

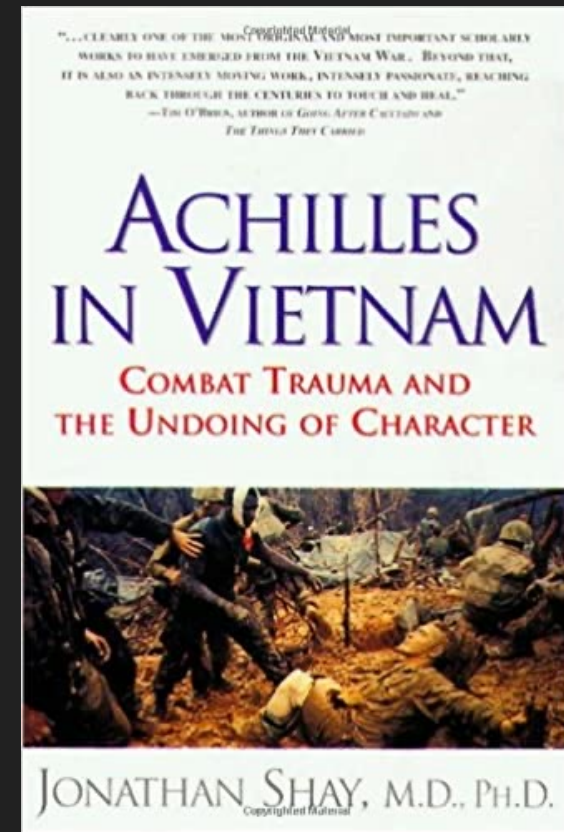
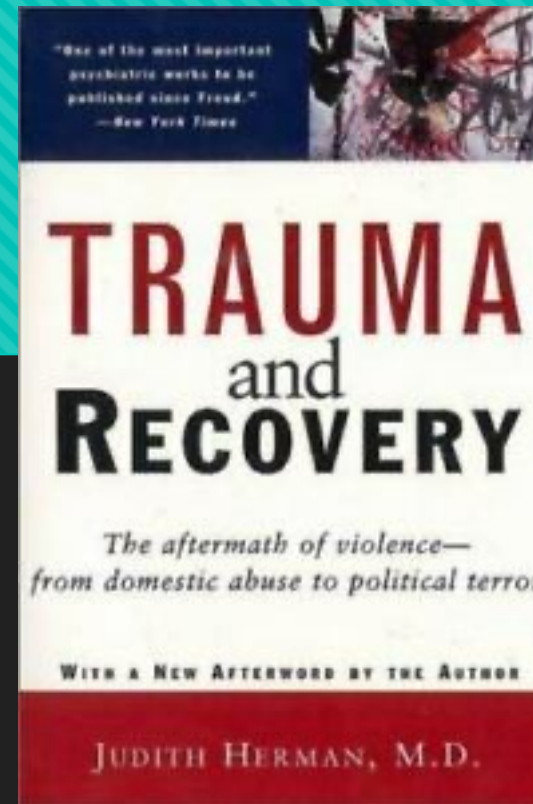
Witnessing Trauma

In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*



Traumatic Memories

- Tend to be "in the form of vivid sensations and images" rather than in "verbal narrative" (Herman 37-38)
- Jonathan Shay: traumatic memory is "not narrative," but rather an experience that reoccurs, "either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments" (172)



Process of recovery



- Must involve a narrativization of traumatic events—putting sensory images into words in order to integrate trauma into a person's life story
- Doesn't mean the trauma is forgotten or "overcome," but that it becomes part of someone's life experiences rather than intruding

Before trauma can be narrativized

- Merely telling one's story not enough, though
- Clinicians and theorists argue that telling traumatic stories can be harmful if approached in the wrong way
- First, sobriety, safety, and self-care must be put in place



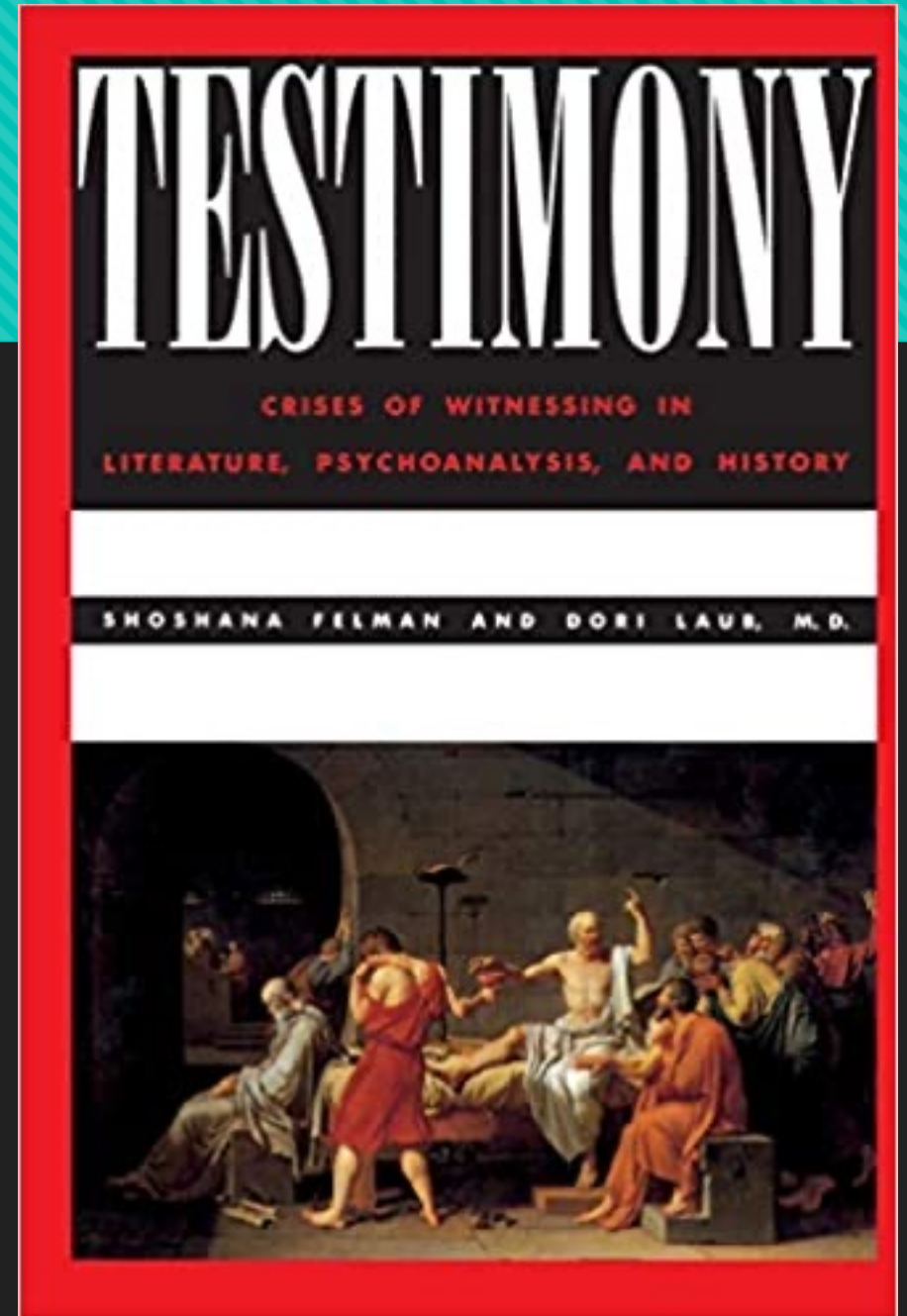
The role of the listener



- For the healing process to truly begin, the trauma story must be heard and acknowledged by a sympathetic listener
- Listeners must be trustworthy
- Must be strong enough to hear the story without injury to themselves and without either blaming or disbelieving the teller
- Most importantly, listeners must be “ready to experience some of the terror, grief, and rage that the victim did...*Without emotion in the listener there is not communalization of trauma*” (Shay 189)

The witness

- Holocaust researchers Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub assign the term “witness” to the listener of the trauma tale
- Just as in the courtroom, testimony and witnesses are used when there is a “crisis of truth,” which a courtroom verdict must solve (6)
- To sufferers of traumatic events, this crisis of truth is much larger and more profound than in a courtroom trial
- Wars and genocide, the Holocaust especially, cause us to question the very nature of what it means to be human
- Traumatic events experienced as an overwhelming shock, not made real until a narrative emerges and is listened to: the listener is a partner in creating knowledge



O'Brien



- These theories of narrating trauma, which focus on the importance of both telling and listening to stories, are especially relevant to the work of Tim O'Brien
- O'Brien's obsessive emphasis on telling, retelling, and especially on listening to stories illustrates the relationship that clinicians have observed between the narrativization of trauma and the beginning of healing

Turn to the stories—Letters

- One way soldiers communicate their experience is through writing letters
 - Jimmy's letters from Martha
 - Rat Kiley's letter to Curt Lemon's sister
 - Norman Bowker's letter to Tim O'Brien
 - O'Brien's imagined letter to his parents in "The Rainy River"
 - Cross's 3 imagined letters to Kiowa's parents in "In the Field"
- Letters, though, can be a dangerously one-sided means of communication.
- They illustrate the potential harm of re-traumatization when war stories are not listened to properly



Longing for a witness



- What Jimmy Cross and other characters long for instead of a distant non-listener is a witness who can fully understand their experiences
- Traumatic experiences themselves are isolating
- Searching the tunnels—Dave Jensen carries earplugs, but sight is also severely constricted—“tunnel vision”
- Men worry if their screams would even be heard by their buddies waiting outside—
- Metaphor of being swallowed or ingested by the tunnels—“a swallowed-up feeling” (10)
- Kiowa also said to be swallowed up by the muck—the field kills by “sucking things down, swallowing things” (169)

Combating Traumatic Isolation

- Jimmy Cross imagines an actual physical union with a sympathetic listener, Martha.
- Lots of talk about tongues and mouths, indicating his desire to talk to a listener not separate from himself, someone who can understand completely
 - Imagines her tongue on the envelope flap (1)
 - Martha's tongue "taut" and visible in her mouth in the volleyball picture (4)
 - Jimmy puts the pebble in his mouth and imagines it as Martha's tongue (12)
- Jimmy, in fact, wants to sleep inside Martha's lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered" (11). He wants to become one with Martha



Mary Anne Bell



- Rat imagines such a listener as well in the figure of Mary Anne Bell in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”
- He says trying to explain the war to innocent girls back home is like trying to explain the taste of chocolate. A person has “to taste” the “shit” of the war experience for themselves.
- Mary Anne can understand because “she was up to her eyeballs in it” (113-114)
- Rat says he loves Mary Anne and fears that “after the war...you won’t find nobody like her” (114)

Yet...perfect union impossible

- Merging too fully with the trauma sufferer can be dangerous
- While listeners must experience some of the emotions the victims did, nevertheless, “the listener must still remain “a separate individual who preserves his own space” (Laub 58).
- Acc. to trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra, the witness should experience an “empathic unsettlement” rather than a full identification with the trauma victim
- Desire to merge too fully seen in Mary Anne’s quest to understand Vietnam? She wants to “eat this place,” to ingest it...necklace of tongues?



What we're left with is stories



- The perfect witness, who IS another you is impossible, so we must rely on narrative, on story to communicate traumatic experience
- Characters such as Kiowa has to tell the story of Ted Lavender's death over and over again
- Mitchell Sanders discusses the importance of listening in the tale of the 6-man listening post in "How to Tell"
- Must use narrative/invention techniques to make his listener truly understand his emotions
- End of "How to Tell": difficulty of listening. The narrator must begin patiently to retell the story, "adding, subtracting, making a few things up" to get at the real truth (85)

Confession

- The difficult nature of both telling and listening to stories is captured in the collection's emphasis on confession
 - Sanders "confesses" to O'Brien he made up some of the listening post details
 - "The Rainy River" told as a "confession" to readers, etc.
- Confessing is closely related to witnessing
- A confession must be witnessed; only then can healing, atonement occur
- Confession reintegrates someone into the community



More on Confession

- Without a listener, there can be no confession.
- Jo Gill, in her introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing*, points out that confession is not simply a means of “expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience” but rather, it constitutes “a ritualized technique for producing truth” (4).
- What’s important for O’Brien’s work here is the recognition that truth does not consist simply of relating historical experience, exposing a lived past to an audience. Like the theorists cited above, O’Brien operates according to a sophisticated understanding that narrative is a partnership between a storyteller and an audience who work together to get at truth. His repeated emphasis on listening in the collection makes clear that the audience member shares responsibility in the narrative process.
- But also makes the listener aware, unable to retain innocence, turn a blind eye to atrocity

The Burden of Witnessing

- In his seminal non-fiction book, *Dispatches*, which describes his experiences as a war correspondent in Vietnam, Michael Herr writes about the role of the witness to atrocity, arguing that taking on the role of witness carries the burden of a sinful knowledge:
- “I went behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn’t know, it took the war to teach it, that you were responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did” (20).



Blame



- While those back home often plead innocent to war atrocities, claiming ignorance about what happened, both Herr and O'Brien, in telling their war stories, consciously understand, like Jimmy Cross does, that "when a man died, there had to be blame" (*TTC* 177).

O'Brien's Anger

- O'Brien has made it clear in interviews that the blame for the Vietnam War is much more wide-ranging than the immediate causes for specific deaths in the field. He has expressed anger at the ignorance of his own small-town draft board that sent him to a war they did not even understand:
- One aspect [of a Midwestern background] is my sense of bitterness about small-town . . . polyester, white-belted, Kiwanis America. The people who vote and participate in civic events, who build playgrounds and prop up our libraries and then turn around and send us to wars, oftentimes out of utter and absolute ignorance. . . . The Middle America I grew up in sent me to that war. . . . These people didn't know—in my case, in the case of Vietnam—Ho Chi Minh's politics from those of the governor of Arizona. They didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. . . . There's a laziness and a complacency, a kind of Puritan sense of pious rectitude, that you can tell really pisses me off. (Bourne 80-81).





“Lives of the Dead”

- In this story, O'Brien is both witness and trauma sufferer—the two experiences merge
- As a witness to Linda's trauma, he longs to understand and like Cross with Martha, to merge fully with Linda: “I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones” (228)
- But complete merging not possible—Tim's seeing Linda's body at the funeral home drives home this message and Linda must dissolve into story, into the imagination
- But this story shows that while war trauma might not be able to be *fully* communicated, we ALL have sorrow and loss in our lives
- The mingling of war and pre-war experiences shows we have a common basis for understanding, for empathy to develop
- But we must be good witnesses, good listeners?