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Trauma : A Genealogy



Synopsis

Psychic trauma is one of the most frequently invoked ideas in the behavioral sciences and the humanities today. Yet bitter disputes have marked the discussion of trauma ever since it first became an issue in the 1870s, growing even more heated in recent years following official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a book that is bound to ignite controversy, Ruth Leys investigates the history of the concept of trauma. She explores the emergence of multiple personality disorder, Freud's approaches to trauma, medical responses to shellshock and combat fatigue, Sándor Ferenczi's revisions of psychoanalysis, and the mutually reinforcing, often problematic work of certain contemporary neurobiological and postmodernist theorists. Leys argues that the concept of trauma has always been fundamentally unstable, oscillating uncontrollably between two competing models, each of which tends at its limit to collapse into the other. A powerfully argued work of intellectual history, *Trauma* will rewrite the terms of future discussion of its subject.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I am giving this book 3 stars only because it is well researched. You can find an overall sketch of some of the important studies in trauma over the last century. However, Ley's main theses, that studies of trauma have oscillated between mimesis and anti-mimesis, and that there are no biological bases for reactions to traumatic stress, shows the weakness of approaches from the humanities. I think she totally discounts the mind body connection, and while others may find her "scathing" dismissal of Caruth and VanDerKolk's work "intriguing" I find it unnecessarily nasty and

inappropriate. I don't go for scholars who try to build their reputation at the expense of others, especially since she doesn't come up with anything beyond a literature review. In fact, she says she is producing a genealogy not a history so she can bounce around among different themes. Fine, but it also becomes a poor rationalization for an overselective use of data to back up her argument. In fact, she ends up not being very sympathetic to the reality of trauma, and I find her approach generally insensitive.

I read this book particularly for her response to Cathy Caruth's work on trauma. Another reviewer of this book considers Ley's response a bit too "nasty" and "scathing." But I think that upon re-reading Caruth's text it is clear that Caruth cuts corners in her argument and rather nuancing her ideas she forces Freudian and Lacanian texts to fit her theory. For instance, Caruth mentions a story that Freud references. In this story the man kills his beloved by accident in a battle. Caruth says that he doesn't realize it and then finds out later that he killed her. Caruth uses this moment to say that trauma can not be faced directly. But that's not what happens in the story. In the actual story, the man finds out immediately that he made a mistake in killing his beloved. He even mandates her funeral arrangements and all that. Secondly, Caruth puts so much emphasis on the man that she makes it seem like HE is the victim and not the innocent woman he has just murdered. This kind of uneven analysis (where one person is viewed as traumatized and actual innocent victims are put in the background) is one of the reasons that we have so many hurt people. I think Ruth Leys points out these problems clearly in Caruth's text and I, honestly, don't know how one can make a kind response to the mistakes Caruth makes. Once you consider the ramifications that would occur upon putting her ideas into practice, I find it difficult to think of a polite response to her theories of trauma.

Trauma: A Genealogy is a survey of the history of the concept of trauma, tackling a controversial topic which examines the emergence of multiple personality disorders, combat fatigue, and other psychological conditions sparked by trauma. Her examination of the concepts and works of Freud and others reinforces her argument that the concept of trauma has been fundamentally unstable, revolving between two very different models of perception. College-level psychology students will find Trauma: A Genealogy intriguing.

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