feels as though I'm being punished. […] For what I did to you and the children' (p.302). Laura comforts him but she intermittently shares his sense of responsibility. Addressing her dead daughter, she thinks: 'Betty, you were only nine. You weren't my ally or my angel or my friend. You were a child. It was my job to keep you safe. I failed' (p.174). Throughout their ordeal she has been obsessed by lines from the Book of Job, which reinforce a fatalistic approach to life: 'One thing I feared and it befell, And what I dreaded came to me. No peace I had, nor calm, nor rest; But torment came' (The Book of Job, 3: 25). By the end of the novel, Laura and David are living together again with the remains of their broken families. The resolution, like the novel as a whole, reinforces the fragility and vulnerability of human existence and the idea that 'whatever we love can be taken away from us at any moment but the loss of what we love belongs to us forever' (Doughty, p.304). If the narrative represents a 'working through' of trauma towards concordance rather than discordance, it is a tentative one that changes the protagonists forever.

Julie Myerson is well known for writing tense and striking domestic thrillers, which explore the dark underside of the 30-something 'have-it-all' culture. Her 2004 novel, *Something Might Happen*, is set in a small Suffolk coastal town and concerns the repercussions of the murder of a townswoman and its impact on the community. The novel provides a twist on the usual narrative of loss as initially it is Tess, the protagonist's best friend, Lennie, and not her child, who dies. It is also distinct from crime novels in its focus on domestic life, like Doughty's novel containing aspects of melodrama in its treatment of the themes of adultery, deceit and betrayal. The sense of emotional loss is complicated by the knowledge that the murdered woman's husband and Tess were once lovers and still meet in secret. They have to do their grieving and deal with the grief of others in the context of this betrayal. In many ways it is a study in guilt – at not being a good mother and faithful wife. Indeed, Tess is with Lennie's husband, Alex, when Lennie is murdered.

Significantly, children are central to the narrative: the murdered woman, Lennie, has two sons and her best friend, the main character Tess, has four children. Lennie and Tess's friendship evolved in the context of their roles as mothers, as did Tess's relationship with Lennie's husband. The complicated and contradictory imbrication of family ties, female friendship and illicit desire becomes

the main theme of the novel. After the murder, Tess goes to comfort Lennie's two boys and she becomes increasingly anxious about the safety and well-being of her own children. The novel explores various stages of grief and mourning, from initial shock and denial to guilt, anger, numbness, and rejection of the life they have lived. In particular, Tess exhibits the symptoms of hyperarousal and constriction identified by Herman:

> What I am is numb, deliciously cut off and numb and unsettled. […] All the things that used to please me, that were a part of my good, blameless, ordinary life, are gone. I'm so impatient. Each normal thing-each school run, each family meal-has lost its sweetness and its shine and is just something to be got through. (Myerson, 2004, pp.170-1)

The novel traces the deleterious effects of the tragedy on the family, which begins to exhibit features of breakdown and dysfunction. As for many trauma sufferers, Tess's relationship with her children's father atrophies and she is unable to respond sexually to him owing to their shared sense of responsibility, guilt and grief. To some extent, this accords both with Freud's account of 'the loss of the capacity to love' in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (Freud, 2001, p.244) and with Kristeva's more controversial claim in *Black Sun* that women are more susceptible to melancholia than men because they have a 'lesser aptitude for restorative perversion' (p.71), and ostensibly find it harder to give up the lost maternal Thing and substitute for their loss. Indeed, the widower Alex moves on quite quickly after his wife's death: first to a relationship with a 17-year old school girl and then to one with a 30-something business woman. Tess isn't surprised; however, while her affair with Alex peters out, Tess is strongly attracted to Lacey, the family liaison officer sent to work on the murder case. Their affair in the middle of the investigation into Lennie's murder belies the female melancholic's tendency in the Freudian literature to become sexually unresponsive. Despite or perhaps because of the loss of her friend, Tess asserts her right to be a sexually desiring subject. In the face of grief, therefore, the female protagonist searches for both sexual and maternal fulfilment, unwilling to give up either.

Nevertheless, the fact that her daughter goes missing soon after she begins the affair with Lacey undermines that assertion of autonomy. Following the conventions of both the crime thriller

and domestic melodrama, the resolution of the novel delivers another sudden and tragic death, this time of Tess's daughter Rosa, in a manner that appears to punish the heroine for her 'infidelity'. Unwilling to accept the death of Lennie, to whom she was very close, and last seen 'shouting at the sea' (p.307), Rosa falls from the groynes into the sea and drowns. The ending reinforces the idea that the death of a child is the ultimate form of suffering and negation of meaning. The family eventually leaves the town because 'leaving was our only chance of a future and we owed it to ourselves and the children to hang onto that' (p.323). Children figure as the means through which the protagonists are judged and punished: the novel reinforces the idea that parents, particularly mothers, are responsible for what happens to their children and so they are culpable when tragedy strikes:

> It's not that I blame [the town] for what happened to Rosa, but I couldn't go on being somewhere that reminded me – of what? Of how I took my eye off the ball for that split second – which is, after all, all it takes to lose just about everything you care about? (p.322)

The novel ends on an ambiguous note with the rest of family still together, but emphasizing the sense that in the future Tess and the mysterious Lacey will pick up their relationship. In contrast to Freud's account of the mourning process, which seems relatively clear cut by allowing the mourner to grieve successfully and move on (Freud, 2001, p.245). Myerson's female narrative of maternal loss is much more ambiguous; its occluded ending suggests that all identity is constructed in and through the loss of others.

Another kind of maternal loss is dealt with in *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* by the US writer Kim Edwards. Described on the Amazon website as 'compulsively readable' and 'deeply moving', the novel is a good example of cross-over, middlebrow trauma fiction belonging to the genre of the domestic melodrama. On her website Edwards describes its genesis in a story told to her many years before about a family secret in which a child was given away at birth: 'I thought it would be very interesting to explore a secret and how that dark gravity would shape how a family evolved (qtd. Rich, p. 2). The novel explores the consequences to a family of a father's decision to conceal the live birth of his baby daughter. When his wife Norah gives birth to twins, a healthy boy and a girl with

Down's Syndrome, Dr David Henry tells her the girl has died *in utero*. In reality, he hands the baby over to his nurse who unbeknownst to Norah brings her up as her own daughter. Written in an emotive and powerful fashion from the perspective of various family members, the novel explores the imbrication of the psychic and the social in its depiction of personal betrayal, family breakdown, and conventional attitudes to grieving and the disabled over a 25 year period. If we consider the novel in terms of the trauma paradigm discussed earlier, it's clear that the novel represents a middlebrow version of the trauma novel, incorporating many if not all of the features that have come to be associated with trauma fiction in a narrative that moves towards concordance and repair rather than discordance and rupture.

In its repetitive focus on the characters' sense of loss, the novel insists on the persistent nature of trauma; the affect of sorrow predominates throughout and nothing can wholly mitigate it. For example, the element of frozen affect is clearly present in the narrative. Thinking her baby has died, Norah insists on going through a funeral service for her, and makes frequent visits to the grave:

> Phoebe's [grave] was simple, made from pink granite, with the dates of her short life chiselled deeply beneath her name. In the bleak winter landscape, the wind sharp in her hair, Norah had knelt in the brittle frozen grass of her dream. She'd been paralyzed with grief almost, too full of sorrow even to weep. But she had stayed for several hours before she finally stood up and brushed off her clothes and went home. (Edwards, p.75)

Secondly, there is the element of haunting in the figure of the lost daughter as a ghosted presence in the disintegrating marriage of the two parents: 'Their lost daughter still hovered between them; their lives had shaped themselves around her absence. Norah even wondered, at times, if that loss was the only thing holding them together' (Edwards, pp.177-8). The novel also incorporates the device of the belated revelation of buried trauma for one of the characters – Norah, the mother – but not, significantly, for the reader who knows that David gave her up for adoption years before. Norah's grief on learning the truth reopens old wounds as well as bringing her knowledge of David's lifelong betrayal:

> Phoebe was alive, in the world. That knowledge was a pit opening, endless, in her heart. Loved, Caroline had said. Well cared for. But not by Norah, who had worked so hard to let her go. The dreams she'd had, all that searching through the brittle frozen grass, came back to her, pierced her. (Edwards, p.371)

As this image suggests, grief renders Norah like one of Julia Kristeva's cadaverised, bleeding melancholics and plunges her back into the experience of frozen time and endless tears. However, by the novel's end, just 30 pages later, Norah has generously forgiven David, brought her children back together, and is on the point of remarrying, thereby embarking on the consolatory substitution that for Freud signifies successful mourning. While at the level of narrative plot, then, concordance prevails, the overwhelming affect of sadness and the sense of unresolved mourning that have characterised Norah's narrative throughout the novel arguably persist.

Another way in which the novel may be seen as a fictional attempt to establish concordance out of the discordance of trauma and its effects is through the reunion of the twins, Paul and Phoebe, at the novel's end, after their father's death and through their shared love of music. Paul is a professional musician whose music has provided him with a lifelong reprieve from his own and his parents' grief. Phoebe, who holds down a job against all expectations, also loves to sing. Now aged 25, and in the knowledge that it was their father's action that kept them apart, they meet at his grave and sing a hymn together as a kind of restorative act:

> Her voice, high and clear, moved through the leaves, through the sunlight. It splashed onto the gravel, the grass. He imagined the notes falling into the air like stones into water, rippling the invisible surface of the world. […] The words of this old hymn came back to him, and Paul picked up the harmony. Phoebe did not seem to notice. She sang on, accepting his voice as she might the wind. Their singing merged, and the music was inside him, a humming in his flesh, and it was outside too, her voice a twin to his own. When the song ended, they stayed as they were in the clear pale light of the afternoon. (p.401)

Here, the use of the motif of music corresponds closely to Kristeva's idea of poetic language as a form of semiotic healing. The novel demonstrates that signifying practices such as music may operate as counter-depressants, providing trauma sufferers with a measure of palliation through semiotic jouissance. Interestingly, the concept of melodrama derives from the Greek for 'dramatic song', suggesting that the genre has an archaic resonance with classical forms. Moreover, Kristeva's concept of the melancholic interruption of the metonymic chain also helps to explain what some critics have perceived as the limitations of the novel, such as its relentless and 'redundant' depiction of grief and its consequences to the exception of other narrative elements (Charles, 2005, n.p.). As a whole, the novel accords with Kristeva's account of melancholic discourse in which 'the rhythm of overall behaviour is shattered, [and] there is neither time nor place for acts and sequences to be carried out' (Kristeva, 1989, p.34). In the light of trauma theory, therefore, the novel's episodic character and its metaphorical focus on affect makes more sense, since it might be argued that the novel shows the working through of trauma on at least two levels: metonymically, through narrative concordance and repair; and metaphorically, through the healing jouissance of music.

**Conclusion**

While the formal features of these examples of women's trauma fiction may be readily mapped on to the trauma paradigm – narrative anachrony, belated revelation of trauma, discordance giving way to concordance – a formal analysis by itself cannot adequately account for the cultural significance of the genre or for the cultural work that it carries out. To explain this, it is necessary to consider how such texts circulate among readers. In this respect, the women's trauma novel has become a mainstay of the book club and reading group. *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, for example, became a best-seller through a combination of aggressive marketing, word of mouth customer recommendations and inclusion on book club reading lists. Selection as a 'Need to Read' book in the United States and a 'Richard & Judy Summer Read' in the UK have added to the cumulative sales effect, turning a modest initial print run of 30,000 into international sales of over 4 million. As Joanna Briscoe points

out, it is ‘a skillfully packaged debate-provoker … perfectly attuned to the era of the book club’ (Briscoe, p. 1). In July 2007 the novel was discussed by the *Times* book group led by Alyson Rudd who explored the reasons for its success with book club readers. She concluded that it recounts a simple story in a direct and powerful manner, giving readers the opportunity to ponder the question ‘what if?’: ‘What if I had a baby with Down’s syndrome? What if I had a test and could abort? If I kept the baby, how would it affect other members of my family?’ (Rudd, p. 2). The novel therefore provokes the kinds of question that book clubs thrive on. As one American reader put it, *Memory* is ‘an incredible discussion book [which] raised a lot of issues about how you would have reacted in the same situation (Rich, p. 1). As this example demonstrates, women’s trauma fiction operates in a public sphere, working as a locus for discussion, highlighting issues, and facilitating a shared listening to the trauma of others.

The novels discussed above furnish numerous examples of the symptomology of trauma as theorised by trauma critics. Each text testifies to the pain and anguish of traumatic memory, which in Herman’s words is ‘wordless and static’ (p.175). Similarly, the protagonists of these fictions experience the ‘acting out’ stage of trauma and the various symptoms identified by Herman: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. They each, too, in their own way, attempt to ‘work through’ their traumas, and make tentative moves towards the coming to terms with grief, the phase that Herman terms as ‘remembrance and mourning’, and a reconnection with ordinary life in their roles as mothers, partners and lovers. Thus, these are texts which speak to the possibilities of ‘narrative repair’ rather than insisting on aporia, difficulty and interruption.

To what extent are these representations compromised by their popular format? In response to the widespread critical assumption that the treatment of trauma in women’s middlebrow trauma fiction either feeds or responds to a generalized ‘traumaticization’ of public discourse around women and mothers, I would argue that we cannot assume from the form they take that such texts produce a ‘numbing’ effect, which represents an unethical response to trauma, any more than we can with more literary texts. By definition, all trauma fictions invoke trauma to produce readerly responses of various kinds, including pleasure, whether that be of a predominately empathic or unsettling kind.

Secondly, does women's trauma fiction perpetuate the construction of women as victims and feed into a sentimental female trauma culture? While this question can only be posed in relation to specific representations in particular contexts, more often than not, women's trauma fiction presents women's grief as a complex response to loss and women's attempts to overcome it as significant and meaningful. Far from understating the difficulty of working through trauma, such texts rarely display the clear-cut resolutions, the happy-ever-after endings, or the straight-forward depiction of wounds healed that one might expect from popular forms. As the texts discussed above demonstrate, endings are often ambivalent and occluded, and closure is frequently deferred, suggesting that mourning is ongoing if not endless, and that (female, maternal) identity is constituted in and through loss. Above all, the readers of women's trauma fiction play a key role as part of wider reading communities in the form of book clubs, reading groups, and groups of friends and family who engage in the process of empathic reading/ listening/bearing witness to other women's suffering.

In my view, therefore, the prevalence of women's middlebrow trauma fiction represents the consolidation of the trauma paradigm and trauma subjectivity in contemporary mainstream culture. If trauma is an aspect of modernity (Luckhurst, 2008) then women writers have been engaged in gendering the experience of trauma, using their fiction to depict the 'shocks' of modern women's lives. Contemporary women's trauma fiction provides the opportunity to imaginatively explore individual and cultural traumas like the violent death of a child, the loss of a baby, or the giving up of a disabled child. Moreover, in these middlebrow fictions, narrative possibility rather than rupture is privileged and narrative concordance is to some extent wrested from traumatic discordance. Lastly, I would suggest that women's trauma fiction acts a counter-depressant to the reader, a means of articulating and thereby palliating the affect of sadness and melancholia that characterizes (maternal) traumatic subjectivity. This provides a way of reading such fiction not merely as cheesy mum's lit, nor either in terms of conventional literary norms, but as a meaningful symbolic representation of traumatic experience and mourning for lost and loved others.

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