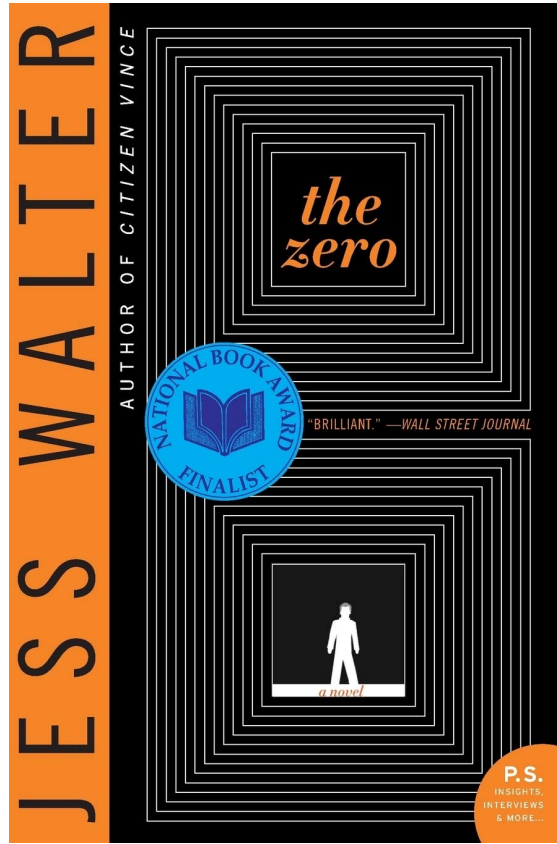


A Reading of *The Zero*



Briquet's Syndrome



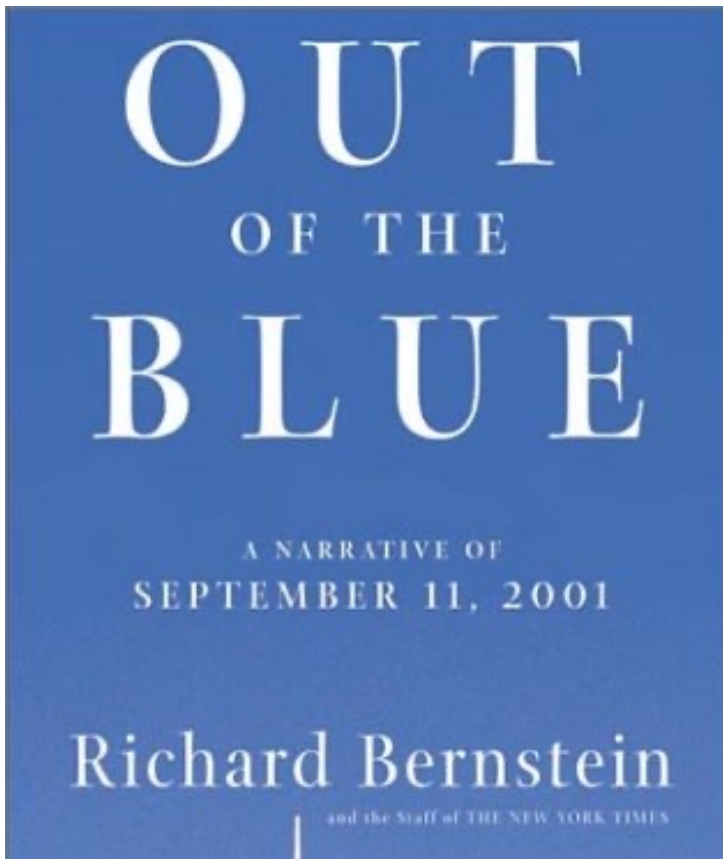
- Remy told by his psychiatrist that gaps constitute a case of “textbook PTSD. Visions. Stress-induced delusions. Disassociative episodes. Maybe even Briquet’s syndrome” (194)
- Briquet’s syndrome, first diagnosed in 1859, considered a somatic disorder—a mental illness characterized by physical symptoms.
- Symptoms of Briquet’s often include headache, dysmenorrhea, and abdominal pain, and those affected are overwhelmingly young women in their teens and twenties.
- Condition is so rare in males that some physicians doubt that it even occurs in men (DSM-IV- TR #300.81)

Historical Amnesia

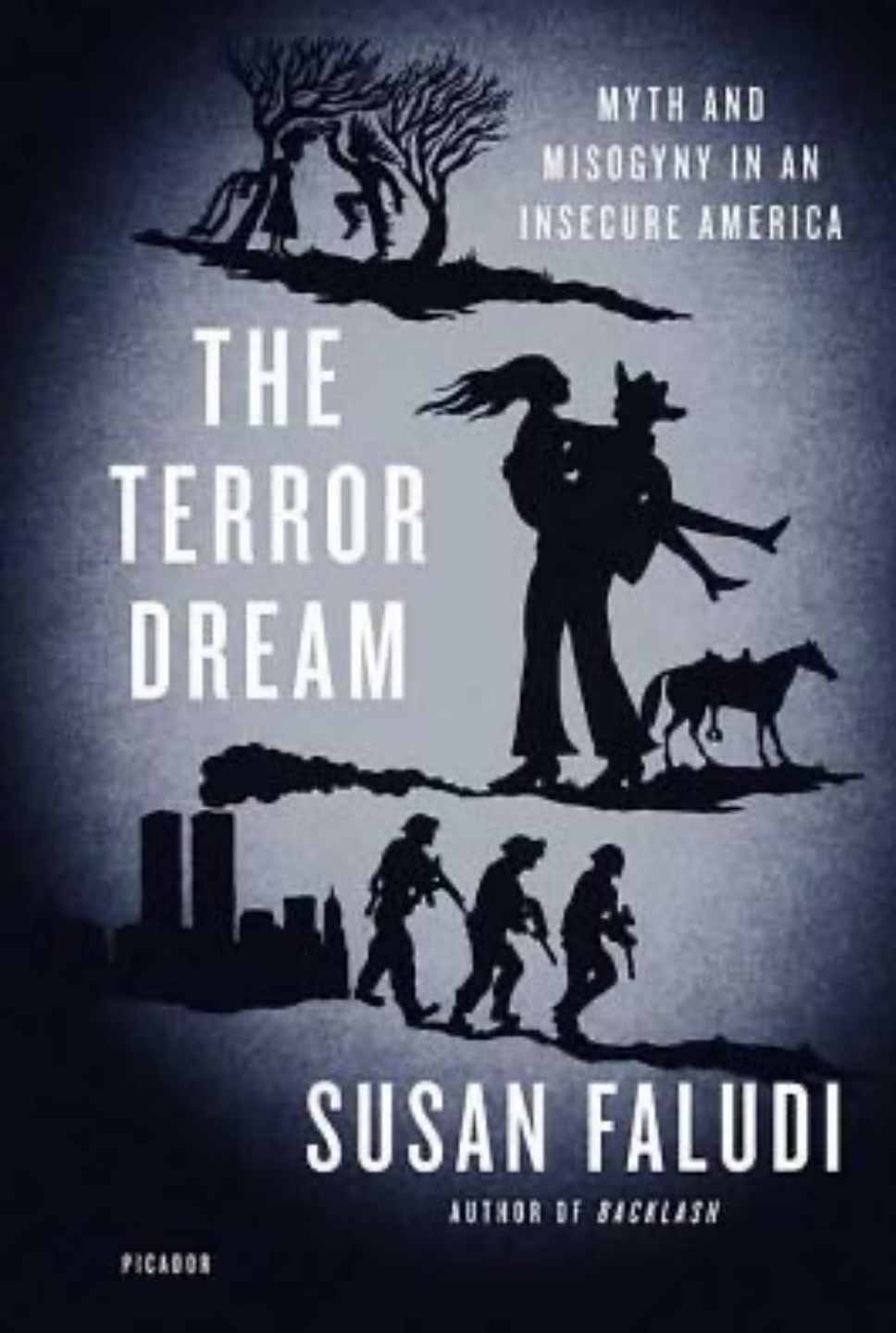


- Possibility that Walter initially proposes to readers the often-visited trauma story of 9/11, but then works to undercut it throughout the novel?
- Perhaps Remy NOT suffering from a “classic case of PTSD” so much as he’s suffering from a kind of historical amnesia in which effects don’t seem to have causes, in which tragedy arrives “out of the blue” one cloudless day in September of 2001

“Out of the Blue”



- Critics such as Aaron DeRosa have drawn attention to how both imaginative literature and criticism responding to 9/11 as well as the recent spate of critical assessments of this literature often appeal to a “sense of lost innocence,” a new sort of “postlapsarian” world (608)
- Such an interpretation suggested by the number of dust jackets depicting a pristine blue sky overhanging the city and the titles of critical works like Versluys’s *Out of the Blue* or Richard Gray’s *After the Fall*.
- Even the factual *9/11 Commission Report* begins by evoking the serenity of that day. The first sentence of the report reads, “Tuesday, September 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the Eastern United States” (1).
- It’s exactly this “out of the blue” view of the terrorist attacks that Walter’s novel works to undermine



Second 9/11 Discourse

- But there is also a second 9/11 discourse which is the companion story to the tale of lost innocence, noted particularly by critic Susan Faludi, in her controversial analysis, *The Terror Dream*
- In this story, national innocence is shattered, but national pride is redeemed by the courage and heroism of Americans, particularly first responders, immediately afterward
- Faludi argues that traditional, conservative gender dichotomies are culturally reinforced—men are depicted as heroic protectors of endangered damsels in distress as the nation issues, in Faludi’s words, “an almost hysterical summons to restore ‘traditional’ manhood, marriage, and maternity”



- Walter, in *The Zero*, challenges BOTH the discourse of innocent, traumatized victim AND the myth of heroic masculinity
- This challenge related to the gaps Remy experiences

Cause and Effect



- Emphasis on a lack of historical cohesion in Remy's life--disjunction between cause and effect
- After the shooting: "Brian Remy stood, queasy and weak, trying once again to find the loose string between cause and effect" (4).
- The "most common gaps that Remy had been suffering" are "holes not so much in his memory but in the string of events, the causes of certain effects. He found himself wet but didn't remember rain. He felt full but couldn't recall eating" (43)



Empty Spaces

- Holes and empty spaces serve as prominent images in much post-9/11 literature
- Particularly Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
- Holes in the New York City skyline tied to other blanks in the novel—the blank pages of Grandma's autobiography, the empty coffin of Oskar Schell's father, and finally a hole in the heart that can't be mended.
- But they work differently in *The Zero*
- Related to postmodern idea of simulation and simulacra



Simulation/Simulacra

- Simulation is the process in which representations of things come to replace the things being represented
- Representations seem more important than the “real” things themselves
- Simulated copy supercedes the original



Lady Liberty Stamp



Baudrillard

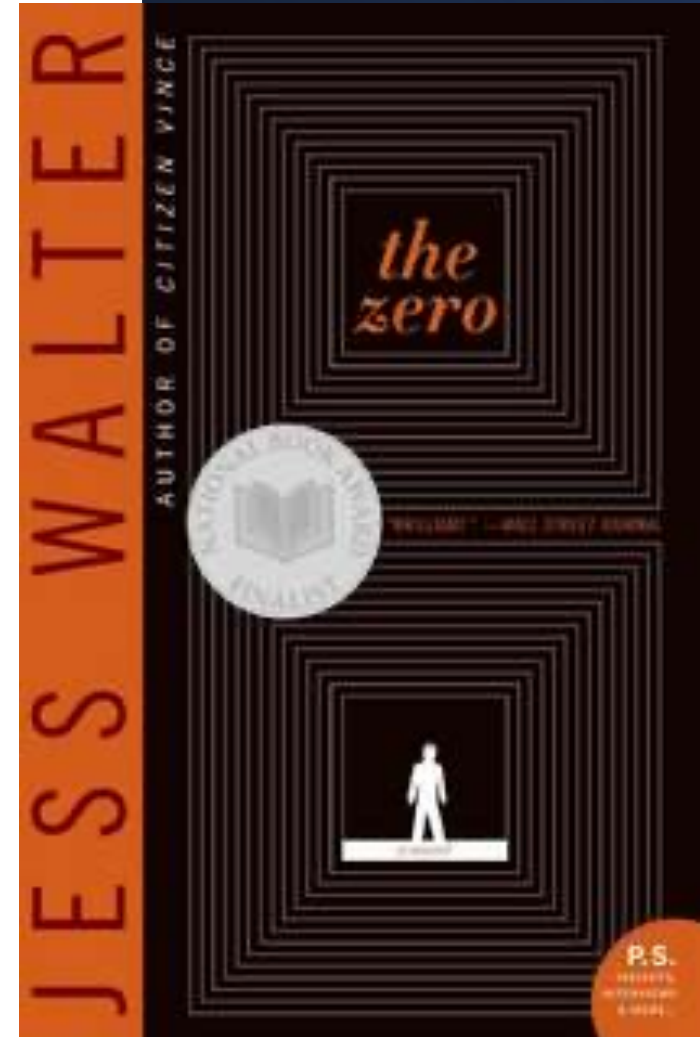
- According to French theorist Jean Baudrillard, we (as a society) have lost touch with reality.
- We're hooked into a simulation of reality, made up of television, the Internet, etc. (What he refers to as "hyperreality")
- This simulation not really a fake, a mere copy of something real. It is another reality, that has a power and meaning that is, if anything, greater than that of the "real" real.
- A copy with no original is called a "simulacrum"

Baudrillard on Simulation

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms. Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary." Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces "true" symptoms?"

The Zero and Simulation

- “Sometimes I wish we’d just gone to a bar that morning and watched the whole thing on CNN. You know what I mean? I envy people who watched it on TV. They got to see the whole thing. People ask me what it was like and I honestly don’t know” (85).
- Prostitutes: Cops’ concerns about who, in their perception, is a “real” woman and who’s a “simulated” woman?
- Simulated heroes? Jess Walter: “There was a real conflation of hero and victim in the wake of 9/11, in our perverse desire to create a triumph out of pure tragedy.”



Gaps as Missing Culpability?



- The holes or gaps in *The Zero* work differently in another way as well
- They suggest MORE than trauma, more than a mental or physical injury to Remy's person
- The missing moments grow increasingly ominous as the novel progresses
 - Remy comes to consciousness to find blood stains on his shoes
 - Also to witness the torture of an Arab man aboard a ship in international waters, a torture session in which he's apparently participated.
- What's missing in these gaps is Remy's memory of his own culpability in the actions he deplores

Distorted Vision



- Remy's distorted, troubled vision works metaphorically as well as literally in the novel
- They represent a kind of historical amnesia or blindness, a denial of the darker sides of American history
- *The Zero* similar in this way to Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*?
- Historian Bruce Franklin argues that O'Brien's book is not about the inaccessibility of truth, but that it's about denial, our refusal to face up to a violent, troubled American past

Simple Narratives



- From Walter’s writing journal in the early stages of *The Zero*:, “[the book] is about our inability to register events. We want simple narratives; we don’t want our presumptions messed with . . . We all suffer from this malady, this affliction, and this is what I want to name.”
- The mysterious Middle Eastern man code-named Jaguar points out the American tendency to rewrite history when he tells Remy that the nation has become a “public relations firm” — “You forget the truth. Everything is the Alamo. You claim victory in every loss, life in every death” (222)
- Advertised as a “shrine to Texas liberty” on its official website even today, the myth of the Alamo obscures the battle’s historical link to the defense of slavery in Texas

Switching Sides



- Walter draws attention to a more contemporary blindness when Remy discovers that he has been paying Jaguar to work as a confidential informant for the Documentation Department, a secretive arm of the newly formed Office of Liberty and Recovery:

“I don’t—“ Remy touched his forehead, trying to put it together. Are you saying that . . . you work for us?”

“Us?” [Jaguar] laughed. “I’m sorry, but your idea of *us* tends to be a little bit fluid, my friend. *Either you’re with us or . . . what? You switch sides indiscriminately . . . arm your enemies and wonder why you get shot with your own guns.*” (291)

- Likely a reference to the arming of Osama Bin Laden and other Mujahideen rebels in Afghanistan
- Jaguar here draws attention to what Remy and other Americans have been blinded to: the causes leading up to the terrorist attacks on 9/11

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"102 Minutes does for the September 11 catastrophe what Walter Lord did for the Titanic in his masterpiece, *A Night to Remember* Searing, poignant, and utterly compelling."
—Rick Atkinson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *An Army at Dawn*



102 MINUTES

THE UNFORGETTABLE
STORY OF THE FIGHT TO SURVIVE
INSIDE THE TWIN TOWERS

WITH A NEW POSTSCRIPT ON
THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11

JIM DWYER AND KEVIN FLYNN

Rescue Efforts

- Effects without causes underpin the heroic discourse celebrating Americans' response to the terrorist attacks as well
- While Americans comforted themselves with tales of courageous first responders saving numerous lives, this view has been questioned, not only by feminists such as Susan Faludi, but by investigators such as Jim Dwyer, a New York Times reporter and co-author of the 2005 account, *102 Minutes: the Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers*
- Dwyer, while affirming that real courage was indeed exhibited by many after the attacks, nevertheless points to exaggerations and misconceptions about the rescue efforts and their efficacy



Dwyer on 9/11:

“We encased the 9/11 events in a glaze of mythology. The mayor went to funerals and said the firefighters saved 25,000 people. Sometimes he said it was 50,000. He said that the firefighters knew what danger they were in and continued to rescue people. People like Fred Siegel wrote books declaring it a triumph of emergency management.

None of that -- not a syllable -- is true.

Meanwhile, in real life, here's what happened: the people who could get out rescued themselves. They walked down the stairs. They carried each other. They broke down doors. The firefighters came to help, but they were carrying 100 pounds of gear, and if the people in the building had to wait for them, they'd all have died.”

(Gotham Gazette Reading NYC Book Club, Aug. 31 2001).



Guterak

- Remy Paul Guterak, encased in this glaze of mythology--admired as heroes by their fellow New Yorkers.
- Guterak enjoys the new-found respect he's receiving—the free coffee, the thanks on the street—even confessing to Remy that “he'd never been this happy” before (9)
- Guterak capitalizes on the rhetoric of heroism: he acquires an agent; his face appears on the box for “First Responder. The cereal of heroes”; he is trotted out at a monster truck jam in which The Eagle Truck, Hero One carries a “haunting display of airbrush artistry featuring America's lost heroes” (176)
- Ironically, readers find out near the end of the novel that Gutarek is actually consumed by guilt because he ran away from the burning buildings that day, while others ran into them.

Two Remy's?

- Remy himself is a shattered man following the attacks
- But those around him insist on treating him as a hero—competent and brash.
- His bewildered questions are repeatedly treated as self-effacing humor by his colleagues and associates
- No one believes him or understands what he means when he mentions the gaps he's been experiencing.
- Back to the statement, “there was a real conflation of hero and victim in the wake of 9/11, in our perverse desire to create a triumphant myth out of pure tragedy”
- He divides Remy into two halves (innocent, traumatized victim on the one hand; courageous, masculine hero on the other)
- Wounded warrior metaphor?
- Remy's conscious self is the wounded part; his “other” self, the self that acts during his gaps, is the hyper-masculine warrior self

Remy's Family

- The waking Remy does not at all fit what Faludi describes as the nation's summons to restore 'traditional' manhood, marriage, and maternity"
- The Remy we actually meet in the novel is a failed family man whose ex-wife Carla now lives in a subdivision called Jericho outside the city with her new husband, Steve, who doesn't care "*who we bomb, long as we do it while we still got the upper hand. Line 'em up. Clean house*" (28).
- Effects without causes evident in Remy's personal life as well
- Edgar's grieving of his dead father
- Not a "metaphoric death for his father," as Carla suggests, nor an attempt to get "a little sympathy ass," as Steve suspects
- Instead, Edgar explains that "general grief is a lie," that the "only way to comprehend" real grief "is to go through it," which he's doing in mourning his father, regardless of the fact that his father has not actually died.
- Rather than retrenching into a traditional family and protecting his wife and child, Remy superfluous as a husband and father





Counter-Terrorist Remy

- This waking Remy contrasts with the Remy that seems to take over during the blackout periods
- Critic John Duvall has described this other self as “the brutal counter-terrorist Remy . . . who uses violence and intimidation to protect the homeland” (287)
- Second Remy is the type of hyper-masculine clandestine operative one might find in a conventional thriller
- After all, Guterak’s agent tells him that history itself has “become a thriller plot,” and that’s where the big money is—in thrillers. (At least, that is, until the events can be mined as nostalgia)

Nicole

- Clandestine Remy is not only adept at violent intimidation, he is hyper-sexualized as well.
- Sleeps with April's boss, Nicole, a woman the waking Remy abhors
- Glib and glamorous real-estate agent who sees the 9/11 attacks as an opportunity to expand her market





Confidential Informants

- When at the end of the novel, it turns out that ALL of the men in the supposed terrorist cell that clandestine Remy has been hunting down are confidential informants of competing U.S. agencies, hyper-masculine warrior mythology satirized
- Jaguar asks Remy at the end of the novel, “Does a man ever realize that he has been the villain of his own story?” (321)
- While Remy is not sure which of them Jaguar is referring to, the accusation haunts him
- Simulation of terrorist cell only creates more terrorists?

History

- Walter doesn't believe Americans were "complicit" in the attacks
- But he does object to the American response to the attacks
- "Our complicity begins with our country's reaction to that attack and our failure, in my opinion, to debate the response honestly. The war in Iraq, the abuse of detainees, electronic eavesdropping, Guantanamo Bay—these things were all done on our behalf and they may turn out in the end to have created *more terrorists*."
- Remembering history rather than forgetting may be path to healing?

New York City



- Addich gives Remy a history lesson about New York City in the end
- Past is not a pretty one—never an “innocent” New York to “fall” in the first place
- Addich argues that terrorists can’t tear down New York City because New Yorkers themselves have been trying to tear it down for 300 years, and the city just grows back.

Ending



- Novel does not have a happy ending, though
- Is April killed in the terrorist bomb?
- Novel, then, undermines “perverse desire to create a triumphant myth out of pure tragedy”?
- Remy and others have to live with sorrow and loss