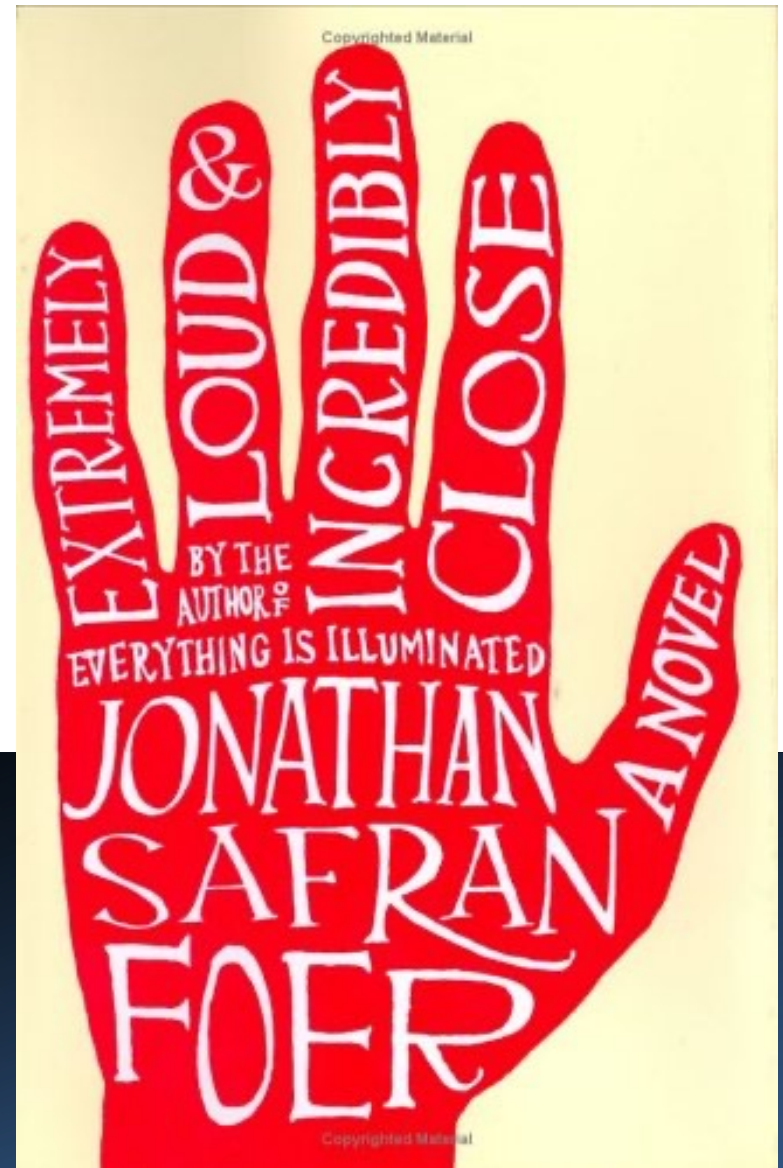


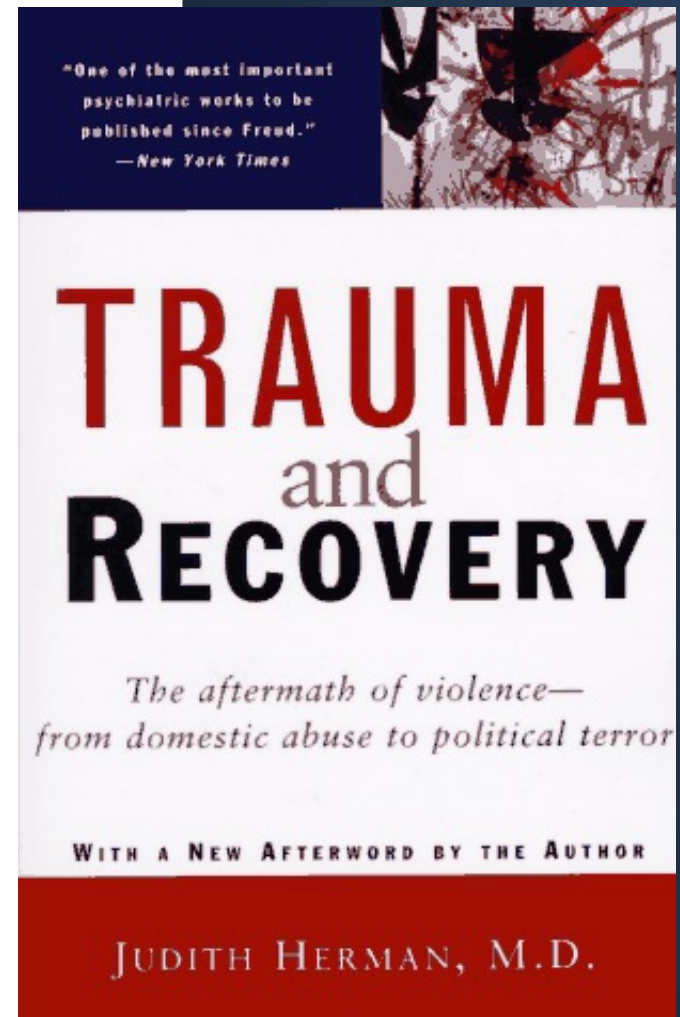
Trauma Theory
and *Extremely
Loud and
Incredibly Close*



Main Symptomatic Categories of Trauma Disorders (from Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*)

1. Hyperarousal

- Persistent expectation of danger
- Problems with sleeping, startling easily at noise; irritability
- Increased blood pressure, adrenaline levels when reminded of the trauma
- Constant arousal of the nervous system



2. Intrusion

- Reliving the event as if it is continually recurring in the present; interrupts daily life
- Time seems to have stopped
- Memories become “frozen and wordless” (Herman 37)
- Memories “lack verbal narrative and context; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman 38).
- Seen as a possible attempt at integration—to relive and master the overwhelming feelings of the traumatic moment(s)

3. Constriction

- The numbing response of surrender
- Analogous states in animals who sometimes freeze when they're attacked
- Sometimes involves disassociation; a feeling of being separate from the event
- Sometimes involves post-traumatic amnesia or an attempt to induce this through narcotics, etc.
- “The effort to ward off intrusive symptoms, though self-protective in intent, further aggravates the post-traumatic syndrome, for the attempt to avoid reliving the trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life” (Herman)
- Often, as intrusive symptoms abate, constrictive symptoms worsen

These Symptoms Result in Disconnection

- Traumatic events breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community
- Survivors may oscillate between:
 - Uncontrollable outbursts of anger and intolerance of rage in any form
 - Seeking intimacy desperately and totally withdrawing from it

3 Stages of Recovery

- Establishment of Safety
 - Must happen **before** story can be told
- Remembrance and Mourning
 - Telling the story in-depth
 - Transforms the traumatic memory so it can be incorporated into the survivor's life story
 - Important to put the story into words, not just images or impressions
 - Goal is integration, not exorcism
 - Mourning, which is extremely painful, must take place
- Reconnection
 - Possible when trauma has been integrated into life story, doesn't subsume life story

Extremely Loud

- Again, according to Herman, tragic memories are “frozen and wordless”
- Herman also writes, “Trauma involves an event that cannot be spoken. The traumatic event is a blank, in the face of which words always and necessarily fall short. And yet trauma must be spoken.”
- Traumatic memory must be turned into narrative memory

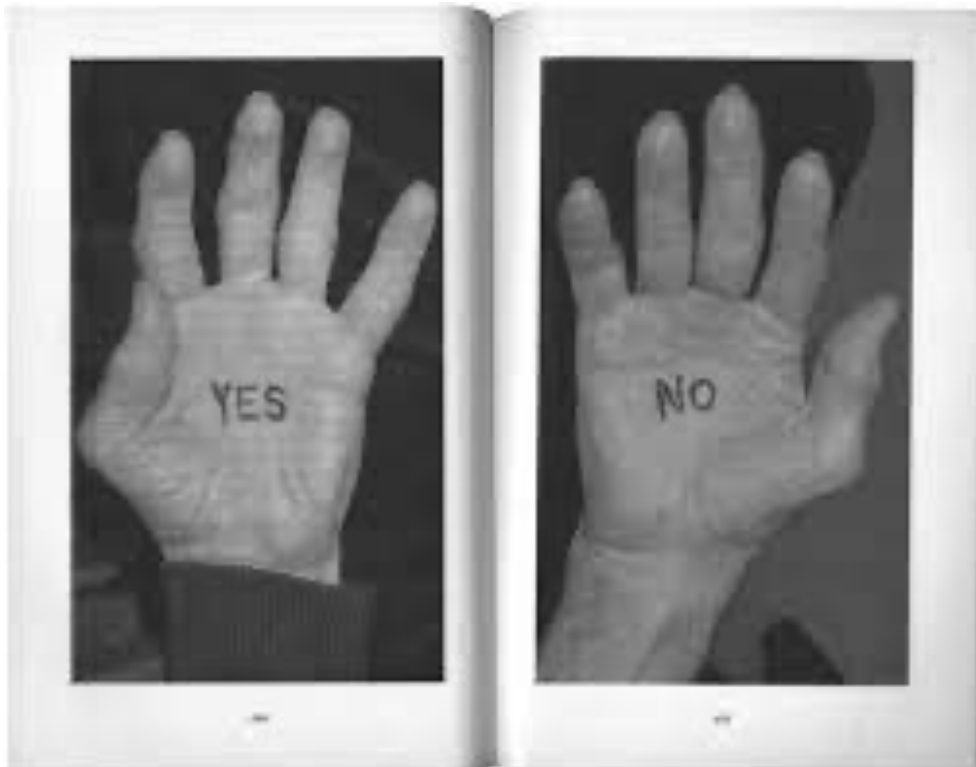


Language Difficulties in the *ELAIC*

- Blanks in the novel; illegibly dark pages; pages in cipher, etc.
- According to critic Kristiaan Versluys, language in the novel is strained to the breaking point: “Being forced to its expressive extremes of dense volubility, on the one hand, and ominous silence, on the other, it is barely capable of serving its traditional function as a vehicle of communication” (80).



Grandparents



- Deny their trauma. They never talk about the past, never listen to sad music, never watch television shows about sick children, etc.
- Basically, they experience what Herman calls constriction
- Past usurps the present in the Nothing spaces they create
- Thomas Sr. especially a prisoner of his impoverished language—he even has to recycle his words in his daybooks
- No listener for Thomas's letters



Grandparents, cont.

- Thomas has to ask strangers the time in the airport because symbolically he doesn't know what time it is—past or present
- Grandma's blank life story—the past is all-determining because it cannot be articulated. As long as trauma is not narrativized, as long as it cannot be told, it comes across as a blank and keeps obliterating the present

Yet...

- Grandma's letters to Oskar break this pattern. She writes to a real person she loves, a sympathetic listener.
- Very layout of final letter (p 306+: short sentences, lots of white space) is testimony to the slow, painstaking genesis of the word
- Grandma complex: on the one hand she wants to go backward in time, to even undo Creation, to live in "an undifferentiated nothingness"
- Yet, reacts more positively when she asserts her love for Oskar at the end. Connecting with another





Oskar

- Accusations of “whimsy” in Oskar’s voice miss the point—sayings such as “heavy boots,” “the worst day” are dodges and evasions, inspired by his simultaneous need to face up to his situation and to repress it
- Oscar’s inventions represent his desire to live in a world safe from trauma
- They are usually about safety or else about connectedness and the need to stay in touch

Oskar (cont.)

- In order to counteract trauma, Oskar sets out on a quest
- Sixth Borough story is a cautionary tale that warns against the dangers of solipsism and isolation. Suggests the sterility that comes from the refusal to change
- Oskar's quest, then, is a counter-action to his grandparents' defeatism; he uses his "compensatory imagination" to forge new relationships, to act in a changed world





New York City

- Diversity of the city itself provides a counter-balance to personal devastation?
- According to Versluys, Oskar's personal search is "part and parcel of a rich and complicated collective destiny"
- If trauma brings time to a standstill, the quest reintroduces development and movement. Linearity of the quest counters the circularity of traumatic obsession?