

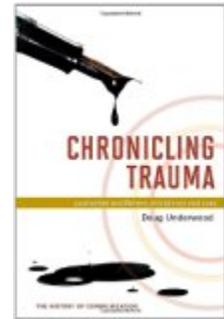
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anne Rothe. *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*. London: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 224 pp. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-5128-9; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-5129-6.

Doug Underwood. *Chronicling Trauma: Journalists and Writers on Violence and Loss*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 244 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03640-8.

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Trauma and the Media

“If it bleeds, it leads.” This stereotype of news coverage reveals a disturbing truth about Western media culture’s fascination with pain and violence. Anne Rothe and Doug Underwood each address how traumatic human experience forms the foundation of modern mass media culture (defined broadly as journalism, literature, and popular culture, primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom). They focus on how trauma affects not only the victims (real or imagined) of violence but also the producers and consumers of such media products: in other words, all of us. While the tone and purpose of the books differ substantially, each contributes a well-researched perspective on how pain has served as a cornerstone of historical and contemporary mass media production, frequently attracting those who experienced significant trauma themselves, as well as documenting the general public’s steady desire for increasingly wrenching trauma narratives, even to the point of spectacular fabrication. Underwood’s biographical approach resituates a multitude of journalist-literary figures within a broadly historical context that reveals patterns of cultural roles in relation to particular narrative structures. Rothe critiques popular media’s fascination with and commodification of trauma utilizing a multidisciplinary theoretical framework grounded in Holocaust and media studies, focusing on the production and consumption of popular trauma culture. Reading both books

together ultimately reveals the ethical line between actually suffered and imagined pain as well as the fraught relation between trauma, its narrative representation, and commodification.

Underwood has written a number of books on the complex relation between journalism and fiction prior to *Chronicling Trauma*. In the current study, Underwood, professor of communication at the University of Washington, focuses specifically on how “the intersection of journalism and fiction writing is a particularly valuable place to gain insights about trauma’s role in literary expression” (p. 3). His wide-ranging analysis of the lives of 150 journalist-literary figures in the United States and the United Kingdom, from the 1700s to the present, is presented in four primary chapters, each focusing on a particular kind of trauma and its professional manifestation (childhood stress and professional career trauma; women’s rights, civil rights, and sensationalism; war coverage and the “heroic” code; and dysfunctional lifestyles and artistic production). He includes an introduction (“Trauma, News, and Narrative”) and a brief epilogue exploring current journalist-literary figures. Two tables—“Journalist-Literary Figures and Their Traumatic Experiences” and “Traumatic Experiences as Journalists and Writers”—encapsulate his data in an appendix: an overwhelming number of well-known journalist-literary fig-

ures have suffered some sort of trauma prior to becoming a professional writer, and many continued to suffer additional trauma in their professional lives. Underwood stresses throughout that he does not claim a cause-effect relation between the trauma experienced by these writers and the content of their work. Still, it is difficult not to draw at least tentative conclusions in such directions; for example, he also cites some of the limited psychological studies of some of the writers discussed, including war correspondents and their substance/alcohol abuse.

Even if such causality eludes concrete scientific evidence, the implications of this research are potentially staggering: do those who have suffered some sort of psychic or emotional trauma tend to gravitate to journalism-media-literature? And if so, does such professional writing provide a sense of therapeutic release or, instead, deepen the writer's experience of trauma (the book gestures toward the latter)? When those who have firsthand experience with personal trauma become the primary narrators of human reality for everyone, typically covering the most traumatic and history-altering social experiences—such as interpersonal violence and war, as well as self-annihilation through drugs, alcohol, and suicide—the nature of reality and its mediation cannot help but be inflected in particularly disturbing ways. As such human events are recorded first as journalism and then as literary fiction (often because the violence to be represented exceeds conventional journalistic structures), a saturated circuit of human pain comes to dominate how millions experience the truth of human experience. Upon completion of the book, one may well wonder whether such historical patterns of mediation have conditioned us to consider certain aspects of human trauma as “natural,” and whether there might be other ways of shaping our understanding of such experience. Underwood rightly asks whether and how changing journalistic and literary production (the disappearing newsroom, the increasingly micro-technology we use to read and communicate, the changing nature of the printed word itself) might be altering the narration and consumption of trauma.

Chronicling Trauma provides an impressive historical overview of figures as diverse as Daniel Defoe, Thomas Boswell, Stephen Crane, George Eliot, Joan Didion, Dorothy Parker, Norman Mailer, Langston Hughes, Truman Capote, and another 141 major journalist-literary figures. One of the drawbacks of such a wide historical sweep is the inevitable sacrifice of depth to breadth and a sense of breathlessness (and too many very lengthy sentences) in the narration. There is also a tendency to

rely on such sources as the Dictionary of National or Literary Biography and other standardized interpretive biographies and critical works. Underwood does not explore the construction of “life writing” offered by such sources, which themselves conform to particular kinds of historical conventions challenged even by many of his subjects (such as Virginia Woolf). Nor do such sources allow for the kind of nuance in considering how these subjects viewed media depictions of trauma written by others in their time. Again to reference Woolf for an example: Underwood never mentions her indictment of the propaganda used by Spanish and British newspapers to build sympathy for the Republican cause in the civil war in such texts as *Three Guineas* (1938), despite a lengthy focus on that historic event that predictably gives us Ernest Hemingway. Too often, the analysis remains at the surface, telling us much of what we already know about these figures, even while contextualizing it in new ways.

In contrast, the sheer scope of the book reveals patterns of (often stereotypical) professional behaviors (e.g., the “heroic” war correspondent, the hard-boiled and hard-drinking crime reporter, and the women who attempted to be “one of the boys” in order to be taken seriously) over the span of centuries: what seemed particular when focusing on the diachronic level has more general historical significance when viewed synchronically, suggesting disturbing repetitions of narrative structures and their commodification for public consumption over time. One such example (among many) that casts current media narrative structures in a more historical pattern can be found in the journalistic and literary forms utilized by nineteenth-century writers, such as Charles Dickens. Dickens (forced to leave school for the factory after his father was thrown into debtor's prison) wrote in a journalistic style that exposed social ills through a good-evil lens (victims and redeemers). This style eventually gave shape to his literary work (especially *Oliver Twist* [1838] and *Nicholas Nickleby* [1838-39]) through what critics have named the “Newgate novel” (for the famous London prison), “in which there is a criminal element to the plot, a clear delineation of good and bad characters, circumstances revolving around mistreatment and victimization, and a restoration of moral order at the end” (p. 83). If you are a fan of today's talk radio and television, such a formula no doubt sounds familiar.

While Underwood's study reveals statistically fascinating connections between literary figures with prior experience in journalism and the kinds of traumatic experiences they suffered pre-professionally as well as in their professional lives, Rothe's book strikes a more ur-

gent tone, enacting a scathing critique regarding modern American popular mass media's depiction and selling of trauma. Starting with the provocative cover (featuring the iconic cartoon Jewish boy, in striped pajamas with yellow Star of David, trailing a teddy bear behind him by Michael "Dino" Henderson), one is drawn into her meticulously researched analysis of American Holocaust discourse as the paradigm for narrating trauma in mass popular culture. Rothe focuses particularly on daytime TV talk shows, in "misery memoirs" and—in the latest twist—in fake misery memoirs. A professor of German at Wayne State University, Rothe writes for a more specialized audience of cultural, literary, and media scholars and practitioners, and writes compellingly, albeit also indignantly, particularly when discussing such key figures as Oprah Winfrey (who trades in what Rothe calls "trauma camp"); Elie Wiesel (the "pre-eminent Holocaust representative" mystifying the Holocaust in order to link it to American experience [p. 7]); and the inventors of fake testimonies (there are several). Journalism historians, journalists and media producers, upper-level/graduate students, and cultural studies scholars will find this book troubling for a variety of positive reasons and will engage with popular culture differently as a result.

The book's rather complicated organizational structure (and at least in the review copy, a rather annoying font and spacing shift from chapter to chapter) and an authorial tone that sometimes departs from its primary ethical/critical stance to something more like moral outrage are areas of weakness. However, given the subject, one might understand such lapses into indignant polemic. From a scathing introduction, "Oprah at Auschwitz," the study opens to three multi-chaptered parts, ending with an epilogue, "Fantasies of Witnessing," extensive notes, and an index. Part 1 lays out the foundational paradigm of Holocaust discourse, moving from a chapter entitled "Holocaust Tropes" to how victims narrate their experience to the Americanization of the paradigm in "Trauma Kitsch." Part 2, "Watching the Pain of Others on Daytime Talk Shows," applies this paradigm to television: Rothe differentiates between the "first-generation" hosts who offered "talking cures" (e.g., Phil Donohue) and "second-generation" host-participants (e.g., Winfrey, Jerry Springer, etc.), who trade in "trauma camp." Part 3 shifts the focus to popular literature and her interesting discussion of "misery memoirs" that move from the commodification of misery to invented narratives ("Fake Suffering," "Forging Child Abuse," and "Simulating Holocaust Survival"). Taken as a whole, Rothe's book reveals

American popular culture—literally, metaphorically, and ethically—as sick.

That sickness begins with the 1961 televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in the United States, as it "transformed [the Holocaust] from an event in European history into a core constituent of American memory, not only because it became the core marker of American-Jewish identity via the dubious notion of hereditary or vicarious victimhood, but also and especially because it was appropriated politically on a national level" (p. 7). The use of "victim testimony" gave rise to the power of historical witnesses over time; this in turn created a narrative structure turning victim into survivor in a Social Darwinism that linked the Holocaust to an American ideal of struggle for success that had its basis in a Christian suffering-and-redemption plot, Rothe theorizes (p. 8). Sentimentality and melodrama help transform the plot into a mass marketable commodity, widely evident today across the media landscape. The recovered memory movement of the 1990s, building on a television culture based in the confessional model, has produced not only a narrative form that Rothe claims is the fastest growing aspect of published literature (the so-called misery memoir), but also a simulated body of such narratives that are actually "fake" together with fabricated Holocaust survivor tales. Paralleling such narratives, Rothe notes the rise of "dark tourism," increasingly popular touristic sites commemorating mass death, offering tourists a sense of "authentic" trauma through commodity consumerism.

While the Holocaust remains a critical subject for these cultural products, Rothe postulates that "child abuse is increasingly replacing the Holocaust as the paradigmatic embodiment of evil because it is a far less historically specific subject matter" (p. 165). Her book was published just as the Penn State football scandal was breaking; together with the scandal enveloping the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts, and countless other sensational media stories surrounding child abuse, sexual violence, and institutional cover-up, one does not have to look hard to understand that transformation of focus. Drawing on a wide range of multidisciplinary scholarship throughout and presenting numerous individual analyses of mass media products, Rothe's book offers a densely argued indictment of American popular media culture, requiring that consumers as well as producers think deeply about the implications of assimilating the pain of others, dishonoring the actual victims of violence, and leaving all of us on ethically dubious ground.

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