The Global Experience of Trauma

A review of

Trauma Texts

by Gillian Whitlock and Kate Douglas (Eds.)


$140.00

Reviewed by

Mary Dugan

Trauma Texts is not just another book about trauma. Nor is it a book proposing an intervention for helping the traumatized. It is also not a collection of stories about those who have been traumatized or stories by the survivors of traumatic events. It does not tell you how to use life stories/narratives (although many of the chapters describe these studies with enough information that one could conceivably replicate the work). This is not an easy book to read for several reasons. The descriptions of the traumatic events are disturbing, and the chapters are in depth, thought provoking, and need to be carefully considered. This is not light reading or an introduction to trauma work.

Trauma Texts is a collection of provocative and scholarly works brought together by editors Whitlock and Douglas. They chose well, and the result is an in-depth analysis of the evolution and impact of what are known by such terms as life stories, narratives, testimonies, and trauma texts.
The collection covers a wide range of traumatic events as well as the varied ways the stories of these events are told by the contributing authors. The reader can choose discussions of various topics, including post-9/11 Guantanamo detainees, Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, and grieving mothers of soldiers lost in the Iraq war.

Likewise, other venues (music, art, and Internet) are presented in addition to the more familiar written testimonies and memoirs. Specific examples include the Cambodian American rapper praCh, who uses his music to tell the story of the genocidal era of the Killing Fields, especially its ongoing impact on Cambodians and Cambodian Americans, and discussions of the drawings by street children in Tanzania and the Internet site Communities Against Violence Network—Indigenous Women (CAVNET_IW).

A few readers may be surprised that the editors are not psychologists or other mental health professionals but an English professor and a senior lecturer in English who share a common interest in life writing. A look at Merriam-Webster’s (n.d.) definition of humanities explains the logic of this: “Humanities: The branches of learning (as philosophy, arts, or languages) that investigate human constructs and concerns as opposed to natural processes (as in physics or chemistry).” One generally considers English professors and lecturers as having some expertise in literature—the collection of writings unified by the language, country, or subject. Telling stories about the experiences of being traumatized has become a literary genre.

In the first chapter, the reader is challenged to consider whether academicians are actually avid consumers of trauma texts or in reality voyeurs to the pain of others, looking for more unusual and exciting events to study. It may be that academicians of literature are not the only ones who need to ask this question. In the field of psychology, the mind and behavior are studied. There is an overlap of storytelling that uses trauma stories as a literary genre and as clinical tools used by mental health professionals to help people face their previous traumatic experiences. Is it possible that mental health professionals need to consider their own motives as well?

Although the chapters do not necessarily require reading in the order presented, they do follow a logical progression that is laid out in the first chapter. In their introductory chapter, Whitlock and Douglas provide key points of each of their selections and suggest themes and questions to consider. It is useful to go back and reread the first chapter after reading all or part of the text in order to process these salient points.

A major strength of this volume is its diversity. It goes beyond the exploration of European and American populations’ experiences of trauma, already abundant in the literature. Westerners have available a multitude of resources detailing the stories of Holocaust survivors, Vietnam War veterans, or Bosnian refugees, and these populations are included in this volume. In addition, the reader of Trauma Texts is exposed to stories from Indonesia, India, Tanzania, and Chile.

Many of the contributors also explore the ripple effect of the trauma to families, communities, and the witnesses who hear and document the stories. Through the discussion
of those not always favored by mainstream society and media (e.g., Guantanamo detainees or the antiwar mothers of soldiers), we are provided with a glimpse into the humanity of the other side, making it a little more difficult to categorize people. Overall, one could justify the conclusion that traumatic experiences are universal to all peoples of the world. At the very least, the variety of trauma stories demonstrates the need for greater understanding of other cultures in order to become culturally responsive as we strive for global citizenship.

Trauma Texts contributes to that literature of cultural understanding by exploring the experiences of individuals and communities that differ from what may be familiar to the reader. Additionally, there are implications for those working with displaced trauma survivors and/or researching acculturation among refugees and asylum seekers (Allen, Vaage, & Hauff, 2006).

Although the overall work is exceptional, there are chapters that are not of the same depth and breadth as the others. Perhaps the function of these chapters is to balance the intensity of the other chapters. Considering the benefit of exposure to other cultures, the reader might want to consider whether all of the stories and events reflect true trauma narratives or the (mis)categorization of trauma imposed by the individual author and/or editors. For example, in Weincke’s discussion of Tanzanian street youths, he concludes that these young people are social actors and active contributors to their social status, suggesting that many are very capable of dealing with the difficulties of daily life and are not the victims of trauma.

As stated above, Trauma Texts is not an easy book to read. The topic, although compelling for some, addresses the suffering of individuals caused by the cruelty of others. Some may experience a visceral reaction to the details of the cruelty provided in some chapters. In addition, difficult questions are asked, followed by thought-provoking discussions, with no solutions provided. Despite these considerations, the book is worth the read for scholars wanting to keep abreast of current trends in the treatment of trauma, the study of trauma testimony, or the literary genre of trauma narratives.

References

