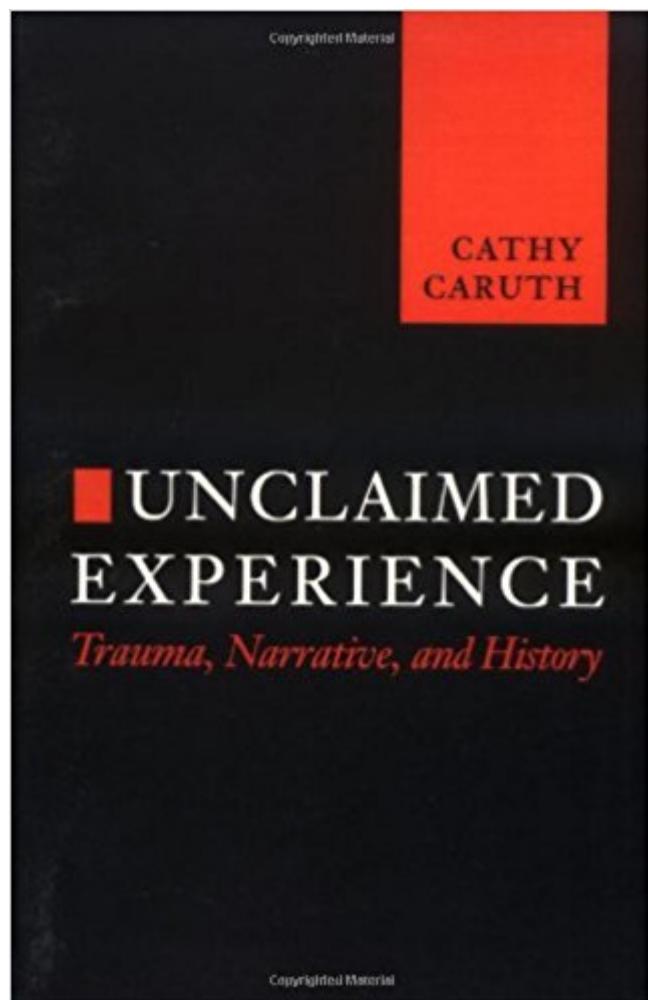


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Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative And History



Synopsis

"If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet."⁴ •from the IntroductionIn Unclaimed Experience, Cathy Caruth proposes that in the "widespread and bewildering experience of trauma" in our century•both in its occurrence and in our attempt to understand it•we can recognize the possibility of a history no longer based on simple models of straightforward experience and reference. Through the notion of trauma, she contends, we come to a new understanding that permits history to arise where immediate understanding is impossible. In her wide-ranging discussion, Caruth engages Freud's theory of trauma as outlined in Moses and Monotheism and Beyond the Pleasure Principle; the notion of reference and the figure of the falling body in de Man, Kleist, and Kant; the narratives of personal catastrophe in Hiroshima mon amour; and the traumatic address in Lecompte's reinterpretation of Freud's narrative of the dream of the burning child.

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Customer Reviews

If you want to understand the state of trauma studies in their relation to the humanities, you absolutely must be familiar with Caruth's work. This book and her collection of edited essays were in large part responsible for the work on trauma within literature, film, and cultural studies since 1990. It is important to recognize that Caruth is neither a clinician nor a psychiatrist. She is working on

analyzing written and filmed texts ranging from Freud's theories in "The Interpretation of Dreams," "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and "Moses and Monotheism" to Paul de Man's post-structuralist literary theory to Alain Resnais's film "Hiroshima Mon Amour" to understand how these texts theorize trauma. She is interested in the discourse that has developed around trauma, the written record that affects how we--as literary scholars AND as psychologists, psychiatrists, and physicians--currently conceive of trauma.

The previous reviewer lists three psychiatrists/neuroscientists, Daniel Schacter, Joseph Ledoux, and Richard McNally, that are very important to trauma studies; however, his or her claim that Caruth "ignored" the work of these scientists is misleading and unfair. Her book was published in 1996, while the majority of these men's work on trauma appeared in the late 1990s and the 2000s. Schacter, who has been publishing longer than the other two, did have a book published in 1994 on memory. However, "trauma" does not even appear in the index. While the work of psychiatrists and neuroscientists can illuminate other, more literarily-minded trauma theorists today, most of these sources were not available to Caruth.

Although the book is written with a fairly academic narrative, the theory put forward is profound. If one has ever wondered why it is that an individual who is traumatized mysteriously finds themselves traumatized again in life (different time, different circumstances), this book is for them. The phrase "history of trauma" is not a chronology of how we learned of the subject. Instead, it refers to how the "history" of a traumatic event within a person's life remains that person's "history" until it is "claimed." This book was referred to me by a professor during my UCLA journey and to this day, I think back to how it expanded my mind on trauma. I'm in the process of finishing my own book (Speaking Truths, fiction, released April 2010) wherein the protagonist must resolve his own trauma. There is no doubt this book contributed significantly to how I outlined my character's journey.

From an academic perspective this book was very enlightening. It compelled me to look at trauma through an ethical and historical lens.

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