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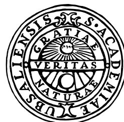
Unquiet Afterlives

Ghosts Narrating Rape Trauma in Contemporary Swedish and American Fiction (1990–2018)

Daniela Lillhannus



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Abstract
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This thesis examines contemporary Swedish and American novels that employ ghost narrators to recount experiences of deadly sexual violence: Carina Rydberg's *Osalig ande* (1990), Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Sara Stridsberg's *The Antarctica of Love* (2021 [2018]), and TE Carter's I Stop Somewhere (2018). Through contextualization and comparative analysis, the study traces how trauma fiction draws on supernatural narration to engage with understandings of rape and trauma that were shaped by feminist consciousness-raising, trauma research, and psychiatric diagnostics of the mid-twentieth century and onwards.

The study asks why these novels use ghosts as narrators, how they do so, and to what effect. Building on feminist narratology, genre theory, and scholarship on rape myths, the thesis analyzes focalization and first-person narration of sexual violence. It situates the primary texts within a broader cultural framework by examining entanglements of myth, intertextuality, and psychological discourse in dialogue with contemporary psychotraumatology. This interdisciplinary approach treats trauma as a conceptual knot—a phenomenon whose meanings are historically and culturally contingent.

Addressing the largely underexplored topic of sexual violence in Swedish literature, the thesis offers new insights into the influence of American trauma discourses on the Swedish texts. It also demonstrates how an interdisciplinary approach to trauma fiction can identify and illuminate rape as a core ethical theme in novels. The study contributes to the theoretical orientation of hauntology in literary studies and medical humanities, proposing spectrality as a subject position and framework for conceptualizing experiences of social isolation and lack of agency after traumatic events.

Examining how victims are depicted through culturally available scripts and other characters' perceptions, the study argues that fiction can yield critical insight into how social dynamics contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of trauma. It demonstrates that ghost narrators produce stories where other people's responses fundamentally shape rape trauma through loneliness and shame. At the same time, spectrality provides victims who are made invisible with a means of refusing complete obliteration—by continuing to observe others, waiting for the gaze to be returned.

Keywords: literature, rape, trauma, death, psychotraumatology, PTSD, feminism, narratology, spectrality, medical humanities, Carina Rydberg, Alice Sebold, Sara Stridsberg, TE Carter

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For my friends

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 11

1. Introduction 15
    - Research aims and questions 19
    - Primary material and selection 19
    - Fields and frameworks 23
        - Feminist rape studies 24
        - Trauma studies 28
        - Spectralities and representations of death 33
    - Overview of the study 37

2. Theoretical perspectives 40
    - Narrative 40
        - Genre 43
    - Looking with the specter 44
        - Ghosts and gendered trauma in fiction 45
        - The spectral subject position 47
    - Defining trauma 51
        - The trauma knot as interdisciplinary approach 52
        - Emerging concepts of trauma: psychotraumatology and literary trauma theory 53
    - Feminist perspectives 67
        - Defining rape 68
        - Rape myths 70
        - The genre of "speaking out" as a feminist strategy 72
    - Methodology and application 74

3. The defiant ghost: Carina Rydberg's *Osalig ande* (1990) 78
    - *Osalig ande* (1990) 79
    - Style, structure, and genre 81
    - Critical reception and previous research 83

Analysis 89
Osalig ande as a narrative of rape trauma 89
The unwanted visibility of sexual violence 91
Incest and marital rape as two potentially traumatic events 97
Shame and mythologies of rape trauma 99
Conflicting modes of the trauma story: art, popular culture, and medical discourses 107
The ghost reborn—remembering and forgetting trauma 115
Concluding remarks 120

4. The ghost yearning for the familiar: Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002) 124
The Lovely Bones (2002) 125
Style, structure, and genre 126
Critical reception and previous research 127
Analysis 131
The ghost—a figure of empowered survivorship? 131
The Lovely Bones as a narrative of rape trauma 134
Haunting through grief and yearning 139
Romance as a mode for Susie's story 143
A "therapeutic" narrative lacking trauma therapy 150
Concluding remarks 154

5. The ghost returning against her will: Sara Stridsberg's *The Antarctica of Love* (2018) 157
The Antarctica of Love (2018) 158
Style, structure, and genre 160
Critical reception and previous research 161
Analysis 164
Mythologies of rape and death 164
The Antarctica of Love as a narrative of rape trauma 168
Living ghostliness and repeated traumatic events 170
The living as incompetent listeners 174
Depicting dissociative flashbacks through media imagery 179
A different way of haunting? Motherhood as a non-traumatic return 183
Concluding remarks 189

6. The ghost in solidarity with living victims: TE Carter's *I Stop Somewhere* (2018)....193

I Stop Somewhere (2018)....194

Style, structure, and genre....196

Critical reception and previous research....198

Analysis....202

I Stop Somewhere as a narrative of rape trauma....202

Acquiring painful knowledge....208

Challenging previous narratives of death, insanity, and teenage girlhood....213

Challenging rape myths and sexual scripts....218

An unfinished future....223

Concluding remarks....229

7. Conclusion and further discussion....233

Trauma beyond the frameworks of disorder and aporia....233

New perspectives on trauma fiction....236

Tracing mythologies of rape....240

The politics of trauma narratives and the ethics of the ghost narrator....243

Bibliography....249

Svensk sammanfattning....267

Abbreviations

DSM	*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
YA	Young adult literature

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1. Introduction

> When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable.
>
> The study of psychological trauma must constantly contend with this tendency to discredit the victim or to render her invisible.
>
> — Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1992

> You can do what you want with us, say what you want, throw black earth on top of us and tell whatever stories you like. No-one can check the facts with us, that is what is so nice about the dead. A perfect friend, someone who never argues, and we never change, we stay the same as we have always been. Frozen in tableaux.
>
> — Sara Stridsberg, *The Antarctica of Love*, 2021 [2018]

After the protagonist of Swedish novelist Sara Stridsberg's *The Antarctica of Love* (2021) (*Kärlekens Antarktis* [2018]) falls victim to a sexually violent murder, she finds herself in a ghostly state. Watching and listening to events that take place on Earth after her demise, she is exposed to a myriad of narratives about herself—through death, she has become a public figure, subject to incessant speculation and debate.

Feminists and researchers of sexual violence have rightly pointed out that historically, victims' personal accounts of rape have often been silenced. Nonetheless, as Stridsberg's tale highlights, detailed accounts of sexual violence feature extensively in contemporary culture; for example, in crime narratives, in which raped and murdered women and girls are staple characters. The potential conflict between these representations and her own point of view is dryly pointed out by the protagonist: "[n]o-one can check the facts with us, that is what is so nice about the dead" (66). Not all people who are dead stay silent,

however. In ghost stories, their opinions, desires, and memories may intrude on the living in multiple and ambiguous ways.

The Antarctica of Love and the other fictional ghost stories subject to qualitative investigation in this book feature protagonists who, in one way or another, are forced to simultaneously reckon with two painful things: their own memories of sexual violence, and other people's reactions to it. By using ghosts as narrators, these novels attempt to make visible the points of view of victims whose stories, when told, are usually told by other people.

Within psychology today, trauma is generally defined as the debilitating psychosocial consequences of an overwhelming event.[1] Emerging concepts of psychological trauma have played a central role in how accounts of sexual violence have been formulated and received throughout the timespan explored in this book (1990–2018). As anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman have argued, the development of trauma as a concept during the twentieth century shifted the predominant perspective from which traumatized people were viewed from suspicion to acceptance. The concept of trauma eventually came to authenticate the suffering inherent to sexual violence, creating a new kind of culturally and politically respectable trauma victim.[2]

In the late twentieth century, during an increase in American literature that sought to portray rape in ways that call attention to its negative impact on victims, the concept of trauma played an accommodating role. In the early 1990s, narrative techniques that mimicked symptoms of trauma began to be employed as a way to depict previously unrecognized forms of sexual violence, as well as of convincing readers of the continued relevance of the topic amid a public backlash against many feminist understandings of rape.[3]

Trauma also exists as a psychological phenomenon, and within the field of psychology today, rape is generally understood as one of the events most likely to cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[4] Contemporary research associates PTSD with several different psychological processes, such as memory,

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[1] "Trauma," American Psychological Association, accessed December 16, 2025.

[2] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton University Press, 2009).

[3] Robin E. Field, *Writing the Survivor: The Rape Novel in Late Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 150–154.

[4] Among women who have experienced sexual assault, between seventeen and sixty-five percent develop PTSD. Ronald C. Kessler et al., "Trauma and PTSD in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 8, no. 5 (2017): 1353383; Rebecca Campbell et al., "An Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault On Women's Mental Health," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 10, no. 3 (2009): 225–46; Heidi S. Resnick et al., "Prevalence of Civilian Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in a Representative National Sample of Women," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (1993): 984–91.

cognitive–affective reactions, coping strategies, beliefs, and social support.[5] These processes are affected by variables spanning beyond the internal processes occurring within the individual's psyche. The narration of memories, the strategies people choose to cope with hardship, beliefs about the world and one's place in it, and access to support—these are all affected by the social and political context in which the person suffering from trauma is situated. As psychiatrist Judith Herman points out, women who experience violence have often found themselves in contexts in which their experiences have been discredited or simply rendered invisible.[6]

To investigate the relationship between women's experiences after rape and the social context in which this experience is situated, I engage in parallel discussions about trauma that are taking place simultaneously in the humanities and in the field of psychotraumatology. Because of the multitude of meanings the term "trauma" holds in contemporary culture, I find an interdisciplinary perspective to be necessary when studying how concepts of trauma operate in fiction.

During the time period explored in this study, significant changes took place regarding how rape is represented and understood in culture. For example, incest became widely recognized and debated as sexual violence in the 1980s, while acquaintance rape and sexual abuse at the workplace came into focus during the 2017 #MeToo-movement. When I started my research for this book in 2021, the urgency of #MeToo was still discernible in the many invigorating public discussions and artistic explorations of the dynamics of sexual violence.

Today, another backlash against the rights of women and sexual minorities has gained traction. After #MeToo in Sweden, several girls and women who have publicly spoken out about being raped have been convicted of defamation, a crime which in Sweden applies to both true and false accusations.[7] In the United States, President Donald Trump, who has been accused of sexual misconduct by several women, was re-elected to office in 2025.[8] During his second term, a notable example of the Trump administration's many attempts to target women, minorities, and political opposition is his series of executive orders aimed at suppressing the rights of trans people. Another is the censorship of topics

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[5] Chris R. Brewin and Emily A. Holmes, "Psychological Theories of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Clinical Psychology Review* 23, no. 3 (2003): 345.

[6] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 2015), 8.

[7] "Alla kvinnor åtalade för förtal i samband med metoo fällda," *SVT Nyheter*, May 11, 2021; Hans-Olof Sandén, *Förtal* (Norstedts Juridik, 2022), 43; Linnea Wegerstad, "Brottsoffers yttrandefrihet och förtalsbrottet," *Svensk juristtidning* (2024): 396.

[8] Ruthann Robson, "The Sexual Misconduct of Donald J. Trump: Toward a Misogyny Report," *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 27 (2020): 85.

related to gender and equity through the flagging of certain words for review by federal agencies and the removal of material from government websites. Examples of the extensive list of words that are being targeted include "woman," "transgender," "sexuality," "health equity," "racism," and "trauma."[9] Within this context, where knowledge production about the lives of women and minorities is being suppressed and vilified, research about the narrative strategies previously used to direct attention to the issues of sexual violence and trauma remain as important as ever.

While many victims of sexual violence choose not to speak publicly about their experience, prevalence studies conducted in the twenty-first century indicate that sexual and gender-based violence is still remarkably common across the globe.[10] In Sweden, too, rape is widespread: a survey-based population study from 2025 showed that twenty-four percent of girls and women aged sixteen–twenty-nine had been subject to anal, oral, or vaginal penetration against their will.[11] Thus, while the novels all operate under supernatural premises, their subject matter—sexual violence—is real and reflects many people's experiences outside of fiction.

Stories like *The Antarctica of Love* can be read and used to explore the kinds of potentially traumatic experiences that spark public interest—which many sex crimes tend to do—in cases in which the victim's point of view still exists outside what Herman calls "the realm of socially validated reality."[12] By bringing feminist psychological trauma theory into dialogue with fictional representations of sexual violence, this study addresses an underexplored intersection between literary trauma studies and feminist scholarship on rape narratives.

Investigating fiction through combined perspectives from literary studies and psychotraumatology, this study provides both fields with knowledge about how stories and storytelling shape cultural understandings of sexual violence and its aftermath. By foregrounding the relevance of fiction beyond literary studies, the book aims to be useful not only to literary scholars, but also to

[9] AJ Connelly, "Federal Government's Growing Banned Words List Is Chilling Act of Censorship," *PEN America*, October 1, 2025; Ivana Saric, "All of the Anti-Trans Executive Orders Trump Has Signed," *Axios*, February 5, 2025.

[10] "The Global Backlash Against Women's Rights," *Human Rights Watch*, March 7, 2023; Belén Sanz-Barbero et al., "Prevalence, Associated Factors, and Health Impact of Intimate Partner Violence against Women in Different Life Stages," *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 10 (2019); *Våld och hälsa: en befolkningsundersökning om kvinnors och mäns våldsutsatthet samt kopplingen till hälsa* (Nationellt centrum för kvinnofrid (NCK), 2014); *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence* (World Health Organization, 2013).

[11] *Ungas hälsa, relationer och sexliv—Resultat från UngKAB23* (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2025).

[12] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

researchers working on sexual violence and psychological trauma in adjacent fields.

Research aims and questions

Broadly, this study aims to situate fictional narratives about victims' experiences in the aftermath of sexual violence within wider cultural and discursive frameworks of rape and trauma. It examines the recurring notions of women and girls, trauma, rape, and death that contemporary stories engage with, as well as the means and the effects of this engagement. In what ways do fictional depictions align with or distance themselves from certain specific understandings of trauma prevalent in literary studies, psychotraumatology, and culture? In what ways can trauma fiction that centers the perspectives of victims contribute to knowledge of trauma as a psychological and social phenomenon?

These questions will be answered by exploring a selection of four contemporary Swedish and American novels that use ghost protagonists as posthumous narrators and focalizers of rape. The thesis asks why these novels use ghosts as narrators, how, and to what effects. Is the form of spectral first-person narration used to express critiques of, and subvert narrative conventions related to, rape myths? What are the ghosts' relationships like with the other—living—characters? I am particularly interested in exploring aspects of how the novels depict the relationship between trauma processing and the protagonists' struggle with loss of power, disconnection, and lack of social support in the wake of rape. Finally, I ask how my interdisciplinary perspectives from trauma research, feminist studies, and hauntology can contribute to new understandings of the four novels.

Primary material and selection

Ghosts, haunting, and spectral metaphors appear in several works of fiction centering the topics of trauma and/or rape. Haunting has been used as a metaphor for traumatic memories, as well as for feelings of guilt and ethical ruminations in relation to persecuted or otherwise dehumanized people.[13] Characters have been depicted as literal or metaphorical ghosts—in some cases, to tell their side of the story after dying; and in other cases, to communicate trauma-related

[13] See, for example: Tessa Hulls' *Feeding Ghosts: A Graphic Memoir* (2024); Toni Morrisson's *Beloved* (1987); Majgull Axelsson's *Långt borta från Nifelheim* (1994); Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007); Isabella Hammand's *Enter Ghost* (2023); and Yu Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station* (2019 [2014]).

states of invisibility, lack of communication, and alienation.[14] The ghost figure has even been used to imagine an abuser finally apologizing from beyond the grave.[15] All things considered, the ghost is a resonant figure in contemporary fictional depictions of violence and alienation.

The study narrows its focus to a specific kind of literary ghost figure; that of a girl or woman who has died in connection to suffering sexual violence. Spanning 1990 to 2018, the material examined consists of Carina Rydberg's *Osalig ande* (1990), Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Sara Stridsberg's *The Antarctica of Love* (2021 [2018]), and TE Carter's *I Stop Somewhere* (2018). This relatively small corpus allows me to investigate the research questions in depth. Each author and novel will be presented at further length in their respective chapters.

The novels are united by a set of characteristics: the ghosts provide the reader with a view into their subjective states of mind by functioning as narrators and focalizers. They all alter between narrating past events from their lives, including sexual violence, and narrating events that take place on Earth in the present. In the works of fiction analyzed, I identify rape or sexual abuse on the basis of both conventional narrative cues associated with sexual violence and explicit depictions within the plot.

The main characters are women or girls whose subjective experience of the world changes fundamentally after being raped—not only due to trauma but also due to death. In Rydberg's novel, the protagonist commits suicide, while in the three other novels the protagonists are murdered by their rapists, their bodies hidden. This difference invites comparisons between the ways in which death is situated in relation to rape trauma in the novels. All four protagonists find themselves in a state between life and death, in which they maintain consciousness and can return to Earth, watch the living, and sometimes try to establish contact with them.

The novels were selected because they share a set of defining features: they are the American and Swedish novels I have identified that combine ghostliness with narratives of sexual violence and trauma, and that, more specifically, employ ghosts as literal first-person narrators. In the selection of material for this study, the database assembled by Roxanne Harde and her research group, of over one-hundred young adult (YA) novels in English and Spanish containing

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[14] See, for example: Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959); Christina Wahldén's *Kort kjol* (1998); Sapphire's *Push* (1996); George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017); Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019); Evie Wyld's *The Echoes* (2024).

[15] See: V (formerly Eve Ensler), *The Apology* (2019).

the motif of acquaintance rape has been incredibly helpful: I found TE Carter's *I Stop Somewhere* in that database.[16]

The shared structure of these four novels, in which a victim of rape narrates both her memories of abuse and present actions of living characters, resembles the narrative structure of contemporary realist fiction about trauma in which the narration of traumatic memories and present events are interwoven.[17] However, rather than adhering to realist fictional conventions, the material operates within premises typical of the low fantasy genre, in which fantastic elements intrude on the "real world."[18] The distinct qualities of ghost stories—their blend of realistic depictions of life, and non-realist, visionary depictions of the afterlife—allows me to study a wider range of perspectives on rape and trauma.

The ghost figure allows for character development for deceased girls and women. At the same time, ghost narrators produce stories in which first-person narration of the victim's perspective is not necessarily linked to ideas of survivorship. Finally, the ghost's movement in time and space allows the narrators to witness scenes and details that living victims of sexual violence would not have access to.

I have limited my scope to fiction ranging from 1990 to 2018 because I perceive an interesting development of the theme during this period, in both the United States and in the Nordic countries. These are decades which birthed both the spectral turn in cultural theory and increased academic investigation of memory and trauma in the humanities as well as in psychology. As a psychiatric diagnosis, PTSD was introduced in the 1980s but continued to be developed throughout this period, as will be discussed below. Lastly, several influential feminist discussions about rape which have bearing on the material took place in the decades following the 1970s.

However, the events depicted in the novels take place in part before this period. *Osalig ande*'s plot is set in the upper middle class of Stockholm in the 1970s and 1980s (with the ghost's narration supposedly being set in a time contemporary to the novel's publication). The plot of *The Lovely Bones* is set in a Pennsylvanian middle-class suburb in the 1970s, with the ghost's narration of her surviving family members' lives continuing into the 1980s. *The Antarctica of Love* is set in central Stockholm and depicts a time span from the early 1960s into the 2000s. *I Stop Somewhere* is set in a suburban small town in the state of New York

[16] Roxanne Harde, "Acquaintance Rape Book Database," with Kelly Keus et al., University of Alberta, Augustana Campus, accessed October 6, 2023.

[17] See, for example: Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage* (2014); Sofi Oksanen's *Puhdistus* (2008); Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1992).

[18] Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (Greenwood, 1986), 67.

during the 2010s. Although this time span slightly predates PTSD as a diagnosis, plots set during a time in the past become interesting for my study, as they are narrated from a later point in time, and framed through the later discourses of rape, trauma, and haunting mentioned above.

By including American as well as Swedish novels, this study aims to explore rape trauma fiction from two different language areas. In an increasingly globalized world in which English has become the lingua franca, North American popular culture influences the literary imagination of authors far beyond the United States. At the same time, literary trends from a smaller language area might rise to global prominence, as is the case with Scandinavian crime fiction in the past decades. Bearing in mind that the global system of literary translation, distribution, and influence is complex and does not stay neatly contained within national borders, the examination of literary themes and trends within multiple language areas is warranted. Analyzing these novels while paying attention to cultural context will, I hope, shed light on global similarities as well as local specificities within contemporary trauma fiction.

Because of the small sample and relatively similar premises of the examined material, the results generated by these readings will not be generalizable to encompass the experiences of all women who suffer rape, disappear, die, or become victims of murder. Although the novels' protagonists inhabit a variety of class positions, they are all implied to be white, except for Ellie in *I Stop Somewhere*, whose Puerto Rican heritage on her estranged mother's side is mentioned but not explored to any great extent. The age span of the protagonists ranges from teenagers to women in their late twenties and thirties, making it a sample that spans both childhood and adulthood—but not old age. Moreover, all the protagonists are portrayed as heterosexual.

Due to this study's focus on the role of the narrator in written accounts of rape, the investigated material consists of novels, although the figure of the ghostly rape victim, or spectral points of view being used to explore themes of trauma, also appears in other forms of media as well.[19]

Within literary studies, genre is sometimes approached through a distinction between "genre fiction" and fiction that is positioned as falling outside, or above, genre frameworks. This perceived separation has shaped some earlier work on trauma as a fictional topic. Roger Luckhurst perceives a tendency among literary scholars to place a strong focus on the "[m]odernist aesthetics of fragmentation and aporia," while ignoring the trauma literature that falls into the realm of popular culture.[20] This tendency may imply that trauma is communicated most

[19] In television, examples include *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017–2020). Films include Lukas Moodysson's *Lilja 4-ever* (2002) and Steven Soderbergh's *The Presence* (2024).

[20] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Routledge, 2008), 15.

convincingly in narratives that are positioned as non-generic. Yet even such narratives draw on generic conventions, and different genres offer different resources for representing trauma. I have consciously selected material spanning different book market categories in this study, instead of only including the kinds of literary fiction most commonly designated as "trauma fiction."[21] Rather, the material is united by other shared genre conventions; most notably from low fantasy ghost stories and women's personal stories of sexual violence.

Fields and frameworks

Institutionally situated at a Swedish Department of Literature, while having received a significant part of my doctoral education within the interdisciplinary research school Womher, which aims to expand the state of research about women's mental health, it follows that my research builds on previous work conducted within several different academic fields. Writing from within the overarching disciplines of Literature and Medical Humanities, I join a tradition of researchers who critically examine the relationship between medicine, culture, and experience.[22] More specifically, this study concerns the relationship between psychiatric, psychological, and cultural conceptions of rape trauma.

Previous research about the specific novels and authors investigated in this study will be presented in each individual analysis chapter. The fame of the authors and novels varies, as does the amount of previous research available about each text. While a relatively large number of studies have been conducted about Alice Sebold's coming-of-age story *The Lovely Bones*, almost none have yet been conducted about TE Carter's YA novel *I Stop Somewhere*. Both Carina Rydberg and Sara Stridsberg are critically acclaimed and widely read authors in Sweden, and their fiction has been the subject of academic investigation—although research about the specific novels I examine is still mostly missing.

However, beyond research about specific authors or literary directions, the interdisciplinary scope of this book carries with it the challenge of narrowing down relevant previous research from a considerable number of fields. To understand contemporary novels about rape trauma, it is necessary to draw not only from literary scholarship, but also on feminist studies of sexual violence,

[21] See: Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[22] Relevant previous studies include: Anna Ohlsson, *Myt och manipulation: Radikal psykiatrikritik i svensk offentlig idédebatt 1968-1973* (Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2008); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (Virago, 1987); Gunnel Svedberg, *Omvårdnadstraditioner inom svensk psykiatrisk vård under 1900-talets första hälft* (Karolinska Institutet, 2002); Nancy Tomes, "Feminist Histories of Psychiatry," in *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*, ed. Mark S. Micale and Roy Porter (Oxford University Press, 1994).

trauma studies, and spectral studies, and to attend to both their contextual insights and the knowledge they produce. These fields all encompass research that engages with questions of violence and trauma. They are not themselves contained within specific disciplines but represent research directions which are taking place within a variety of institutions and settings. To sufficiently situate this study in the relevant fields and theoretical discussions to which it contributes new knowledge, I have found that quite an extensive introduction and theory chapter is necessary.

Feminist rape studies

Feminist research about rape and sexual violence is one of the main fields to which this book contributes. It originally grew out of feminist social movements, as clinical psychologist Laura Brown notes: "[a]lmost the entire corpus of literature on the topics of rape and sexual assault, sexual and physical abuse of children, intimate partner violence, and violence in the workplace and the academy has roots in feminist activism."[23] Today, it spans many disciplines, as research about gender tends to do: law, media, psychology, sociology, and studies of different artistic expressions, to name a few examples. Sexual violence is a ubiquitous phenomenon that is affected by widely different social life strata. Feminist rape studies are united by the imperative to produce knowledge about the workings of rape in society, motivated by the purpose of preventing sexual violence.

Part of this field are the psychotraumatological studies focusing on sexual violence as a potential source of traumatization. In a chapter from the *APA Handbook of Trauma Psychology*, trauma scholar Charles Figley and colleagues summarize the historical emergence of this direction:

> It would not be until the feminist movement in the 1970s that a renewed interest in and recognition of the widespread victimization of women and children would emerge, along with condemnation of the archaic undermining of women's experiences of abuse. [...] As social, political, and cultural rights were sought for women, psychology too turned toward advocacy of women and their experiences. At this time a cognitive shift arose in which women's issues were seen as a reaction to the power hierarchies and institutionalization.[24]

[23] Laura S. Brown, "Contributions of Feminist and Critical Psychologies to Trauma Psychology," in *APA Handbook of Trauma Psychology: Foundations in Knowledge, Vol. 1*, APA Handbooks in Psychology (American Psychological Association, 2017), 502.

[24] Charles R. Figley et al., "The Study of Trauma: A Historical Overview," in *APA Handbook of Trauma Psychology: Foundations in Knowledge, Vol. 1*, APA Handbooks in Psychology (American Psychological Association, 2017), 3.

The most seminal work of feminist psychotraumatology is Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), which I will describe in greater detail in the theory chapter. Other important contributions from psychotraumatology are Laura Brown's insight that traumatic events cannot be defined as taking place outside the range of the everyday, as violence against women often manifests as an everyday experience, clinical psychologist Maria Root's work on "insidious trauma," which notes the cumulative impact of racial bias in addition to misogyny, as well as professor of psychology Jennifer Freyd's model of betrayal trauma, which examines the responses in memory systems among people traumatized by violence committed by persons on whom the victim depends—caregivers, for example.[25] Within psychology, feminist efforts resulted in, among other things, the new term battered women's syndrome, and to a partial reorientation away from victim-blaming, stigma, and the pathologizing of survivors.[26]

This field also includes historical and contemporary studies of rape and the feminist anti-rape movement. Prominent examples of these studies are Maria Bevacqua's *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (2000); Sabine Sielke's *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790–1990* (2002); and Rachel Loney-Howes' *Online Anti-Rape Activism: Exploring the Politics of the Personal in the Age of Digital Media* (2020).[27] The field also includes critiques of this movement; for example, Katie Roiphe's polemic *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (1993) and Mithu Sanyal's *Rape: From Lucretia to #metoo* (2019 [2016]).

Research about the effect of rape myths—false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to justify sexual violence—and public attitudes about rape are highly relevant for my study.[28] Studies within

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[25] See: Jennifer J. Freyd, "Memory and Dimensions of Trauma: Terror May Be 'All-Too-Well Remembered' and Betrayal Buried," in *Critical Issues in Child Sexual Abuse: Historical, Legal, and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Jon R. Conte (SAGE Publications, Inc, 2002); Jennifer Griffiths, "Feminist Interventions in Trauma Studies," in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. Roger J. Kurtz (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 186; Maria P. Root, "Women of Color and Traumatic Stress in 'Domestic Captivity': Gender and Race as Disempowering Statuses," in *Ethnocultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues, Research, and Clinical Applications* (American Psychological Association, 1996).

[26] Figley et al., "The Study of Trauma," 3; Lenore E. Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome* (Springer Publishing Company, 2001).

[27] See also: Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose, "Digital Feminist Activism: #MeToo and the Everyday Experiences of Challenging Rape Culture," in *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, ed. Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (Springer International Publishing, 2019); Sabine Sielke, "The Politics of the Strong Trope: Rape and the Feminist Debate in the United States," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 49, no. 3 (2004).

[28] See: Kimberly A. Lonsway and Louise F. Fitzgerald, "Rape Myths," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1994); Emily C.R. Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," *Episteme* 21, no. 2 (2024): 408–24; Audrey S. Yap, "Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (2017); Kerstin Adolfsson, *Blaming Victims of Rape:*

psychology suggest that persistent false beliefs about rape have very concrete implications in the mental health and lives of victims of sexual violence. Victims who believe in rape myths are less likely to report a sexual assault and to seek support, as shown by psychologist Rebecca Campbell and colleagues.[29] And if a victim does find the courage to tell somebody what happened, a person who believes in rape myths is more likely to blame the victim. In a Swedish study about blame attribution towards victims of rape, two of the most important variables predicting blame attribution were shown to be acceptance of rape myths and sympathy towards the victim—in fact, the study came to the conclusion that personal beliefs were more predictive of attributing blame to the victim than were situational factors relating to the rape itself.[30] Factors that indicate a person's acceptance of rape myths include high sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, and acceptance of interpersonal violence.[31]

Studies that investigate narratives and discourses of rape, from fields as varied as media studies, linguistics, law, history, and literature are relevant for this book. One category focuses on how rape is represented and debated in media and social media.[32] Other studies focus on rape discourses in the courtroom and in law.[33] A third category investigates how different kinds of rape narratives have evolved historically.[34] Similar questions can also be posed within literary scholarship. Research about rape narratives in fiction include studies that contribute to a literary history of fictional accounts of rape; studies that theorize how sexual violence may be represented in fiction, and what consequences these depictions

Studies on Rape Myths and Beliefs about Rape (University of Gothenburg, Department of Psychology, 2018).

[29] Campbell et al., "An Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault On Women's Mental Health," 235.

[30] Adolfsson, *Blaming Victims of Rape*.

[31] Martha R. Burt, "Cultural Myths and Supports for Rape," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38, no. 2 (1980).

[32] See: Jenny Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse: Media Influence and Public Understanding of Sexual Violence Against Children* (Pluto Press, 2004); Gabriella Nilsson, "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," *Sosiologi i dag* 43, no. 4 (2013); Grace Liu et al., "Language and Rape Myth Use in News Coverage of Sexual Violence in the United States, 2014–2017," Oral Presentations, *Injury Prevention* 26, no. 1 (2020): A1–A1.

[33] See: Åsa Bergenheim, *Brottet, offret och förövaren: vetenskapens och det svenska rättsväsendets syn på sexuella övergrepp mot kvinnor och barn 1850–2000* (Carlsson, 2005); Sofia Orrbén, "'Han hade sin penis i henne'—Representationer av agerande kroppar i sexualbrottsdomar," *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap* 43, no. 2–3 (2022).

[34] See: Ulrika Andersson et al., ed., *Rape Narratives in Motion*, Palgrave Studies in Crime, Media and Culture (Springer International Publishing, 2019); Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Springer International Publishing, 2018).

might have; and works that investigate how rape depictions become significant within specific novels or genres of literature.[35]

Robin E. Field's *Writing the Survivor: The Rape Novel in Late Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (2020) has helped me think about the contextual placement of my primary sources within a late twentieth and early twenty-first century tradition of fiction that depicts rape victims in a sympathetic light, inspired by the ideology and texts of the anti-rape movement. Her book provides an overview of these novels, which came into being during the same time period in which feminists were reformulating how rape and victims of rape were commonly understood.[36] Regarding studies that theorize fictional representations of rape, Tanya Horeck's *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2004) explores how images of rape serve as public cultural fantasies of domination and of gender, ethnicity, and class in fiction and film and in wider culture.[37] On the intertextual transference of stories of rape, Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed's *Filomelas förvandlingar: Myten om det outsägliga* (2024) traces how the ancient myth of Philomela has been developed and reinterpreted over the centuries, prominently shaping stories of sexual violence from Antiquity to the present.[38]

The field of feminist rape studies is international, and in this study I rely extensively on insights from an Anglophone context. This is mainly because of the extensive research conducted within this language area, but also because it provides an enlightening contextualization of the material I investigate; both American and Swedish.

American and Swedish literature come from two different literary traditions and partly different historical and cultural situations. However, they are also affected by some of the same discourses. The potential influences and convergences could be the subject of an entirely separate study, but as Gabriella Nilsson has shown in the article "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," influences from American debates are discernible in Swedish debates about sexual violence against children as a gendered issue in the 1980s and 1990s:

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[35] See: Janice L. Doane and Devon L. Hodges, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire* (University of Michigan Press, 2001); Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson, *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009); Roxanne Harde, "No Accident, No Mistake: Acquaintance Rape in Recent YA Novels," in *Beyond the Blockbusters*, ed. Casey Alane Wilson and Rebekah Fitzsimmons (University Press of Mississippi, 2020).

[36] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 25.

[37] Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (Routledge, 2004), 3.

[38] Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, *Filomelas förvandlingar: Myten om det outsägliga*, Eureka—Ellerströms akademiska; nr 98 (Ellerströms, 2024).

> The increased interest in incest was not a Swedish phenomenon, but had its contemporary equivalent in other countries in Europe and in the United States. The way in which the issue was discovered, handled and discussed in Sweden in many ways resembled the process in other countries. What the Swedish sociologist Nea Mellberg describes as a transition from silence to speech in the mid-1980s in Sweden [...] had already taken place in the USA in the late 1970s [...]. There, incest was made one of the controversial issues of the women's movement as early as the influential New York Radical Feminists meeting in 1975, and a number of feminist books on the subject were published after that [...].[39]

In the mid-1980s, Swedish feminists raised the subject of sexual violence against children similarly to how it had previously been discussed in the United States.

Research about depictions of sexual violence in Swedish literature is still incredibly scarce. The notable exceptions are Berit Åström and colleagues' *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and Beyond* (2013), which provides comparative readings of gendered sexual violence in Swedish and Anglophone crime fiction, and the feminist literary scholar Ebba Witt-Brattström's *Historiens metoo-vrål* (2019), which, as a part of a wider scope, accounts for a selection of historical and literary public rape testimonies in Sweden. Therese Hellberg's dissertation, *Vanära, fattigdom och dubbelarbete* (2022) also has a section in which portrayals of rape in Swedish women's fiction from 1940 to 1955 are discussed. Moreover, Cecilia Pettersson's book chapter "'This Is My Story Now!' Trauma and Postmemory in Two Swedish Illness Narratives about Mothers and Daughters" (2025) touches on the subject of incest as a potentially traumatic event in Anna-Karin Palm's novel *Jag skriver över ditt ansikte* (2021).

Thus, research about Anglophone discourses of rape is highly relevant for my study, because knowledge from this field can inform new research in Swedish literature. Furthermore, it is relevant since the Swedish fiction about rape investigated in this study is influenced by several different Anglophone discourses, as I will elaborate upon later.

Trauma studies

Notions about trauma as a psychological phenomenon have often moved back and forth between the field of psychology, the psychiatric realm, and public contexts such as feminist activism, art, and popular culture throughout the twentieth century.[40] My research is situated in two fields that have theorized trauma during the past few decades: psychotraumatology and literary trauma studies. These two fields have sometimes come into contact, usually in the form of

[39] Nilsson, "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," 18. My translation.

[40] Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma* (Routledge, 2020), 41.

scholars from the humanities citing psychotraumatologists—seldom the other way around—but for the most part, academic debates about trauma have remained contained within specific disciplines. Dialogue between trauma theory in the humanities and psychotraumatology has, during the existence of the two fields, been quite uncommon.[41]

Trauma studies within the humanities

From the early 1990s onwards, trauma has been theorized and discussed from a humanities perspective within a field often called cultural trauma studies.[42] Initially, this field emerged at Yale University, where a number of literary and cultural scholars began to develop trauma theories influenced by deconstruction. Leading figures within this movement were Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Geoffrey Hartman.

The central claim of Caruth's influential trauma theory is that analyzing texts that bear witness to trauma through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis, alongside deconstructive insights into the indeterminacies of representation, can, in literary scholars Lucy Bond's and Stef Craps' words, "grant us a paradoxical mode of access to extreme events that defy understanding and representation." Within a Freudian psychoanalytic framework, Caruth views trauma as the result of an event that is not fully experienced when it occurs, but can only be registered into consciousness at a later point in time.[43] The Yale School, as this strand of theory has been called, emphasized the ethical value of bearing witness to past traumatic events on a very large historical scale: Holocaust testimony was one of their main objects of study.

Later directions in trauma research of the humanities include theories about transgenerational trauma, an example of which is Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory," which describes how traumatic memories, according to her, may be transferred from parents to children through narratives and photographs.[44] Another strand of research has focused on how mass media broadcasting and representations of certain catastrophes has created a complicated and

[41] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 12.

[42] In a Scandinavian context, two notable studies within this field are Unni Langås, *Traumets betydning i norsk samtidslitteratur* (Fagbokforl., 2016), and Cecilia Pettersson, *Märkt av det förflutna? Minnesproblematik och minnesestetik i den svenska 1990-talsromanen* (Makadam, 2009).

[43] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 7, 53, 57–59; Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 6.

[44] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

potentially problematic relationship between people who actually suffered through the event, and the people who experience it vicariously through media.[45]

A peculiar feature of trauma theory as it has emerged in the humanities is its inheritance of conflating individual, psychological experiences of trauma with collective historical experiences of large groups of people.[46] However, Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey Alexander have provided a much-needed distinction between trauma as psychological experience and the always-mediated nature of so called "collective" or "national" traumas. Alexander, for example, stresses that opposed to how events become traumatic on an individual level, in order for something to register as traumatic at a social level, intense cultural and political work is required.[47]

Some important recent developments in the field include postcolonial critique of the strong Eurocentrism involved in previous trauma theory's prevalent use of the Holocaust and 9/11 as a basis for all-encompassing statements about the function of trauma. A significant amount of research addressing experiences related to other historical events; for example, slavery and colonialism have ensued.[48]

Another recent development is the call, made by several literary trauma scholars, to explore literature beyond the canon of texts that depict trauma through a modernist or postmodernist fragmented aesthetic, a kind of fiction which had been favored by trauma scholars who argued that fiction should mimic the symptoms of trauma as described in 1990s trauma theory.[49] My study contributes to this effort.

During the 2000s, one strand of writing about trauma within the humanities has been focused on challenging key premises of trauma theory. Ruth Leys (2000), as well as Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck (2008), put forth harsh critiques of what they perceive as a generalization of the notion of trauma, as well as a cynical aestheticization and valorization of it, especially in the writings of Caruth.[50] Wendy Brown (1995) and Lauren Berlant (2002) express a concern

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[45] E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (Rutgers University Press, 2005); Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2004).

[46] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 10.

[47] Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (University of California Press, 2004), 61; Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Polity, 2012), 2.

[48] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 104. See: Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing Trauma Out of Bounds* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Sonya Andermahr, ed., *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism* (MDPI—Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2016).

[49] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 112. See: Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*.

[50] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 133; Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck, "Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma," in

with what they perceive as a "slide of political into therapeutic discourse," (Brown), and a risk that ideas of trauma are used to conflate the eradication of pain with justice being achieved (Berlant).[51]

My study joins the position of Bond and Craps (2020), who, although sympathetic to Brown's and Berlant's critiques, as well as some of Leys', Kansteiner's and Weilnböck's micro-arguments, still find value in trauma theory and want to approach the field from a simultaneously appreciative and critical perspective, rather than join the backlash against it and reject it altogether.[52] Indeed, trauma theory needs to be wary of a previous tendency to be over-confident regarding its own explanatory power, especially in relation to complex, global problems. However, as Bond and Craps note, social movements like ACT UP, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo serve as a reminder that the concept of trauma can help "make visible and intelligible the suffering of individuals and communities, assist us in identifying and understanding situations of exploitation and abuse, bring them to a wider public consciousness, and act as an incentive for [...] sustained and systemic critique."[53]

Psychotraumatology

In the 1980s, the field of psychotraumatology expanded as it encompassed the research and treatment of PTSD and other adverse reactions that can occur after experiencing potentially traumatic events. Within this field, PTSD refers to a psychiatric disorder which may be developed after exposure to a potentially traumatic event, such as a disaster, unexpected death, war, rape, or other kinds of violence.[54]

PTSD was first included in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*) in 1980, and today, the diagnosis is still included in the fifth version, *DSM-5*, which is used for psychiatric diagnosis of patients in both the United States and in Sweden. PTSD is also included in the eleventh edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The main difference between the current versions of these two diagnostic manuals is that as opposed to the *DSM-5*, the ICD-11 includes a separate

A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Astrid Erll et al. (De Gruyter, 2008).

[51] Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Duke University Press, 2002), 108; Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 140; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 75.

[52] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 136.

[53] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 132, 140–141.

[54] Kristina Bondjers, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—Assessment of Current Diagnostic Definitions* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis), 2020, 11.

diagnosis, complex PTSD, in addition to PTSD. The former is defined as fulfilling the criteria for PTSD while also including disturbances in self-organization, which are identified through three symptom criteria: persistent disturbance in affective dysregulation, persistent negative self-concept, and disturbances in relationships.[55]

Within psychotraumatology, prominent areas of research include the formulation of theoretical models of PTSD, research about the psychological processes implicated in PTSD, and research about treatment methods. The most prominent current theories that are used to explain PTSD are the emotional processing theory, dual representation theory, and cognitive theory.

Edna Foa and Michael Kozak's emotional processing theory (1986) suggests that complex fear structures exist in the traumatized individual's memory of the event, and when they are activated, they produce cognitive, behavioral, and physiological reactions. In PTSD, stimuli that are no longer connected to actual danger become associated with danger. Foa and Kozak propose that beliefs about aspects of the trauma become negative in two ways: in viewing the world as a dangerous place, and in viewing the self as incompetent. Furthermore, they argue that traumatic memories are stored in a fragmented manner, which interferes with information processing. To resolve the trauma, integration of new information into pre-existing structures becomes necessary.

Chris Brewin and his colleagues' dual representation theory (1996), as opposed to other prominent theories of PTSD, proposes that memories of traumatic events are processed and accessed in two different ways: verbally accessible memories give rise to, for example, distressing recollections of what happened; whereas situationally accessible memories cannot be accessed deliberately, and instead, when triggered, appear as flashbacks and dreams.

Anke Ehlers and David M. Clark's cognitive model (2000) suggests that negative appraisals of the traumatic events align with the development of PTSD. The victim starts to view the world as a dangerous place and the self as incapable. The changes to the process of remembering caused by these appraisals need to be addressed for the person suffering from PTSD to heal.

Finally, the utmost importance of social factors for the development and maintenance of PTSD is almost universally accepted by researchers as well as practitioners in this field. Jonathan I. Bisson lists some of the possible social factors which may affect the traumatic response: community function and support; family function and support; displacement; disconnection; living conditions; material loss; loss of role; food; finance; disorganized services; employment; and

[55] Bondjers, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—Assessment of Current Diagnostic Definitions*, 13.

leisure activities. Indeed, perceived poor social support is currently considered one of the factors most strongly associated with PTSD.[56]

Generally, contemporary psychotraumatology approaches trauma narratives in a way that is very different from the humanities trauma theory that was so influential in the 1990s. While the latter emphasized what it conceived of as the difficulty, or even impossibility, of fully representing experiences of trauma through narrative, psychotraumatology stresses the therapeutic importance of *reconstructing* the trauma narrative. As seen in the theories about PTSD, traumatic memories are not viewed as necessarily unassimilated, but as filled with threatening meanings that therapy seeks to alter.[57] Current evidence-based treatments include methods that focus on psychoeducation, emotional regulation and coping skills, imaginal exposure, cognitive processing and meaning-making, emotions, and memory processes.[58]

Existing theories of rape trauma from a feminist perspective have mainly emerged within the fields of psychology and psychiatry (with the most noteworthy contributions mentioned in the section about feminist rape studies above), although this perspective has remained relatively unexplored within humanities trauma theory.[59]

Spectralities and representations of death

A final area of research to which this study contributes is spectrality studies, or hauntology, which is dedicated to the investigation of ghosts and the temporal, ethical, and aesthetic mechanisms of haunting in the cultural imagination. Many view the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* in 1993 (and the English translation *Specters of Marx* in 1994) as the starting point of an outpouring

[56] Jonathan I. Bisson, "Psychological and Social Theories of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Psychiatry* 8, no. 8 (2009); Chris R. Brewin et al., "Meta-Analysis of Risk Factors for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Trauma-Exposed Adults," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68, no. 5 (2000); Chris R. Brewin et al., "A Dual Representation Theory of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Psychological Review* 103, no. 4 (1996); Anke Ehlers and David M. Clark, "A Cognitive Model of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 38, no. 4 (2000); Edna B. Foa and Michael J. Kozak, "Emotional Processing of Fear: Exposure to Corrective Information.," *Psychological Bulletin* 99, no. 1 (1986).

[57] Ulrich Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD: What Do They Have in Common?," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 6 (August 2015): 28186.

[58] Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD."

[59] Notable exceptions are Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (University of Virginia Press, 2002), as well as Meera Atkinson, *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), in which Atkinson argues for the politicization of violence against women and children. Instead of viewing it as a series of individual tragedies, she advocates for including this kind of violence into the category of large-scale collective atrocities more often addressed in cultural trauma studies.

of writing on spectrality—a "spectral turn," as Luckhurst put it in 2002—in cultural studies, history, sociology, literature, and other fields.[60] As a part of this spectral turn, several studies which chronicle the cultural history of ghosts have been published, demonstrating the persistent cultural fascination with specters and the dynamics of haunting from Antiquity to the literary modernism of the twentieth century.[61]

Other scholars have established that haunting is a prominent theme in Anglophone literature and culture of the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century.[62] Melanie Anderson's *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2013), and Joanne Chassot's *Ghosts of the African Diaspora* (2018) identify a strong spectral current—often incorporating questions of trauma—in English-language African diaspora literature from the 1980s onward, most famously realized in Toni Morrisson's *Beloved* (1987).

Hauntology or spectrality is also a locus of theoretical and methodological inquiry, in which the ghost is used as a tool to investigate literature and social phenomena. Here, we find Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, in which the specter is conceptualized as a powerful haunting force with ethical potential which should be lived with rather than expelled. In the words of María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, spectrality for Derrida signals "the disjointedness of ontology, history, inheritance, materiality, and ideology [...]."[63]

However, other and, in part, opposing conceptualizations of the specter also took place during this time, as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren point out. For example, Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian*, which was published in 1993, the same year as *Spectres de Marx*, used the ghost's association with invisibility to explore social dynamics that dispossess certain groups of people.[64] It is from this tradition that one of my main theoretical perspectives arises: Esther Peeren's

[60] Roger Luckhurst, "The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the 'Spectral Turn'," *Textual Practice* 16, no. 3 (2002).

[61] Works within this category include: Lisa Morton, *Ghosts: A Haunted History* (Reaktion Books, 2015); Debbie Felton, *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity* (University of Texas Press, 1999); Caroline Callard, *Spectralities in the Renaissance: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (Oxford University Press, 2022); James Uden, *Spectres of Antiquity: Classical Literature and the Gothic, 1740–1830* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny, and Literature* (Palgrave, 2002); Matt Foley's *Haunting Modernisms* (2017).

[62] Luckhurst, "The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the 'Spectral Turn'"; Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Michael Walker, *Modern Ghost Melodramas: What Lies Beneath,* Film Culture in Transition (University Press, 2017).

[63] María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, "Introduction," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 7.

[64] del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, "Introduction," 10.

formulation of spectrality as a metaphor for invisibility and agency, outlined in *The Spectral Metaphor* (2014). I will return to her work in the next chapter.

A final example is Avery Gordon's seminal book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), which proposes a method for sociological research that involves looking for hauntings—identifying and reckoning with the kind of unsettling and painful social relationships currently unmeasurable with sociological research methods—and which thus remain partly outside what is currently considered to be "real" within the field. Through analysis of Luisa Valenzuela's *Como en la guerra* (1977) (*He Who Searches* [1979]), and Morrison's *Beloved*, Gordon demonstrates how fiction can be used productively in disciplines beyond the field of literary studies to identify previously unrecognized social forces that haunt present life.[65]

Research about cultural representations of dying and dead women is not a part of hauntology, per se. However, Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), in which Bronfen investigates the literary and visual representations of dead women in a western cultural tradition, provides useful insight into the opposite side, so to speak, of art about women's death: Bronfen's study points to how representations of women's death and female corpses are so common and familiar that they almost escape the notice of scholars of art and literature.[66] Since the focus of my study is on novels in which characters explicitly ruminate on the status of their corpses after being murdered or committing suicide, research about cultural ideas of the bodies they leave behind becomes relevant to understanding these novels' specific takes on female spectrality.

Highly relevant to this study are also the deceased narrators explored in Alice Bennett's *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (2012) and Brian Norman's *Dead Women Talking* (2012). These studies, although incorporating many kinds of deceased characters besides just ghosts, take on various of the different aspects of the hauntological directions described above, with a specific narratological focus on characters' abilities to tell stories after their demise. Bennett's insights include that the afterlife is a favorable setting for temporal narrative experimentation, and that the ghost's association with psychic phenomena often allows ghost narrators to access knowledge that would be unavailable to a living

[65] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 23–24, 194. In Sweden, Line Henriksen has examined hauntology as an ethical concept in her dissertation *In the Company of Ghosts: Hauntology, Ethics, Digital Monsters* (Linköping University Electronic Press, 2016). Finally, I want to mention Mark Fisher's formulation of hauntology in relation to sonic media in an influential entry on his blog (K-punk) in 2006. Mark Fisher, "Phonograph Blues," *K-Punk*, October 19, 2006.

[66] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*, 1st digital, on-demand ed. (Manchester University Press, 2006), 3.

character.[67] Norman traces the specific position of dead women as narrators in American literature, in which he argues that they speak as agents of social justice, bringing attention to violence, sexuality, class, and racial injustice.[68]

Both Bennett and Norman discuss the protagonist Susie's position in *The Lovely Bones* as an example of posthumous narration. The gendered dynamics of sexual violence in relation to Susie as a ghost narrator has been discussed elsewhere, as well. Among these texts, some which I will present in greater detail in the chapter about *The Lovely Bones*, one is especially relevant for my study as a whole, and will therefore be discussed briefly here.

Lenise Prater's book chapter "Testimony from Beyond the Grave: Comparing Girls' Narratives of Sexual Violence and Death in Gothic Fiction" (2021) investigates the effects of using dead narrators in three stories about sexual violence: Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, Elisabeth Scott's *Living Dead Girl* (2008), and Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2010). She argues that the dead-narrator perspective serves to undermine the emphasis on simplistic survivor empowerment prominent in postfeminist discourses of sexual violence.[69]

However, she notes an important difference between Sebold's novel, in which the issues of rape and murder are clearly separated, and Scott's and Asher's novels, which are found to conflate the hurt of rape with death in a way that Prater finds troubling. While Susie is an actual ghost, the other two narrators' ghostliness is metaphorical. Hannah's narration in *Thirteen Reasons Why* consists of cassette tapes she recorded while she was alive, which are listened to and interpreted by the novel's actual protagonist, the teenage boy Clay—privileging his interpretations over her narrative authority. Hannah suffering rape is also portrayed as one out of many instances of "self-harm" leading up to the protagonist's suicide. In *Living Dead Girl*, the protagonist Kyla lives in captivity and is regularly raped by her abductor. She is alive up until the very end of the novel—but metaphorically refers to herself as dead, and as a "ghost girl"; until, at the very end of the novel, she greets death with the words "I am free."[70] Prater's argument formulates a critique which many other studies about rape narratives also address: the problematic aspects of viewing rape as a fate equal to, or worse than, death. I will discuss this matter in more detail in the next chapter.

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[67] Alice Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 51, 117.

[68] Brian Norman, *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

[69] Lenise Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave: Comparing Girls' Narratives of Sexual Violence and Death in Gothic Fiction," in *Young Adult Gothic Fiction: Monstrous Selves/Monstrous Others*, ed. Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi, Gothic Literary Studies (University of Wales Press, 2021).

[70] Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave," 166–167.

Overview of the study

I have now presented the questions and aims guiding this book, the research fields and frameworks that my study operates within, and the material that will be the focus of the analysis. In Chapter 2, the theoretical perspectives guiding my readings will be discussed, alongside the study's methodology. Here, I outline my views on narrative, of spectrality as a subject position, and the understandings of rape and trauma that inform the study. I also explain how these theoretical perspectives will be applied. Then, the study moves on to the qualitative analysis of the novels, focusing on one novel in each chapter, starting with the earliest text, published in 1990, and moving forward in time to the two latest texts, published in 2018.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the novel *Osalig ande* by Carina Rydberg, a pioneering work of Swedish rape trauma fiction. I show how the novel's use of a spectral protagonist presents unwanted visibility and invisibility as two mutually non-exclusive positions imposed on victims, which together enable continued perpetration of sexual violence. Furthermore, the chapter argues that a recognition of the genre traits that *Osalig ande* shares with American fiction about rape from the same time period enables a reading that recognizes incest and marital rape as two equally important instances of sexual violence.

The chapter continues with an examination of the role of shame in the novel's portrayal of trauma. It argues that shame is portrayed as a fundamentally intersocial emotion, instilled in the protagonist by the perpetrator's and her family's evoking of myths about rape and female insanity—but eventually interpreted by herself as a true indicator of her lack of talent as an artist. However, the protagonist's spectral focalization displays a resistance to shame. Additionally, the novel suggests that turning traumatic experiences into art is a way of communicating preferable to medical discourses—symbolized by the afterlife, which is organized as an oppressive mental hospital. Finally, the chapter contends that *Osalig ande* depicts memories of childhood sexual abuse as continuous and legitimate, whereas forgetting rape trauma is portrayed as a patriarchal policy, imposed on the victim by other people.

Chapter 4 investigates *The Lovely Bones*, American author Alice Sebold's pivotal ghost story about the afterlife of a victim of rape and murder. It argues that the novel positions its narrative close to postfeminist notions of survivor empowerment, as well as the psychological idea of narration as a means of healing from trauma. However, as the chapter demonstrates, the novel fails to realize these aims. Instead, it becomes a poignant depiction of the haunting relationship between the raped and murdered protagonist and a social setting (1970s American suburbia) in which both the narration of rape *and* trauma is impossible. The intertexts available to help the novel's characters make sense of Susie's fate

promote a possessive haunting characterized by denial, stagnation, and a yearning for the past. As a result, I argue, *The Lovely Bones* is a trauma novel which replaces traditional symptoms of trauma with another emotional register: yearning and grief.

Chapter 5 moves on to Swedish author Sara Stridsberg's novel, *The Antarctica of Love*. It demonstrates that the ghost protagonist's ambiguously self-blaming narration of past trauma is marked by romanticizing myths about female death. I show how Stridsberg complicates the depiction of trauma by gradually revealing how the protagonist has been rendered ghostlike even in life through poverty, repeated exposure to many traumatic events, a worsening addiction, and through experiencing a complete lack of agency and social support throughout her life. The novel presents a temporal structure for a story about rape trauma that resembles contemporary notions of complex PTSD: rather than rape being the singular event from which trauma originates, it is revealed that Inni had lost her faith in a natural or divine order long before experiencing sexual violence and murder.

The chapter also argues that Stridsberg conveys Inni's haunting through dissociative flashbacks and photographic out-of-body experiences. In this way, the novel presents a vision of rape trauma in which symptoms associated with the PTSD diagnosis cannot be fully separated from textual and visual media discourses of rape and murder, in which the victim's body is focalized not through her own views but through a distanced and sexualizing gaze. The chapter concludes with a reading of the relationship between the spectral mother and her estranged children as an introduction of a different kind of afterlife, in which Inni's existence is no longer determined by objectifying media discourses, but by a new idea of living on not as an individual, but as *part of* a world in which goodness is possible.

Chapter 6 analyzes TE Carter's young adult novel *I Stop Somewhere*, arguing that it can productively be read as trauma fiction. As the teenage protagonist haunts the site of the rape and murder which rendered her a ghost, she bears witness to other girls being raped by the same perpetrators. The chapter demonstrates how Carter's novel uses spectral focalization to portray the traumatizing aspects of learning new facts about a rape after the event—for example, by learning about the perpetrators' motives. But the protagonist's newly acquired knowledge of a systemic dimension to rape is also developed into a feminist analysis of rape as a misogynist cultural praxis. In the beginning of the novel, seeing other girls suffer in similar ways to her makes Ellie feel disgust and a desire to place distance between them and herself. However, the chapter argues, her feelings change: as disgust and shame shift into guilt, she begins to feel a sense of solidarity with other victims.

Throughout Ellie's narration of previous events from her life, the chapter argues, the novel repeatedly highlights how gendered sexual scripts and mythologies of rape, death, and the mental health of teenage girls shape girls' lack of sexual agency, as well as how the abuse they suffer is interpreted by a surrounding community. Finally, I argue that the novel presents the support group as an alternative context in which trauma healing and feminist consciousness-raising can take place.

The final chapter presents the conclusions that can be drawn and the knowledge gained from the literary analysis conducted in this book.

2. Theoretical perspectives

In this chapter, I establish the theoretical foundations that will guide my readings. First, relevant perspectives on narrative will be outlined. Then, theories about spectrality that play important roles in my readings of ghostly characters will be discussed. Following this, I describe the conceptualizations of trauma on which my study builds, and discuss my definition of trauma fiction as a category of stories through which contemporary understandings of trauma are activated in different ways. Thereafter, I discuss the feminist tradition of thought that influences my understanding of both trauma and rape. Finally, I account for my methodology, and the chapter ends with a reflection on how the theoretical concepts will be applied in the analysis.

Narrative

This study operates under the assumption that cognitive experiences of trauma and sexual violence are affected by the human tendency to remember episodes as re-tellable stories.[71] It also builds on the post-classical view of feminist narratologists, who for several decades now have taken into account the fact that narrative is not ideologically neutral.[72]

The following section outlines relevant narratological concepts as well as theories about genre. First, I will define the narrative components that will be of the most importance in my analyses of the first-person rape trauma narratives in this study: the narrator and focalization. Outlining these distinctions might appear redundant to a literary scholar, but I find that definitions of terms are always useful—especially in a study like mine, which I hope will be read beyond just the discipline of literary studies. I then argue that investigating narratives can yield important insights into sexual violence, memory, and interpersonal communication.

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[71] See: David Herman, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, CSLI Lecture Notes, 158 (Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003).

[72] See, for example: Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 5.

When I use the word "narrator" I rely on Gérard Genette's well-known definition. According to Genette, the narrator is the individual speaking in the text, and this entity exists within a narrating situation. Genette distinguishes between different narrating situations, in which the following aspects can vary: narrative level (intra- or extradiegetic, which means that the narrator can exist within or outside the events described in the story); the time of the narration (the narrator's position in time vis-à-vis the story); and person (hetero- or homodiegetic, meaning that in the first case, the narrator is absent from the story he tells, and in the second case, is present as a character within it).[73]

Genette distinguishes between three types of focalization: zero, internal, and external.[74] Zero focalization, Genette explains, corresponds to "what English-language criticism calls the narrative with omniscient narrator [...] where the narrator knows more than the character."[75] In this case, there are no restrictions regarding what the narrator may present. Internal focalization, on the other hand, is when there are some kinds of conceptual or perceptual restrictions guiding what the narrator may present and "the narrator says only what a given character knows." Finally, in external focalization, what is presented is limited to characters' external behavior and appearance: "the narrator says less than the character knows."[76] Taking focalization into consideration is especially important when analyzing stories with a ghost narrator, where focalization is often a combination of zero, internal, and external.

A question for this study concerns whether neutral focalization exists in stories about rape and trauma. In my readings, I will try Mieke Bal's suggestion that the nature of focalization is always subjective: "whenever events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain 'vision.' [...] This slanted, or why not say the word, subjective nature of storytelling is inevitable, and denying it constitutes in my mind a dubious political act."[77] Bal notes that perception is a psychosomatic process which is strongly dependent on the position of the subject, and because perception is influenced by so many different factors, it is pointless to strive for objectivity.

The consequence of this for storytelling is that elements of the fabula are always, by necessity, presented in a certain way. When this study uses the term "focalization," it is in Bal's sense: it refers to "the relations between the elements

[73] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 216, 245, 248.

[74] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 189.

[75] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 188–189.

[76] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 189.

[77] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 145.

presented and the vision through which they are presented."[78] Thus, focalization contains two parts: the subject of focalization (the focalizer), and the object of focalization. When the focalization in a story coincides with a character, "that character will have an advantage over the other characters. The reader watches with the character's eyes and will, in principle, be inclined to accept the vision presented by the character."[79] It is important to notice which focalizer focalizes which object, because the view we as readers receive of an object largely depends on the focalizer. And "[c]onversely, the image a focalizer presents of an object says something about the focalizer itself."[80]

This study follows David Herman's suggestion that the investigation of narrative provides an intersection between cognitive science and literary theory, because stories are not only found in books but organize people's thinking in many fundamental ways.[81] Memories, when put into words, take the shape of narrative. The person remembering will, by necessity, shape the narrative in a certain way, as her current perspective will affect her vision of past events—as will her potential attempts to connect to a listener; for example, a therapist.[82]

Stories also have a social function of facilitating communication.[83] They enable people to, in Herman's words, "communicate about past, imagined, or otherwise nonproximate situations and events."[84] Furthermore, narratives can be used to "build an account of who was responsible for what during a criminal trial or a family argument."[85] In the criminal justice system, the victim's narration of her experience of sexual violence becomes a crucial and mandatory part of the legal process. The act of narrating rape trauma is also expected of victims in another formal setting: therapy. Telling a therapist about a traumatic rape is usually considered an important part of the healing process.[86]

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[78] Bal, *Narratology*, 145.

[79] Bal, *Narratology*, 149–150.

[80] Bal, *Narratology*, 153.

[81] See, for example: David Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* (MIT Press, 2013); David Herman, *The Emergence of Mind Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English*, Frontiers of Narrative (University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

[82] Bal, *Narratology*, 150.

[83] See: Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*, 230; Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 4.

[84] Herman, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, 3.

[85] Herman, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, 3–4; Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor, "Family Narrative as Political Activity," *Discourse & Society* 3, no. 3 (1992): 301–40; Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

[86] The belief in "the talking cure" has been present in psychotherapy from the very beginning: the term, originally coined by Josef Breuer's patient Bertha Pappenheim, known in case studies as "Anna O," was used by Freud to describe the therapeutic model of psychoanalysis. Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (Dent, 1988), 64.

Narrative conventions and cultural stock plots play a crucial role for how people imagine the phenomena of rape, trauma, healing, and justice. To begin with, people's understandings of their role in a sexual encounter are already contingent on the narrative conventions through which they choose to view it. For example, a rapist can construct a narrative about himself that he can live with by drawing on the common misogynist trope that a specific type of woman wants to have sex, even though she says no.[87] Testimonies from rape victims, on the other hand, may present alternative narratives that challenge practices of victim-blaming.

Narratology can be used to lay bare the different meanings that the word "rape" can take, on depending on the identity of the focalizer. As Bal asks, "[i]s it the rapist, who would be likely to refer to his action differently, or the raped one, the victim who experiences the action? Or is it the narrator, and if so, does this agent identify with either one of these two positions?"[88] Like Bal, I view rape as a word which in itself functions as a narrative, as it implies an event. The word rape (or any euphemism for it) "implies a story with several agents, a variability of interpretation, and a difference of experience. What is sex, or theft, or lawful appropriation for the one may still be a violation of subjective integrity for another—whether culturally accepted or not; but who, then, is the culture?"[89] Narratological analysis is necessary when examining discourses of rape, as it helps the reader determine whose perspective is being favored in the text at hand.

Accordingly, the results of this study will be relevant not only because they can help us better understand how trauma *fiction* works, but also because they might have implications for how we may understand contemporary tendencies in the construction of rape trauma narratives more broadly, across social, political, and media discourses.

Genre

On an overarching level, I follow a combined literary and a socio-rhetorical view of genre, in which genres are seen as consisting of texts that resemble each other in form and content, and simultaneously as communicative tools meant to achieve specific goals.[90] Within this framework, fiction can be viewed as a genre

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[87] Joanna Bourke, *Rape: Sex, Violence, History* (Counterpoint, 2007), 10, 14.

[88] Bal, *Narratology*, 159.

[89] Bal, *Narratology*, 160.

[90] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Clarendon Press, 1982), 20–24, 54–74; Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)," *Letras & Letras* 31, no. 3 (2015):56–57. Regarding literary genres, Alistair Fowler's influential definition posits that a literary text belongs to a genre only in relation to other texts which it resembles in content and form. Genres change over time, and often texts will adopt

which exists alongside others; for example, criminal judgements from trials or newspaper articles.[91] Due to differing genre conventions of structure, style, voice, and thematic content, these genres each allow for different ways of telling stories about sexual violence. This study follows the view of John Frow and Derrida that all texts are shaped by their relation to one or more genres but may also modify them. In Frow's words, texts "do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them." But while texts often break the rules of the genres to which they relate, a text is still never genreless, never unframed.[92]

Frow argues that genres actively generate and shape people's knowledge of the world: "far from being merely 'stylistic' devices, genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk."[93] If we think about genres as containing the set of common "scripts" and plotlines discussed elsewhere, we can imagine how, for example, people's beliefs about rape may be affected by the different generic conventions of narrating rape, sex, and violence.

Looking with the specter

Trauma has often been conceptualized as a manifestation of past events "haunting" the present.[94] However, in this study I focus on ghost characters who, in addition to being haunted by memories, also haunt other people. Spectrality, in my study, is therefore used to describe a specific subject position of narrating

elements from other genres. For Fowler, genre is not just an instrument of classification, but a literary code that affects how a text is interpreted by readers. Regarding genres as communicative tools, I follow Carolyn Miller, who views genre as a "typified rhetorical response to a recurrent rhetorical situation," and as a social action that creates meaning. However, I do not view the rhetorical purpose of a text to be the only marker of genre: for me, form and content are equally important genre markers.

[91] John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed., The New Critical Idiom (Routledge, 2015), 1. My use of the term genre is broader than how the word is sometimes used in literary studies to describe book market categories. When I refer to the traditional book market genres (crime, romance, et cetera) I use the term "popular fiction," while I use the term "literary fiction" for the genre which falls outside of popular genre categories. See: Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (Routledge, 2004), 1.

[92] Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (Routledge, 1992), 224–225; Frow, *Genre*, 1–2, 30.

[93] Frow, *Genre*, 2.

[94] See, for example: Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4, 6, 20; Ruth Lipman, "Haunted by History: Revisiting Childhood Trauma in Philippe Grimbert's 'Un Secret'," *The French Review* 89, no. 4 (2016): 122–35; Peter Ricketts, "Hemsökt av historien," *Axess*, September 3, 2019; Gabriele Rippl et al., eds., *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma* (University of Toronto Press, 2018); Elliott Young, "Haunted by Trauma," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (2019): 963–66.

and focalizing, rather than an all-encompassing, universal principle.[95] However, spectrality as a narrating and focalizing position can be understood as a response to a broader cultural preoccupation with the figure of the specter.

In European and North American fiction, ghosts have long been associated with strong affects such as fear and obsession. The literary tendency to use ghosts to generate fear in fiction culminated in the Gothic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but this tradition continues in today's popular culture.[96] Often, ghosts are depicted as the lingering souls of people who have died in violent ways, or the demanding presence of dead people who have unfinished business on Earth and cannot move on to the other side before receiving closure or revenge. Often, they serve as reminders of past wrongs and breaches in ethics, which should be righted. The nature of fictional ghosts varies—they can be malicious, demanding, or loving—but they almost always dwell in proximity to the living.[97]

Ghosts are used in contemporary fiction within a multitude of genres. For example, within the crime genre, ghosts most famously appeared in the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991); and in Swedish and American crime fiction, ghosts have been included several times, often to incorporate elements of the unknown into a genre whose structure revolves around the resolution of mystery.[98] Within the rich and diverse tradition of contemporary ghost stories, another tendency has been to use the ghost figure as a means of recounting stories about women's experiences of pain, fear, and oppression.

Ghosts and gendered trauma in fiction

In Anglophone literature since the early 1980s, an upsurge of fiction that portrays women's experiences through the mode of the ghost story or in the Gothic style is discernible. Arguably, the most groundbreaking work that placed

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[95] In this, my view of the ghost diverges from the influential Derridaean concept of "hauntology," which, as Peeren points out, suggests that all meaning and being is essentially conditioned on the past haunting the present. Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 11. Contemporary fiction is also filled with ghosts in the more literal sense, and these are the ghosts which this study is interested in.

[96] Morton, *Ghosts*; del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader*, 2; Walker, *Modern Ghost Melodramas*; Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*.

[97] Morton, *Ghosts*, 11.

[98] Examples of Swedish crime novels that include ghosts are Mons Kallentoft's *Höstoffer* (2009), and *Den femte årstiden* (2011), and Carl-Johan Vallgren's *Din tid kommer* (2024). In 2024, Swedish journalist Johan Hilton argued that the choice to include ghosts and paranormal elements in the television crime genre has become far too common and is a cheap gimmick. He mentions the American television series *The X-files* (1993–2002), *True Detective: Night Country* (2024), the British television drama *River* (2015), and the Austrian–German Netflix series *Freud* (2020). Johan Hilton, "Spöken i deckare borde förbjudas enligt lag," *Göteborgs-Posten*, January 21, 2024.

questions of gendered *trauma*—as a part of the trauma of American slavery's racist dehumanization of and violence toward Black people—at the center of its ghost story was Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). Based on the fate of Margaret Garner, a woman who escaped enslavement in the nineteenth century United States, the novel depicts the horrors of abuse, reluctantly remembered by a formerly enslaved family whose house becomes haunted by a ghost.[99] Already at its time of publication, *The New York Times* wrote that it possessed "the heightened power and resonance of myth."[100] Indeed, the novel quickly became canonized, and *Beloved* has since come to be regarded as a foundational text in trauma studies and has been the subject of extensive specialist and non-specialist interest.[101]

Beloved helped establish a number of tropes and conventions in subsequent literary fiction about trauma. Three of its stylistic features became especially common: its disarticulation of linear narrative, its embodiment of traumatic history in the ghost, and its focus on the way in which trauma shapes not only the generation directly affected by atrocities but lives on for several generations through silences and dysfunctional family dynamics. *Beloved* also explores the complex role of community in acknowledging and dealing with past trauma.[102] Indeed, the novels I investigate in this study hold echoes of Morrison's literary technique of utilizing the ghost story as a means of depicting the belated return of memories of traumatic events taking the shape of a ghost's relentless haunting.

Gina Wisker also notes that the novel *The Woman in Black* (1983) by Susan Hill resulted in a revival of the Gothic British ghost story, centering "horrible secrets of the past and their deadly legacy in the present."[103] Other Anglophone writers who were revitalizing the Gothic from a perspective centering women during this time were Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Fay Weldon, Emma Tennant, Michele Roberts, Sara Maitland, and Joyce Carol Oates. Wisker notes that they all fleshed out the genre "with the nuances of a gendered perspective, revealing from women's and feminist perspectives the oppressive

[99] The intersection between Gothic elements and the theme of trauma in *Beloved* are highlighted by Gina Wisker, who writes that "Morrison's *Beloved* does what every good Gothic contemporary tale should, it makes palpably real the everyday lives of people, the shocking, hidden histories which we have all repressed and which must be faced in order to be able to cope, return to wholeness and move on." Gina Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 95.

[100] Michiko Kakutani, "Books of The Times: Beloved. By Toni Morrison," *New York Times*, September 2, 1987.

[101] See, for example: Anderson, *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*; Karyn Ball, "Trauma and Memory Studies," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2021); Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*; Norman, *Dead Women Talking*; Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*.

[102] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 90–91.

[103] Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*, 207.

representations of women's lives in popular narratives, as well as their perpetuation in traditional, established Gothic texts." They were, she states, "breaking silences," and revealing some of the "everyday horrors of families, domestic situations, romance and relationships."[104]

The spectral subject position

The ghost's inherently social tendency to haunt the living is central to its lore. As I will discuss later in this chapter, in psychoanalytic trauma theory, the role of the listener has often been emphasized as an ethically necessary position of trauma witnessing.[105] This notion resembles the ethical dimension of haunting, as emphasized by those who write about spectrality in the tradition of Derrida. One of those scholars, Stephen Ross, states that a core ethical function of the specter is to remind us of our responsibility to acknowledge "the infinite others, past, present, and future, whose displacement is the condition of possibility for our own existence."[106] To many who theorize haunting, the agency of the dead does not disappear completely as long as they are remembered by "us," the people who are still alive.

The specter has often been imagined as a figure that demands both ethical consideration and political action from the living.[107] In Matt Foley's and Roger Luckhurst's readings of Derrida's *Specters*, the ghost is conceived of as an agent of future justice. When "we," the subjects of the present, find ourselves at an ethical impasse, the specter arrives as a representative of absolute alterity, and we must listen to its imperative. The radical untimeliness or anachrony produced by the appearance of a ghost—a person from the past who refuses to leave us alone—thus destabilizes the subject of the present; the ghost reorients our perception of what needs to be done.[108]

In my study I follow Esther Peeren, who suggests that spectral subject positions may in fact exist in the present and not just belong to people from the past. She explores how the figure of the ghost is used metaphorically in fiction and coins the term "living ghosts" for the subjects studied.[109] While agreeing with

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[104] Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*, 207.

[105] See: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992); Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

[106] Stephen Ross, "Introduction," in *Spectrality in Modernist Fiction*, ed. Stephen Ross (Oxford University Press, 2023), 5.

[107] Ross, "Introduction," 4.

[108] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (Routledge, 1994), 27, 51; Matt Foley, *Haunting Modernisms: Ghostly Aesthetics, Mourning, and Spectral Resistance Fantasies in Literary Modernism*, (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 15; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 95.

[109] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 5.

scholars who emphasize the capability of specters to resurrect forgotten, ignored, or suppressed parts of history, Peeren also seeks to draw attention to the people and phenomena that are being overlooked in the present. Peeren identifies a category of living ghosts: "the people who, already in their lifetime, resemble dispossessed ghosts in that they are ignored and considered expendable, or, sometimes at the same time, become objects of intense fear and violent attempts at extermination."[110]

Defining ghosts in this way allows Peeren to question the dichotomy she finds in Derrida's *Specters*, where the living (the "we" of Derrida's text) are always the ones haunted by the deceased, ghostly Other. Peeren instead suggests the possibility "that one may be the ghost one moment and ghosted or haunted the next—or both at the same time."[111] This suggestion evokes a crucial basic insight of critical theory; namely that our positions in the world are relational and flexible and depend on social and material structures of power. I find this insight to be a helpful tool for analyzing the spectral protagonists of this study. The ghosts, although haunting the living, are still made into the subjects, the "I" of the stories. By allowing ghosts to function as focalizers, the novels break with the assumption criticized by Peeren; that "we" cannot be specters in somebody else's eyes.[112] Through analyses of literary, filmic, and televisual portrayals of living ghosts, by which she means characters whose invisibility in society is depicted through spectral metaphors, Peeren suggests a re-focalization that "looks *with* rather than *at* the specter and recognizes that this specter is always also a self as I am always also an other."[113] I will use Peeren's insights to examine the narrative function of stories about rape trauma told specifically through the spectral victim's point of view.

Peeren's ideas resonate with the underlying ethical mission of the rape trauma novels in this study, preoccupied as they are with de-objectifying murdered girls and women. Inspired by her suggestion that an ethical way of existing

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[110] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 13–14. See also Jeffrey Weinstock's claim that "without ghosts to point to things that have been lost and overlooked, things may disappear forever." (Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (Popular Press, 2004), 6.

[111] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 27.

[112] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 26.

[113] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 29 (emphasis in text). Peeren argues that by choosing the ghost—a fictional figure—as a metaphor, a writer can avoid the fetishization which occurs when a real group of people are used as a metaphor for marginalized subjects. Peeren takes as an example Giorgio Agamben's use of "the refugee" as metaphor: the metaphorical use does not account for the real and diverse group of refugees who actually exist. Peeren explains that by "choosing, in the ghost, a figure generally considered not 'real'," she seeks to "avoid appropriating, abstracting or universalizing the experience of actual people." She also notes that the ghost is not easily reduced to a single type or stereotype, as there are many kinds of ghosts. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, with Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Theory out of Bounds, 20 (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 71, 73.

together with specters entails an attempt to acknowledge their own vision, as well as a willingness to look at the world—and oneself!—through the ghost's eyes, I will analyze the novels' spectral focalizers as feminist literary subjects whose points of view the reader are invited to temporarily adopt and relate to, despite the life–death divide.[114]

Questions of power and agency are central to feminist thinking and they become especially important in discussions about rape, an event which for the victim often entails a more or less complete loss of power.[115] In this study, power is conceived of in accordance with Max Weber's definition: "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons [which] can emerge in the most diverse forms."[116] For analyzing how agency is portrayed, this study will be inspired by Peeren's discussion on the subject:

> [Agency can be understood as] the ability to act on one's own initiative and to have this acting taken seriously by others as something meaningful which merits a response, whether affirmative or not. As such, agency potentially enables one to renegotiate one's social position and identity, with the latter seen as non-foundational, multiple and inherently intersubjective. Following Butler, agency is not taken as entailing autonomy, since all behavior, including the ability to act and speak as a subject, is at once made possible and restricted by social norms and power relations [...].[117]

Peeren stresses the importance of agency as a necessary concept to haunting, and investigates what this "spectral agency" can actually mean:

> Haunting, like agency, is not a property one simply has, but a conditional capability whose strength and (im)possibility are determined, to a large extent, by contextual factors, both preceding and shaping the situation in question (power structures, established discourses and so on) and arising from it [...].[118]

As Peeren defines it, you can only have agency if you are acknowledged, and in order for a ghost to achieve agency through haunting, it also has to be acknowledged. However, this possibility for agency is ambivalent, as literary ghosts are not always noticed by the living. In fact, a defining feature of ghosts is their

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[114] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 27.

[115] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34

[116] Max Rheinstein, ed., *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), 323.

[117] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 15; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997), 139.

[118] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 182.

ambiguity and their existence between seemingly opposite states: "visibility and invisibility, life and death, materiality and immateriality."[119]

There are many contextually dependent ways in which people become metaphorical specters. Peeren investigates several, one of which is especially relevant to those of the novels analyzed in my study that depict murder and lost corpses: discourses about missing people which render them spectral in the sense that their status as living or dead is uncertain, and they are perceived to exist in a borderland between life and death.[120] One of the ways in which the missing person is deprived of agency, Peeren notes, is through the fact that they "can no longer speak for themselves but have to be spoken for and imagined by others."[121] Another is the assumption that they have not gone missing by choice. Their vanishing is something that "happens or is done to them"—and this passivity is "prescriptive as well as descriptive":

> In order to garner the attention and sympathy that allows them to live on, as missing, in the public sphere, the disappeared have to be seen to comply with a culturally imposed 'innocence rule', requiring them to appear as 'ideal citizens' who did 'nothing that might place them at risk for harm' [...]. Having been *taken away, through no fault of one's own, by an unknown person or persons to an unchosen, unidentified location* is a precondition for being considered genuinely missing. Those who have 'merely' run away are excluded from this particular category because they threaten to dilute its gravity and complicate its affective schema. The truly missing need to be lost not only to those left behind, but also to themselves.[122]

Peeren notes that the category of living ghosts which missing people make up is gendered—and how they haunt is dependent on culturally and historically specific gender norms. Within this group, white, middle-class women most often meet the "innocence rule." Following Rebecca Wanzo, Peeren argues that for a person's disappearance to reach the status of a public event, "the missing should be actively sought and *missed*, a demand most readily fulfilled by middle-class women and girls able to represent 'the ideal citizen that the nation's policies are designed to protect'."[123] Consequently,

> not all the missing exude an equal (or any) haunting force. The dominant conjuration of Wanzo's racialized and class-specific 'Lost (White) Girl Event' or 9/11 [leads to] the neglect of those who happen to be black, lower-class, male, elderly or considered in breach of the innocence rule. Such missing persons are more

[119] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 24.

[120] This does not apply to *Osalig ande*, in which the victim's body is not lost.

[121] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145.

[122] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145 (emphasis in text); Rebecca Wanzo, "The Era of Lost (White) Girls: On Body and Event," *Differences* 19, no. 2 (2008): 113.

[123] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145; Wanzo, "The Era of Lost (White) Girls," 100.

> quickly forgotten or never searched for in the first place, pre-empting their *living on* as ghosts. [I would suggest] that most missing persons [...] are incapable of engineering their own recognition; they, or, rather, the void left by their unexplained removal, can be conjured only by others, on their terms, which must, moreover, make sense in the wider social realm.[124]

Established discourses about lost white girls and women shape the haunting situation of the protagonists in my novels, who are all white or partly viewed as white by others, and range from young adolescents to adults, from working class to upper middle class. As two of the protagonists investigated in my study are adolescents, Peeren's suggestion that missing children as a class may prominently and persistently haunt societies is also relevant. The ways in which these specters haunt are affected by what Margarida Morgado calls child disappearance as a "hegemonic social and cultural construction of the late twentieth century and a dominant structure of feeling," causing "things [to be] wrenched out of joint suddenly and unpredictably."[125]

Defining trauma

Trauma is a complex term, which is used in many different ways in the sources referred to in this book. When I use the word "trauma," I follow the psychotraumatological praxis of defining it as the debilitating *consequence* of a shocking and painful event, rather than refer to the event itself as a trauma. However, the fiction investigated is selected based on its inclusion of events that are commonly understood to be potentially traumatic.

Two very different approaches can be discerned in psychotraumatological and literary research when it comes to defining trauma as a phenomenon. Some theories build on an essentialist definition, which is the case in psychiatric diagnosis which defines trauma as a disorder, in the organicist paradigm which seeks the material traces of trauma in the human brain, and in psychoanalysis (including psychoanalytically influenced literary trauma theory), which views trauma as a psychic given inscribed in the unconscious.[126] Others refuse an essentialist definition and instead call for a plurality of perspectives on trauma. Despite my choice to define the word trauma as the debilitating consequence of a shocking and painful event, my study still joins the latter category. Inspired by literary

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[124] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 146 (emphasis in text).

[125] Margarida Morgado, "A Loss beyond Imagining: Child Disappearance in Fiction," *Yearbook of English Studies*, Modern Humanities Research Association, January 1, 2002.

[126] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 7.

scholar Michelle Balaev, I view trauma as a pluralistic phenomenon which is historically, socially, and politically situated, rather than as a universal concept.[127]

In recent years, several scholars have argued that for people who live in continuously traumatizing environments and life situations, traumatic events are not only singular and past, but also potentially still ongoing in the present.[128] Thus, models of healing from trauma cannot be limited only to therapy—fundamental aspects of victims' life situations may also have to change. One of the assumptions guiding my readings is that sometimes these changes are not possible without larger, structural changes to society itself.

The trauma knot as interdisciplinary approach

How trauma should be defined has been subject to much debate in psychotraumatology, as well as in the field of cultural trauma studies.[129] Moreover, as Fassin and Rechtman note, the concept of trauma is no longer "confided to the psychiatric vocabulary; it is embedded in everyday usage."[130]

To not get stuck on one essentializing trauma definition and risk becoming blind to the fictional depictions of trauma which do not match this particular vision, this study conceives of trauma as a "knot." Bruno Latour coined the term as a means of rethinking the history of science as inevitably connected to society, politics, and culture.[131] Envisioning a concept as a knot brings into view the many heterogeneous elements it binds together and is therefore especially suitable for interdisciplinary projects.

As Luckhurst suggests, due to its far-reaching conceptual transformations, it is particularly useful to think of the concept of trauma as a knot. To unravel it, we need to investigate its complex elements, its origin in multiple disciplines, its bridging of the mental and physical, the individual, and collective.[132] I thus do not want to define trauma in any strict way—rather, when investigating

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[127] Balaev notes that there are a plethora of ways of understanding trauma. It is, for example, important to recognize that trauma is historically situated and that studies which place trauma in its historical, cultural and political contexts are necessary for understanding it. Michelle Balaev [Satterlee], ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 8.

[128] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 74; Gillian Eagle and Debra Kaminer, "Continuous Traumatic Stress: Expanding the Lexicon of Traumatic Stress," *Peace and Conflict* 19, no. 2 (2013): 85–99.

[129] See: Bond and Craps, *Trauma*; Constance J. Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," in *APA Handbook of Trauma Psychology: Foundations in Knowledge, Vol. 1*, APA Handbooks in Psychology (American Psychological Association, 2017).

[130] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 6.

[131] Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 108; Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 201; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 14.

[132] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 14.

trauma as a fictional topic, I view it as a conceptual knot in which a plethora of different perspectives may become activated to varying extents within different cultural representations.

The study of literature can serve as one way of exploring a broader set of contemporary understandings of trauma, beyond singular definitions like the PTSD diagnosis. Fictional portrayals of trauma contain a multitude of meanings: they are diverse and include both pathological and non-pathological responses to trauma. Thus, I see an advantage to Balaev's call for utilizing a pluralistic model of trauma.[133] Balaev's critique of influential writing about trauma from the field of literary studies is that it risks generalizing trauma and homogenizing the specific experience of a group or individual in the past, resulting in an indeterminate meaning of experience.[134] Instead, Balaev suggests, the parameters of literary trauma theory can be broadened if we suppose that extreme experiences cultivate multiple responses and values. "Trauma," Balaev writes, "causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time."[135]

My study acknowledges developments in trauma research both within the humanities and in psychotraumatology, and takes on the challenge to identify relevant points of convergence, but also conflict, between literary, psychological, and psychiatric conceptions of trauma. Particularly, I think that perspectives from psychotraumatology can be employed to update understandings of trauma within the humanities. At the same time, the kinds of textual analysis available within literary studies—in the case of this study, the contextualizing readings of novels—can be used to enrich, challenge, and offer new perspectives on psychotraumatological understandings.

Emerging concepts of trauma: psychotraumatology and literary trauma theory

The novels that are the focus of this study were published in the three decades following three important advancements in trauma research: first, the introduction of the PTSD diagnosis into the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*) in 1980; second, the publication of Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992); and third, the plentiful writing about trauma which took place in literary studies in the 1990s.

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[133] Balaev [Satterlee], ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, 3.

[134] Balaev [Satterlee], ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, 7.

[135] Balaev [Satterlee], ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, 4.

In the following, I will give an account of these three perspectives, followed by a summary of recent psychotraumatological findings on the workings of social support in relation to trauma. These four perspectives on trauma will form the main threads of the trauma knot traced in my analysis of the material. Finally, I give a brief account of how literary research has theorized the relationship between trauma and literary form, and argue that taking trauma fiction as an object of study allows me to examine these different threads as they appear in fictional narratives.

The PTSD diagnosis in the *DSM*

The diagnostic manuals used in psychiatry provide normative definitions of disorders, and knowledge of these definitions is helpful when thinking about how these disorders are conceptualized in society at large. As a diagnostic manual, the *DSM* functions as an official and standardized gatekeeper which decides whether psychological phenomena are symptoms indicative of illness, or if they are just "normal" parts of being a healthy human.

The *DSM* is American, but it is used as a diagnostic resource in many parts of the world, including in Nordic countries. In addition to being used by psychiatrists and social workers, its definitions have had a great impact on society at large, thus making it an important contemporary cultural text.[136] I choose to trace the *DSM* diagnosis over the diagnosis of PTSD from the ICD, partly because of the immense global influence of the *DSM*, partly because the PTSD diagnosis in the *DSM* predates the ICD diagnosis by a decade, and finally, because I believe that it has a more direct impact on people who suffer from PTSD, as it is used clinically to diagnose patients. In the following, I will account for the *DSM*'s current diagnostic criteria for PTSD, followed by a discussion of the significant and unusual way in which this diagnosis was debated and developed since its first introduction in 1980.

The diagnostic criteria of PTSD as listed in the current version, *DSM-5*, are the following: the person has experienced or been extremely and repeatedly exposed to details of a potentially traumatic event, such as threatened or actual death, serious injury, or sexual violence. The person experiences intrusive symptoms afterwards, such as recurrent, involuntary, and distressing memories, nightmares, or flashbacks. They engage in persistent avoidance of stimuli that may remind them of the traumatic event; experience a negative change in thinking patterns and mood after the event; and exhibit marked changes in reactivity and affect, such as irritability and difficulty sleeping. These symptoms must last

[136] See: Ethan Watters, *Crazy like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*, 1st hardcover ed. (Free Press, 2010).

for more than one month and cause significant distress or difficulty in the person's life.

Especially significant for my study are the listed alterations in cognition and mood: inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s); persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world; persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others; a persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame); markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities; feelings of detachment or estrangement from others; and persistent inability to experience positive emotions.[137]

The evolution of the PTSD diagnosis since 1980 reflects a fundamental change in how psychiatry at the time viewed people suffering from trauma—also affecting how people suffering from trauma perceived themselves. The introduction of PTSD in the *DSM–III* in 1980 marks not only the starting point for a vast amount of subsequent research on PTSD, but also of an era in which trauma has become an increasingly familiar concept for people everywhere.

What sets the trauma diagnosis apart from most other mental disorders is the explicit link required between the experienced symptoms and a distinct event, or series of events, as the cause of the disorder. When PTSD was first introduced in the *DSM–III*, this caused a controversy around Criterion A, the event criterion. It stated that the symptoms of PTSD were only a part of the disorder if they were preceded or exacerbated by a traumatic event, defined as a stressor that would "evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost anyone." One major consequence of this definition was that the event—the external stressor—was assumed to be of considerably greater significance for the development of trauma than was thought before.[138]

Hence, instead of placing the blame on the individual's psyche, the diagnosis of PTSD moved the focus onto a specific event as the etiology of the pathology. Before the PTSD diagnosis, psychiatry operated under the assumption that people suffering from trauma did so because they were inherently more psychologically vulnerable than the average person. Today, the reason for traumatic mental distress is instead placed in the outside world.[139] To offer an example relevant to this study: people who are diagnosed with PTSD after experiencing rape are now conceived of as suffering because of the actions of another person, the perpetrator. *The perpetrator's actions*, not the victim's inherent

[137] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 271–72.

[138] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 18.

[139] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 18.

vulnerability, have made the victim ill. This recognition shifts the blame from victim to perpetrator, which is a relevant shift, especially considering that self-blame prominently features among victims of sexual violence, and is associated with PTSD and depression on an individual level.[140]

The way in which the PTSD diagnosis requires an event as the cause of the disorder is highly unusual in diagnostics, as the *DSM-III* was consciously designed to be descriptive. Indeed, the diagnostic criteria for PTSD have been subject to extensive discussion and the trauma definition has been altered in each edition of the *DSM*; but importantly, the traumatic event as a foundational criterion remains in the current edition, *DSM-5*. An important addition in the current edition is that it explicitly refers in plural to "event(s)" as precipitators of PTSD, acknowledging that the index event may, in the words of Dalenberg and colleagues, "be the tipping point for a series of cumulative or related traumas."[141] However, although the *DSM-5* has come to recognize that a person suffering from PTSD may have been subject to more than one traumatic event, the idea of trauma originating in one singular catastrophic event persists in the cultural imagination.

The association between the term "trauma" and the PTSD diagnosis has become very strong within the field of contemporary psychotraumatology, and today, when people use the word trauma in casual conversation, they are usually, to some degree, inspired by the definition of PTSD developed by the *DSM* and other diagnostic manuals. However, the fictional material in this study will depict responses to rape that do not always strictly comply with the diagnostic criteria. The reason for this is that the general concept of trauma, as understood by people today within a variety of disciplines and social contexts, is much broader than just the diagnosis.[142]

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992)

What genealogies of trauma sometimes fail to mention is the influence of feminist thinking on both psychotraumatological and popular understandings of the concept of trauma.[143] Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* was among the first psychotraumatological works to consider rape and gendered violence as potentially traumatic events—the mainstream of psychiatry did not recognize rape and gender-based violence as events which can cause PTSD until feminists raised the

[140] Campbell et al., "An Ecological Model of the Impact of Sexual Assault On Women's Mental Health," 230.

[141] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 22.

[142] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 15, 22.

[143] Brown, "Contributions of Feminist and Critical Psychologies to Trauma Psychology."

subject in the 1970s and 1980s.[144] During a time in which a biological paradigm was predominant in psychotraumatology, Herman's book turned the research community's attention to the impact of social factors and power on both the kinds of potentially traumatic events that people suffer, and people's experiences of trauma in their aftermath. It reframed trauma as a concern for feminists, and feminist insights about sexual violence as a concern for psychotraumatology, no longer possible to overlook. It remains a seminal work within the field.

Right before the publication of *Trauma and Recovery*, in the late 1980s, trauma and PTSD were still mainly associated with Vietnam war veterans. Herman showed the research community how the concept could shed light on another kind of atrocity—one that was not mainly suffered by men, but by women, thereby popularizing the idea that rape could cause psychic trauma in the same way as other catastrophic events such as war, which up until then had been psychiatry's most commonly imagined example of a potentially traumatic event. This insight is underpinned by Herman's historicist approach to trauma, which is dominant in the beginning of the book, where she argues that historical notions of gender have affected how the concept of trauma emerged in psychology and psychiatry. Beginning with Jean-Martin Charcot's work on hysteria in the late nineteenth century and continuing with Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis, psychology's tendency to ignore women's experiences of oppression has left the field with an incomplete understanding of what constitutes trauma.[145]

Laura Brown describes feminist psychology in general as a model "informed by feminist political philosophy and thought, observing human experience through an analysis of how power and powerlessness are distributed and experienced in various cultural and social contexts."[146] This project of analyzing how power and powerlessness are distributed becomes highly relevant to the study of instances of sexual violence and their aftermath—and is reflected in Herman's insistence that a completely central aspect of trauma is the experience of losing control and being powerless. This view encompasses the feminist perspective that women's disproportionate suffering due to sexual violence is not natural, but, as the feminist Susan Brownmiller stated, a result of the conscious process of intimidation by which men keep women in a state of fear.[147]

[144] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 39.

[145] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2.

[146] Brown, "Contributions of Feminist and Critical Psychologies to Trauma Psychology," 503.

[147] Elizabeth A. Armstrong et al., "Silence, Power, and Inequality: An Intersectional Approach to Sexual Violence," *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (2018): 99–122, 101; Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Fawcett Books, 1993), 15.

Inspired by Herman, this study investigates whether trauma can be understood as a phenomenon which arises due to events that rob the subject of her sense of power over her own body, and of her sense of connection to other people. Herman's definition, which has greatly influenced how PTSD is conceptualized in the entire field of psychiatry today, is as follows: an event becomes traumatic when it overwhelms the systems of care that normally provide people with "a sense of control, connection, and meaning." When trying to make sense of a traumatic event, ordinary human adaptations to life turn out to be insufficient.[148] The loss of power experienced when neither resistance nor escape is possible leads to an exaggerated danger response, which prevails long after the actual danger is over.

The fact that humans are social beings who benefit from social contacts is an uncontroversial statement within psychology. But in contrast to much of literary trauma theory and many of the diagnostic tools used today, Herman's theory of trauma actually defines social relationships and interactions as fundamental aspects of traumatic experience. According to Herman's trauma theory, traumatic events disrupt the established connections between individual and community:

> They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.[149]

In the moment of the traumatic event, autonomy and bodily integrity are lost, Herman states. The individual's point of view does not matter. This calls into question one of the foundations of personality development; namely that one can be an autonomous self in relation to others. When something terrible happens to a person, they can also feel abandoned—why did nobody come to their rescue? The alienation created by the loss of trust can make traumatized individuals feel that they have lost their place in the human community, that they "belong more to the dead than to the living."[150]

In cases of sexual violence, interpersonal relationships are especially central. Herman suggests that the event of rape is likely to produce psychological trauma because it often involves a perpetrator who is socially connected to the victim. If a rape is committed by an acquaintance, "the damage to the survivor's faith and sense of community is particularly severe," because the traumatic event then also involves the betrayal of an important relationship in the life of the victim.

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[148] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

[149] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

[150] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 52–53.

But Herman also notes the deliberate interpersonal cruelty which is inherent to rape in general: the purpose of the act is to terrorize and humiliate the victim by forcing her to participate in something she has no control over.[151]

All in all, I consider *Trauma and Recovery* to be an essentially cross-disciplinary text—unlike the definition of trauma which has emerged in the *DSM*, Herman's definition is not based on clinical studies alone. What Herman instead offers is a theory of trauma based also on medical and political history, her own observations of patients, and readings of fiction. To an extent, this approach resembles my use of the trauma knot in this study. Her feminist insistence on taking women's traumatic experiences seriously and her insights about the social nature of trauma and healing will inspire my analysis, as well.

Psychotraumatological studies of trauma and social support

Herman's insights from *Trauma and Recovery* still influence psychiatry today when it comes to the question of why social dynamics have such a strong influence on traumatic experience.[152] And indeed, subsequent psychotraumatological studies have found that interpersonal relationships both affect and are affected by trauma.

Based on a review of existing studies, psychiatrists Anthony Charuvastra and Marylene Cloitre find that both social support and its absence can play a role in the likelihood of developing PTSD.[153] Psychotraumatological research has also found that the presence of social support facilitates the recovery process.[154] Here it is important to note that all psychological therapy is inherently a form of social support. An essential element in any kind of therapeutic encounter is openly admitting and sharing one's experience with another person, the therapist. But the friendships and support systems we have outside of therapy are also very important. Based on results of studies conducted in the 2000s, Charuvastra and Cloitre suggest that implementing PTSD treatment aimed at improving social relationships could be more effective than just focusing on fear-reduction through exposure.[155] Indeed, later clinical research also indicates that interpersonal therapy may be effective in treating PTSD.[156]

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[151] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 55, 58.

[152] For example, Charuvastra and Cloitre, writing in 2008, refer back to Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* for an answer to this question. Anthony Charuvastra and Marylene Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Annual Review of Psychology* 59, no. 1 (2008): 301–28.

[153] Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 305.

[154] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 27.

[155] Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 320.

[156] See: Salman Althobaiti et al., "Efficacy of Interpersonal Psychotherapy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 264 (March 2020): 286–94.

Moreover, negative and positive social support have different patterns of influence: for example, one study has shown that negatively experienced social interactions tend to increase the risk of developing PTSD, whereas positively experienced social interactions do not decrease the risk of developing PTSD, but contribute to measures of post-traumatic growth; e.g., "appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength, or spiritual development."[157]

A study suggested that while men and women tend to receive the same amount of positive support following a potentially traumatic event, women tend to receive more negative responses than men.[158] This may be both due to the fact that women who express negative emotions receive less sympathy than men who do the same, but it might also reflect the social stigma attached to events like rape, which are experienced by many women.[159] Victims of events that are considered shameful are more likely to receive negative social reactions, and thus often remain unshared and out of focus.[160] These results support Herman's claim that traumatic events happening to people who are already generally devalued in society, like many women are, tend to take place outside of the realm of socially validated reality, resulting in their experience becoming harder to talk about.[161]

The cultural trauma theory of the Yale School

Within the field of literary studies, theorists from the Yale School, an influential group of American scholars inspired by psychoanalysis and deconstruction, have sought to provide a philosophy that explains why trauma occurs in the first place.[162] According to Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), a traumatic event is never properly registered as a memory, and is thus never incorporated into consciousness. Caruth, while recognizing that there is no firm definition of trauma, still provides a normative description: "[i]n its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events

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[157] Susan E. Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 19, no. 6 (2006): 905–14; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307.

[158] Bernice Andrews et al., "Gender, Social Support, and PTSD in Victims of Violent Crime," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 16, no. 4 (2003): 421–27; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307.

[159] Herman notes that women often experience a lack of community support after a rape. In the case of rape, the public response is also largely carried out within the criminal justice system, where the legal definitions of rape rarely match the experiences of traumatized women. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8, 72.

[160] Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307–308; Punamäki et al., "The Deterioration and Mobilization Effects of Trauma on Social Support."

[161] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

[162] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 5–9.

in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."[163]

While Caruth's theory of trauma goes beyond this definition, it makes universal claims about traumatic experience which are built on the idea that dissociation is an inherent part of traumatic events. Caruth suggests that the traumatic event cannot be experienced while it occurs, but only later in connection with another place and another time. Understood in this way, trauma is conceptualized as, in Luckhurst's words, "a crisis of representation, of history and truth, and of narrative time."[164] The unresolvable paradox—the "aporia"—which Caruth envisions at the center of traumatic experiences, is the fact that "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it," as she states in *Unclaimed Experience*.[165]

The function of trauma testimony, according to the poststructurally and psychoanalytically influenced Yale School, is partly ethical, and partly an instrument of psychiatry. Ideas about the ethical necessity of testimony and witnessing play a large role in the influential work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), in which literary scholar Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dori Laub argue that the Holocaust was a crisis of witnessing, because of its status as an "unprecedented, inconceivable, historical occurrence of 'an event without a witness'—an event eliminating its own witness."[166]

Their view reflects an understanding of trauma according to which the survivor cannot fully comprehend the traumatic event before "reliving" it in front of a witness—a process which takes place through narration. Laub, especially, emphasizes the listener's completely necessary role.[167] As Bond and Craps point out, however, Laub's ideas can be seen to aggrandize the role of the interpreter. Potentially, as they suggest, the idea that victims of traumatic events cannot function as their own witnesses may indeed conceive of victims as helpless and inarticulate, unable to make sense of their own experience without an empathetic listener.[168]

Chronicling the theoretical influences of the Yale School, Luckhurst recognizes psychoanalysis as its most foundational influence. However, Freud's engagement with trauma is not very organized, Luckhurst notes, and Freud's three

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[163] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

[164] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," *American Imago* 48, no. 1 (1991): 7; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 5.

[165] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 91–92; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 4.

[166] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, xvii.

[167] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 85.

[168] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 69–70.

major inventions in this field "provided models that are not always compatible but which persist in contemporary discussions."[169]

First, his works about traumatic hysteria showcases a kind of two-stage theory of trauma, according to which the first forgotten impact of an event in childhood makes "a belated return after a hiatus," a notion that has been central to literary trauma theory since.[170] In the context of my study, an important addition is that Freud eventually abandoned the theory of hysteria as originating in experiences of childhood sexual abuse, and came to the conclusion that his female patient's stories were not the product of real memories of traumatic events, but of sexual fantasies. However, as Luckhurst notes, the debates about this subject, ongoing throughout the 1980s and 1990s, remain remarkably unacknowledged in the work of Caruth, Felman and others.[171]

Second, the phenomenon of the "repetition compulsion" which Freud attempted to understand in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) has had a large impact on how trauma is still commonly understood in literary studies.[172] For example, Caruth gives voice to this idea when she evokes "the necessity by which consciousness, once faced with the possibility of its death, can do nothing but repeat the destructive event over and over again."[173]

Third, in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud applied the traumatic neuroses of the individual onto a group, the Jews, who, he suggested, were all still suffering from the trauma of the murder of Moses. Luckhurst points out that sociology has posed a strong counter-tradition to this, which objects to modeling theories about societies on the individual psyche.[174] One might add that within the empirical sciences in general, approaching problems in this way is viewed as a great source of invalid results.

The second and third influences behind the Yale School's trauma theory were themselves influenced by psychoanalysis. In his writings about the Holocaust, Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno assigned art and cultural criticism the paradoxical task of representing an event which so terrible that it is unrepresentable.[175] Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of philosophy also held an important place in American literary theory during the decades before the turn of the millennium. Derrida viewed aporia as a hesitation between the possible and the

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[169] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 8.

[170] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 8.

[171] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 10–11. See also: Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 14; Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902*, with Wilhelm Fliess (Basic Books, 1954), 215–216.

[172] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 9.

[173] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 63.

[174] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 10.

[175] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 5.

impossible. In order to commit to responsible thought, ethics, and politics, this element of undecidability—aporia—had to be preserved and not suppressed, something he thought that most western thought had done in the past.[176]

Thus, while the origins of the most influential definitions of trauma found within literary studies and psychology overlap through psychoanalysis, beyond that, their influences part: while Frankfurt school Marxism and poststructuralism came to inspire the trauma theory of literary studies, psychology was instead influenced by biological analyses of the stress response as well as behavioristic ideas about the link between fear-inducing experiences and anxiety disorders such as phobias.[177]

In later years, other views of trauma have emerged in the humanities—sometimes as direct critiques of Caruth, Laub and other founding figures of cultural trauma studies. Dominick LaCapra, for example, has criticized Caruth's trauma theory for coming "dangerously close to [...] making sublime the compulsive repetition or acting-out of a traumatic past."[178] Instead, LaCapra emphasizes the necessity of enabling practices of actually articulating traumatic experiences to facilitate openings towards different futures.[179] However, I choose to engage with the Yale School in my analysis due to its interesting and influential claims about the temporality of trauma, its emphasis on testimony and witnessing, and its significant influence on what has, by some people, come to be called "trauma fiction."

Trauma fiction

The growing interest in trauma within psychiatry and culture in general corresponds to a growing interest in the topic among writers of fiction. This study's choice to view fiction about trauma as a literary orientation with a common set of features is inspired by the scholars and literary critics who have noticed the wave of trauma novels which resemble each other not just in subject matter, but also in form, the latter of which often mimics trauma symptoms. When I use the term "trauma fiction" in this study, I define it as stories in which contemporary understandings of trauma are activated in different ways. Contemporary fiction about trauma is a site at which several threads in the trauma knot may be interwoven.

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[176] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 1993), 15; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 6.

[177] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 15–17.

[178] Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Cornell University Press, 2018 [2004]), 121.

[179] LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 118.

When reading fiction while marking the subject of trauma, I want to remain attentive to the variety of depictions of mental states rather than just look for a current list of symptoms, or only look for silences and omissions that would represent an "unclaimed experience." Reading fictional narratives about trauma with attention also paid to elements of the plot that do *not* constitute clear-cut depictions of the existing PTSD diagnosis or symptoms may generate new knowledge about the pain which people experience in the aftermath of rape.

Trauma fiction is not a book market category, but should rather be viewed as a category of novels united by a set of formal similarities which have been noted by literary scholars and critics. There is no current academic consensus on the definite meaning of the term, which in my opinion is a good thing. However, there is no doubt that whether it is said to be a genre, a mode, or a stock plot, literary narratives centering trauma are a strong and influential trend in contemporary literature.

In recent years, American literary critics have identified and debated what has been negatively perceived as a trend in fiction that uses a specific plot formula inspired by trauma, characterized by a terrible event in the past functioning as the source of tension in the narrative. This debate has been influential in shifting public discussions on the topic, to the extent that essayist Jamie Hood defiantly named her recent rape memoir *Trauma Plot: A Life* (2025).[180] However, academic debates have generally viewed trauma fiction as a more specific category of stories inspired by trauma theory, rather than including all plots that incorporate past events and secrets.

The Yale School's take on trauma theory viewed experimental literature as a privileged mode of trauma narratives. Caruth, Felman and Laub all insisted on the power of literature as a mode of language to communicate experiences that are not already understood and thus defy representation—for example, traumatic experiences. According to this strand of trauma theory, literature can disrupt conventional modes of representation, which is why it is a productive mode for communicating about trauma.[181] Felman emphasizes the utmost importance of the testimonial form as a contemporary literary mode, which has a better chance of accurately depicting trauma than the testimonial language of legal proceedings because literary depictions can refuse to offer closure.[182]

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[180] See: Parul Sehgal, "The Case Against the Trauma Plot," A Critic at Large, *The New Yorker*, December 27, 2021; Bekah Waalkes, "Why We're Still Talking About the 'Trauma Plot'," *The Atlantic*, April 1, 2025.

[181] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 59.

[182] Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 8.

Anne Whitehead first coined the term "trauma fiction" for stories which activate ideas that have been popularized through the rise of trauma theory. By trauma theory she means the specific cultural trauma theory formulated by Caruth, Felman and others, which is reflected in her focus on the kinds of literature that seek to narrativize traumatic events that "[resist] language or representation," as well as stories in which the concept of testimony is practiced in different ways.[183]

For Whitehead, trauma fiction is an orientation within literary fiction, often inspired by modernism, postmodernism, or postcolonialism. It is characterized by a specific range of narrative techniques that represent trauma by stylistically mimicking its forms and symptoms. In response to the emphasis placed by 1990s literary trauma theories on the disruption of memory and time as a central component of trauma, Whitehead suggests that trauma fiction often departs from a linear temporal sequence. However, it is also characterized by a "self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique." As an epitome of this style, she presents the novels *Beloved* and *Jazz* (1992), both by Toni Morrison.[184]

Caruth has conceptualized traumatic memories from the past intruding on the present as a form of haunting, and this leads Whitehead to view the exploration of "haunted histories" as a typical pursuit in trauma fiction. In these stories, unresolved past events, or the ghosts of people who died in violent ways, "possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living."[185] Thus, in Whitehead's conceptualization of trauma fiction, ghost stories are used to explore trauma as psychological possession, as well as to "embody [...] the traumas of recent history and represent a form of collective or cultural haunting."[186] Whitehead's listing of four common stylistic features of trauma fiction will be central in this study: intertextuality, repetition, a fragmented narrative voice, and supernatural elements. The latter two demand the reader suspend disbelief, even within otherwise conventionally realistic narratives.[187]

However, while Whitehead's formulation of trauma fiction relies primarily on works from the genre of literary fiction, Luckhurst has demonstrated that stories structured according to this kind of logic of trauma also feature in "mainstream" and "popular" genres; in horror, for example.[188]

A theoretical perspective which sometimes surfaces in my readings is Robin Field's term "the rape novel," which encompasses a genre of feminist American

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[183] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 3–5.

[184] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 3.

[185] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 6.

[186] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 7.

[187] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 84.

[188] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 97, 105.

fiction that centers victims' perspectives. She notes that by the 1990s, trauma became a prominent theme within this genre, at the same time as its style evolved formally to include postmodern narrative techniques that eschewed tidy resolution.[189] When I use the term "rape trauma fiction" in this study, it is to capture the mutual formal traits identified by Whitehead and Field.

A good way of identifying other kinds of trauma representations in fiction is to look beyond 1990s cultural trauma theory. If we recognize that trauma is not an experience defined exclusively by amnesia and silence, suddenly the body of fiction which can productively be studied as trauma fiction widens: as Joshua Pederson argues, there are in fact many realist narratives in which traumatic experiences are not purposefully omitted, but depicted in detail. Therefore, scholars investigating trauma fiction should "turn their focus from gaps in the text to the text itself."[190]

In line with this, another possible way of defining trauma fiction would be to utilize the *DSM* criteria to identify symptoms of PTSD among literary characters, which Kia Jane Richmond does in a chapter in her book *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Struggles Through Fictional Characters* (2018). However, in light of the lack of a cultural and clinical consensus as to what defines trauma, literary research seeking to define trauma fiction solely on the grounds of protagonists fulfilling the current *DSM* diagnostic criteria will, by necessity, leave out important works of trauma fiction that do not fulfill these criteria. Studies that strictly define trauma fiction according to a Freudian emphasis on repression will be equally incomplete.

Moreover, just like psychoanalytically influenced literary trauma theory, PTSD as a diagnosis can be problematized for essentializing a very specific type of traumatic reaction which occurs at a specific moment in time, within a specific type of subject. While the PTSD diagnosis is heavily affected by the experiences of Vietnam veterans, American literary trauma theory of the 1990s tended towards assuming that the experiences of Holocaust survivors were representative of all trauma. I therefore believe that it would be too restrictive to confine trauma fiction to only those stories that adhere very closely to one of these theoretical frameworks.

As I have previously mentioned, the concept of trauma holds many meanings in contemporary popular culture, including in fiction. As Michelle Balaev points out, literature harbors "a plethora of different images of trauma" as well as "diverse views regarding the role of loss and pain in a society […]."[191] When writers

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[189] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 149–150.

[190] Joshua Pederson, "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory," *Narrative* 22, no. 3 (2014): 337–339.

[191] Balaev [Satterlee], *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, xii.

of fiction experiment with formal conventions of trauma narration, their narratives may include a plurality of feelings, mental states, social dynamics, and power relations, some of which may be well-known in the different fields in which trauma is studied—and others which may not yet have been extensively studied in relation to trauma.

In literary narratives, ideas about trauma may be developed in connection with, but not entirely dictated by, psychological and cultural ideas of what constitutes trauma. Whitehead's "trauma fiction" is one example of a literary style that primarily activates one of the threads in the trauma knot of 1990s cultural trauma theory. Using knowledge from the field of psychotraumatology, I will explore more of these threads, adding to an updated understanding of trauma fiction.

Feminist perspectives

This study follows calls to examine the political aspects of trauma made by several scholars of trauma literature.[192] More specifically, the connections between trauma and feminist politics will be taken into account, as the concept of trauma has taken on an increasingly prominent role in feminist discussions over the past years—especially in connection to rape.[193] My view of trauma as a historically shaped phenomenon recognizes the importance of the PTSD diagnosis as an epistemic shift which asserts that women's mental anguish may be caused by the violence committed against them, rather than be the manifestation of illness originating inside of the woman.

Above, I described how this shift occurred to a large extent thanks to the feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman. I also noted that the feminist attention to social relationships of power has been crucial in how trauma is understood within psychotraumatology today. I want to take the time here to note that Herman's thinking involves not just a psychological dimension, but also a more all-encompassing political anti-rape vision. If empowerment and social support are crucial for healing from trauma, which Herman insists that they are, this involves recognition and restitution within both the private sphere and in the

[192] See: Balaev [Satterlee], ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, 8; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 14–15.

[193] See, for example: Hsing-Wen Chang, "Inter-Praxis: Feminism and Trauma," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2025): 151–70; Romina A. Green Rioja, "Collective Trauma, Feminism and the Threads of Popular Power: A Personal and Political Account of Chile's 2019 Social Awakening," *Radical Americas* 6, no. 1 (2021); Emma Jane Tseris, "Trauma Theory Without Feminism? Evaluating Contemporary Understandings of Traumatized Women," *Affilia* 28, no. 2 (2013): 153–64.

public sphere—the latter of which requires a political movement against rape.[194] In the following, I will outline some feminist perspectives on rape, rape myths, and first-person rape narratives, which I find necessary for understanding the political dimension of stories about rape trauma.

Defining rape

In order to consider the social consequences of the rapes that take place in the novels, I find it useful to conceptualize rape as a historically and spatially situated social performance.[195] Rape is not a metaphor for war or disaster, but, in historian Joanna Bourke's words, an "embodied violation of another person."[196] In this study, I use the term "victim" more often than "survivor" or the like, for the same reason as Bourke: to draw attention to the hurt and injustice of abuse. I do not use it as a judgment of character, an identity, or to deny the agency of people who have experienced violence.[197]

Literary scholar Sarah Whitney suggests that the postfeminist culture of the 1990s and 2000s contributed to an "anti-victimist" sentiment which rejected the perceived disempowerment of victimhood for an idea of empowered survivorship.[198] In this study, I follow a common definition of postfeminism as a set of assumptions, distributed in popular media forms, which conceive of previous feminist struggles as having already achieved their goals, thus rendering further organized feminist politics unnecessary.[199] In the analysis of protagonists whose status as survivors is far from self-evident, I build on Whitney's discussions of postfeminist tensions between victimhood and empowered survivorship. However, I will not argue against the general use of the term "survivor," which is widespread both within feminism and among survivors themselves.[200]

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[194] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 3, 9, 61, 69, 70, 133, 155.

[195] Legal definitions of rape are often evoked outside of the courtroom, as well as inside it. I am not using this kind of definition in this study, because it places the burden of proof on victims. This way of defining rape is rigid and excludes experiences which, while falling outside of the legal definition, are still equally painful and real.

[196] Joanna Bourke, *Rape: Sex, Violence, History* (Counterpoint, 2007), 6.

[197] Bourke, *Rape*, 7.

[198] Sarah Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones: Alice Sebold's Postfeminist Gothic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 29, no. 2 (2010): 354–355.

[199] Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2007), 1–3.

[200] Laura Jane Bower, "Is 'Victim-Survivor' Our Imperfect Alternative to Describing People with Lived Experience of Sexual Violence? A Feminist Symbolic Interactionist Analysis, Considering How Ethnicity, Gender, and Disability Interact with Language Choice," *Violence Against Women*, April 30, 2025.

Sometimes when talking about rape in general I use the pronouns "she" for the victim and "he" for the perpetrator. This I do to reflect my primary material as well as statistics—most commonly, the perpetrators of rape are men and the victims of rape are women.[201] I do not hold essentialist views of men as biologically destined to rape and women as equally destined to be raped. Although this study focuses on women's experiences, sexual violence is a vast problem that affects people of different genders, from a wide range of social groups. Many men are victims of rape, most often committed by other men.[202]

Susan Brownmiller's influential assertion that rape is an exercise in power, "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear," has been widely taken up and discussed.[203] I view gendered power imbalances as a foundational aspect of rape, but do not conceive of rape as an act of violence detached from sexuality. In this, I follow Bourke's and Catherine MacKinnon's critique and development of Brownmiller's argument: just like physical and/or psychological violence, sexuality and desire are also central to rape.[204] A final component to my understanding of rape is that it is an act which is in some way non-consensual, unwanted, or coerced.[205]

The novels included in the study depict instances of rape that many people would recognize and accept *as* rape: adults coercing children to engage in sexual acts, and rapes which include violent physical assault. However, I do not want to resort to static definitions of rape based on these literary depictions, nor do I think that the depictions of rape in my selection of trauma literature are representative of all the different ways in which it occurs in people's lives.[206]

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[201] *Våld och hälsa*; Kathleen C. Basile et al., *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

[202] Basile et al., *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, 24.

[203] Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 15, 256 (emphasis in text).

[204] Bourke, *Rape*, 9; Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure under Patriarchy," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): 314–46.

[205] Bourke, *Rape*, 9, 11.

[206] In this study, the terms "rape" and "sexual abuse" will be used interchangeably, because there are advantages to the use of both. Since this study is focused on fiction and the mythologies surrounding rape, it is natural to use that term. Simultaneously, many researchers within the social sciences have resorted to the term "sexual abuse," which is more inclusive and useful when, for example, developing a survey which will be answered by people who all might or might not categorize a coerced sexual encounter which they experienced as rape. Recent studies have indicated that the use of the term "rape" reduces the number of respondents who answer "yes," whereas the number of respondents who answer "yes" will be higher in when a survey poses behaviorally specific questions, such as asking directly about forced vaginal, oral, or anal penetration. Another study showed that the respondents' difficulty answering questions about violence and sexual abuse was mainly rooted in their struggle to determine whether their complex and painful experiences were serious enough to qualify for a "yes" answer. Melanie S. Harned, "Does It Matter What You Call It? The Relationship Between Labeling Unwanted Sexual Experiences and Distress," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72, no. 6 (2004): 1090–99;

Rape myths

In academia and in everyday speech, the word "myth" can mean many different things. "The concept of myth has (at least) two connotations," writes psychologist Kathryn M. Ryan. "One is myth as a story that is imbedded in history, religion, and culture and that guides human behavior and gives it meaning [...]. The second is myth as a mistaken belief—a lie."[207] In the following, I argue that rape depictions in contemporary literature are influenced not just intertextually by previous fictional mythologies of rape, but also by commonplace rape myths, which are generally understood as mistaken beliefs about rape. I follow psychologists Kimberly Lonsway and Louise Fitzgerald's understanding of rape myths as "attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny, justify, and tolerate male sexual aggression against women."[208] The myths themselves I conceptualize as more than just "false beliefs," and share Roland Barthes' view of myths as "depoliticized speech," which serves to naturalize certain worldviews.[209]

Myths can live on through literature, but also in everyday life. Research conducted outside of literary studies can provide us with knowledge of important rape myths which influence how many people think about sexual violence today. Due to their widespread cultural influence, fiction taking on the subject of rape needs to position itself in relation to these myths in one way or another. Commonplace rape myths are not stories in the same sense as, for example, ancient mythology, but rather "scripts" or shorthand used by people to make sense of the world.[210]

In the following, five rape myths which feature prominently in contemporary culture will be presented. The first four are identified by Bourke and are as follows: 1. "it is impossible to rape a resisting woman," 2. "men risk being falsely accused of rape," 3. "some categories of forced sex are not really rape," and 4. "no can mean yes."[211] Other scholars have argued that the catastrophic quality which our culture associates with rape is in fact a rape myth in its own right. Following

Resnick et al., "Prevalence of Civilian Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in a Representative National Sample of Women"; Siri Thoresen and Carolina Øverlien, "Trauma Victim: Yes or No? Why It May Be Difficult to Answer Questions Regarding Violence, Sexual Abuse, and Other Traumatic Events," *Violence Against Women* 15, no. 6 (2009): 712.

[207] Kathryn M. Ryan, "The Relationship between Rape Myths and Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Rape," *Sex Roles* 65, no. 11–12 (2011): 774.

[208] Lonsway and Fitzgerald, "Rape Myths," 134; Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 410.

[209] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Hill and Wang, 1972), 142.

[210] Aiyana Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger in Young Adult Rape Fiction," *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 2 (2019): 2.

[211] Bourke, *Rape*, 23–24.

anthropologist Mithu Sanyal, I therefore want to present a fifth rape myth, which I call "rape is a fate worse than death." Sanyal argues that a myth about rape as intrinsically linked to women's obliteration can be traced from antiquity all the way through western history.[212] This myth lives on in contemporary culture's ideas of rape as a universally traumatizing event, Sanyal suggests, and points to the popularization of the metaphorical terms "soul murder" and "spiritual murder" as examples of an understanding of rape trauma which stipulates that women who have been raped should feel that a part of their inner selves is hurt to the point of unrestorability.[213] In this way, Sanyal implies that today, the myth that rape causes irreparable damage to the psyche is charged with contemporary understandings of respectable womanhood as inherently fragile.

While I do think that Sanyal has identified a true and interesting contemporary rape myth, in her categorical arguing against it she risks falling into an opposite mythology of rape, prominent throughout contemporary culture: namely that it is not, in fact, a serious societal problem and that women's negative reactions to it are disproportionate.

At first glance, some of the rape myths presented above are directly at odds with each other. But as Emily Tilton insightfully argues, contemporary rape culture is characterized "by the interplay between rape myths that minimize rape, and myths that catastrophize rape."[214] Rape myths that minimize rape include, for example, that women lie about rape or that rape is not serious. Catastrophizing rape myths, on the other hand, state that "rape occurs late at night in dark alleys, and is committed primarily by inhuman monsters, especially black or seriously mentally ill men." Such myths "prompt severe responses to allegations, especially when the allegation concerns the rape of a white woman by a black man."[215] Rather than being each other's opposites, these myths work together to

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[212] Sanyal locates the origin of the link between rape and death in classical antiquity. The Roman story of Lucretia, where Lucretia commits suicide—the only way in which she can recapture the honor she lost through being raped—is presented as a myth that has been reproduced in western culture ever since, turning eventually into the claim that "rape is a fate worse than death." This idiom was first coined by Edward Gibbon in *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788), then taken up enthusiastically in Victorian England. Sanyal suggests that the pairing of honor and shame keeps determining the aftermath of rape in contemporary western culture by providing a very narrow expectation of how victims of rape should feel. She suggests that while in the past, a woman's life was shattered by rape because it destroyed her position in society, "it's as if the conflict has now moved inside her." Mithu M. Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #metoo* (Verso, 2019), 37, 41, 61.

[213] Sanyal, *Rape*, 63–64.

[214] Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 408.

[215] Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 409.

"distort the epistemic resources we use to evaluate rape allegations"—in other words, they contribute to a general distrust of rape victims.[216]

The genre of "speaking out" as a feminist strategy

Feminist theorist Tanya Serisier, writing about women's public rape testimonies through the lens of genre, investigates the role that personal stories have played in feminist responses to sexual violence. She argues that the anti-rape politics of the feminist movement, mainly from the 1970s onwards, is founded on the belief that personal narratives can be employed as a political strategy to end sexual violence.

This politics of speaking out, Serisier argues, produced a genre of experiential rape narratives, which, as time went on, came to shape the literary genre of rape memoirs, which saw its beginning in the late 1990s and has continued to grow ever since.[217] In a post-second wave feminist world, speaking out about rape is not necessarily always a feminist act. Serisier notes that survivors may narrate and interpret their experiences of sexual violence using many different kinds of discourses, including conservative ones.[218]

Theorizing the rhetorical and political function of the genre of speaking out, Serisier argues that generic form provides a structure that "makes narratives of rape tellable and recognisable to readers," but simultaneously also functions as a limiting force which hinders deviations from familiar generic structures of rape narrative.[219] She writes:

> The existence of a genre encourages and enables stories, providing them with a cultural location that allows them to be heard and understood. It also connects individual acts of speech or writing to a collective practice of narrative in a way that can produce political effects. But, as Derrida (1992) makes clear in his discussion of genre, this positive and enabling function is accompanied by the production and enforcement of a set of rules, norms and constraints.

In Serisier's words, Derridas' "law of genre" refers to the marks of sameness, while his "law of the law of genre" states that there are always moments of generic departure, contamination, and impurity.[220]

Serisier argues that the feminist genre of speaking out, in order to produce narratives that are believed by their audience, has been subject to conflicting

[216] Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 409; Yap, "Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault."

[217] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 4, 44.

[218] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 41–42.

[219] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 158.

[220] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 44, 162; Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 224–225.

demands of both "authentic" uniqueness and the following of recognizable generic conventions. These conflicting demands cause some narratives about rape to be

> cast outside of the genre of speaking out because of their failure to conform to readers' expectations, while others may be rendered suspect for conforming too closely to generic conventions, and thus appearing to be 'fictions' constructed through genre rather than authentic reflections of experience.[221]

According to Serisier, the legal and feminist genres of speaking out "operate according to different truth criteria, or standards of 'believability'."[222] Especially within feminism, generic judgements around credibility are linked to demands for an "authentic" narrative.[223]

Katie Roiphe's critique of "campus feminism" in the 1990s is one of the most well-known examples of the rendering of feminist rape narratives as inauthentic, and thus suspect, because they conform to generic conventions.[224] Roiphe argues that the women who talked about their experiences of sexual violence as part of the contemporary feminist movement did so using melodramatic "stock plots," by which she meant that their stories resembled each other so much so that they became repetitive. This, according to Roiphe, rendered the women's stories inauthentic, and thus unbelievable: "[s]omehow the individual power of each story is sapped by the collective mode of expression. The individual details fade, the stories blend together, sounding programmed and automatic."[225] This kind of argument is echoed by a 2017 book by Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*, in which Kipnis bemoans the "sexual hysteria" of American campus feminism. Featured on the book cover is the quotation: "[i]f this is feminism, it's feminism hijacked by melodrama."[226]

What Roiphe and Kipnis fail to take into account is that this generic mode of narrating rape was also the mode which made it possible for women to speak out about the subject at all. Serisier points out that Roiphe's line of reasoning suggests that in order for a story about sexual violence to be believed,

> rape narratives must be effectively 'genreless', unshaped by shared conventions and locations of telling. Any sign of narrative convention or generic shaping renders them insufficiently authentic and therefore subject to doubt and disbelief.

[221] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 146.

[222] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 146.

[223] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 147.

[224] Katie Roiphe, *The Morning after: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (Little, Brown and Co., 1993).

[225] Roiphe, *The Morning After*, 36.

[226] Natalie Roxburgh, "The Collapse of Dialogue, Consent, and the Controversy over Kristen Roupenian's 'Cat Person'," *Language & Dialogue* 12, no. 1 (2022): 59; "Unwanted Advances—Laura Kipnis," accessed October 30, 2024.

> This is, of course, an impossible demand. Narratives are only tellable through the generic conventions that shape them in ways that are recognisable to readers and audiences. If genrelessness is an impossibility, the appearance of not being generically shaped is often based on a narrative conforming to dominant and traditional models of speech.[227]

Serisier suggests that feminists should analyze the workings of genre, in order to enable the telling of new kinds of stories that decenter questions of judgement and belief.[228]

As a point of departure for my analysis, I will assume that genres of fiction operate according to truth criteria other than legal and feminist genres. Much of postmodern and contemporary fiction—not least low fantasy fiction with spectral narrators—consciously makes artistic use of non-realistic elements. This makes it possible for fictional narratives of rape to go outside of the generic truth conventions of speaking out. At least in theory, fictional genres of narrative allow authors a freedom of experimentation which is almost never granted to women who testify about rape in public, of whom a style of simultaneous formal conventionality and unique authenticity is often expected in order for their stories of rape trauma to be believed by others—the most pressing instances of this being in the legal setting, in media debates, and in encounters with friends and relatives whose social support is contingent on believing the victim's story.[229]

Methodology and application

This thesis makes use of a qualitative method from literary studies—narrative analysis—to investigate how first-person rape and trauma narratives are constructed in fiction, and on a broader level, to explore the production of the concept of rape trauma through literature. My method resembles the qualitative and hermeneutic data analysis often employed by feminist psychology, which has taken up a broader perspective on methodology than quantitative modes of inquiry and statistical data analysis alone.[230]

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[227] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 159.

[228] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 175.

[229] Adolfsson, *Blaming Victims of Rape*; Orrbén, "'Han hade sin penis i henne'—Representationer av agerande kroppar i sexualbrottsdomar," 150; Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 159; Sexualbrottsofferutredningen, *Anmälan och utredning av sexualbrott: förslag på förbättringar ur ett brottsofferperspektiv. Promemoria*, Sverige Justitiedepartementet (Fritzes, 2005). For a discussion of the need for narratologists to stop assuming that strange fiction plays by the same formal rules as non-fictional or "natural" narratives, see: Per Krogh Hansen et al., *Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2011).

[230] Brown, "Contributions of Feminist and Critical Psychologies to Trauma Psychology," 503.

As part of the formal analysis, narratological insights about focalization will help me investigate the factors that shape whose point of view is favored in the stories. Moreover, I will follow Joshua Pederson's suggestion to read with attention to what is said in the text itself, rather than to look for signs of trauma only in the gaps and silences of the texts.[231] Formal readings of narrative structure will be paired with contextualizing and historicizing readings.

Regarding the contextualizing readings, specific attention will be paid to how discourses related to rape and trauma show up in, interact with, and provide certain meanings to the narratives. Here, I will trace the aforementioned threads in the trauma knot—the PTSD diagnosis, Herman's insights about the role of power and social connection, psychotraumatological studies of social support and risk for PTSD, and literary trauma theory—to investigate whether they are supported, challenged, or developed in the fictional narratives. I will also read with attention paid to how the novels position their narratives in relation to the rape myths formulated by Bourke, Sanyal, and Tilton. These contextualizing readings aim to produce knowledge about the ways in which cultural and historical factors affect what values are attached to the potential reorientation of consciousness caused by traumatic events.[232]

Other contextual material used in the analysis includes media debates; which provide information about the public narratives of trauma and sexual violence—or the lack thereof—at the time the material was published; and book reviews, which provide information about whether the specific novels were recognized by a literary public as participating in a collective effort of storytelling about rape and trauma, and if they were recognized, whether reviewers considered this effort to be successful.

The study contains a comparative element: by analyzing four novels with very similar premises, I want to trace similarities as well as variations between the different works. The results of the comparisons will reveal typical features of this specific form of ghost narration, but also the instances when these narratives bend in different directions. Differences between the novels will be related to the temporal context of their times of publication to assess the effects of radically evolving discourses of trauma and rape in fictional stories.

Furthermore, my readings will look for intertextual references in the material. My definition of intertextuality is commonplace, and follows Cambridge Dictionary's: "the connections between different works of literature and art, and the meanings that are created by them."[233] In the material studied, I look for

[231] Pederson, "Speak, Trauma," 338.

[232] Balaev [Satterlee], ed., *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, 4.

[233] *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "intertextuality," accessed March 10, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intertextuality.

intertextuality in references to specific previous works of fiction and art, but also to literary or other artistic genres, which take on significant meaning in relation to the novels' portrayals of rape trauma.

My analysis recognizes Serisier's observation that stories about rape, to be understood, need to be told using existing generic structures that make narratives of rape intelligible and recognizable to readers.[234] By paying attention to the mechanisms of genre and intertextuality in rape trauma fiction, the analysis will investigate what kinds of rape trauma narratives are made possible by the novels' potential adherence to, and modification of, certain mythologies and genre conventions: low fantasy ghost stories, first-person rape narratives (as outlined by Serisier), trauma fiction (as formulated by Whitehead, Luckhurst, Balaev and Pederson), as well as other genre affinities specific to the respective novels.

It also allows me to investigate whether, and if so, how, the novels reflect and/or push back against previous stories about rape, trauma, sexuality, and death. Adhering to John Frow's and Derrida's views of genre, the study will look for how the material sometimes subverts the genres they make use of. Frow's argument that genres shape people's knowledge of the world will be used to trace how the novels portray the effects of previous stories—mainly intertexts, rape myths, and common narratives about trauma—on the protagonists' post-traumatic worldviews. Furthermore, by examining the critical reception, the chapters provide an indication of whether the novels succeeded in making their narratives of rape and trauma recognizable to a literary public.

I will place Judith Herman's ideas about rape as an event that is both underrecognized on a societal level and involves a potentially traumatizing loss of power and breach of social connection into dialogue with the ghost stories I investigate, tracing the very specific situations in which victims of rape are made invisible and powerless, but also when they become visible and connect with others. Here, Peeren's insights about how a lack of agency and recognition renders people ghostly will be used to ask questions about the processes that cause many victims of sexual violence to feel unsupported by the people they most care about. The findings will be considered alongside more recent clinical research which has shown the effects of positive and negative social support on victims of traumatic events.

Peeren's conception of ghostliness as a flexible condition which may befall living people as well as the dead will be used to analyze the many instances in which the narrators look back at previous marginalization during their lifetime. Her insights provide a theoretical framework for my discussions of how the novels depict multiple other potentially traumatic events, in addition to the most

[234] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 158.

glaring instances of rape and murder. They are also evoked in my analysis of how the portrayals of rape trauma are shown to be deeply affected by protagonists' previous experiences.

Artistic, psychological, and political discourses may affect, inspire, and contradict one another. One assumption guiding my readings is that literary texts can alter prominent understandings of psychological ideas of trauma or feminist ideas about rape, just like prevailing ideas about rape or psychological trauma may inspire fiction writers to tell stories in new ways. I want to stress that I view my primary sources—the novels—as authorities in their own right when it comes to thinking about rape trauma narratives. Throughout the analysis, fiction and theory will be in conversation with each other, assuming that novels can provide relevant critique and suggest alterations of common understandings of trauma, rather than just function as case illustrations for already established definitions of the disorder.

The interdisciplinary approach of this study not only affects the theoretical frameworks used, but also has implications for the audience I am writing for: it is a heterogeneous one. Since I hope to reach readers coming from backgrounds as diverse as literary studies, the social sciences and psychiatry, there will inevitably be sections of this book which cater more to the scientific conventions and reading strategies of one of these groups more than the others. The group whose conventions are most frequently met are literary scholars. However, to reach a broader group of readers I have taken care to define terms and avoid excessive disciplinary jargon. I aim to generate results that can then be further investigated by others, through a variety of methods.

3. The defiant ghost: Carina Rydberg's *Osalig ande* (1990)

I will begin the literary analyses of this book with a contextualization of Carina Rydberg's breakthrough novel *Osalig ande* (1990), a rape trauma narrative which was published at an interesting and crucial moment for the scope of this study: a time in which PTSD had just begun to be recognized in culture. However, when Rydberg's novel was reviewed in the Swedish newspapers, its main themes, rape and trauma, remained largely unaddressed. Other words were used to describe the novel's harrowing plot of child sexual abuse and marital rape: "violence," "pain," and a "love carousel." Even when the subject of rape was addressed by a reviewer, the headline obfuscated it by using a common euphemism for domestic violence: "dark family tragedy."[235] Previously, *Osalig ande*'s thematic exploration of rape trauma has never been highlighted, yet it was published at a moment in time when post-traumatic stress disorder had been included in the *DSM* for 10 years—although it was still mostly associated with war veterans and not rape victims.

Based on the critical reception of this novel, one could be tempted to assume that in 1980s Sweden, discussions of rape were not on the agenda at all. The truth is, however, that sexual violence in the form of incest had been made more visible than ever in Swedish media during the decade leading up to Rydberg's novel: ethnologist Gabriella Nilsson has identified a densification of texts that participate in a Swedish public debate around incest during the years 1982–1996.[236] This corresponded to the significant increase in media coverage and raised public awareness of childhood sexual abuse in the English-speaking world throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[237]

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[235] Magnus Brohult, "Flyhänt om oknytt," *Svenska Dagbladet*, August 17, 1990; Lennart Bromander, "Mörk familjetragedi," *Arbetet*, August 17, 1990; Johan Englund, "Når inte ända fram," *Idag*, August 21, 1990; Ole Hessler, "En studie i skuld och våld," *Dagens Nyheter*, August 17, 1990; Kristina Lugn, "En dålig poets sällskap," *Expressen*, August 17, 1990; Cecilia Sjöholm, "Det är synd om Gud, också," *Aftonbladet*, August 17, 1990; Johan Werkmäster, "En andes längtan efter svar," *Göteborgs-Posten*, August 18, 1990. My translations.

[236] Nilsson, "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," 17. Nilsson included texts from different genres in her study: scientific texts, popular science, investigations, governing documents, debate articles, course material, and media interviews.

[237] Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse*, 32.

One of the seminal events leading to the massive attention directed at the subject in Sweden was the summer of 1981, when Swedish news outlets published American reports about alarming rates of incest and sexual violence against children.[238] When Marika, the protagonist of *Osalig ande*, tells the reader about formative events that took place in her childhood and teenage years, her suffering in the aftermath of sexual violence committed by her stepfather plays a significant role. By centering the topics of child sexual abuse and incest, *Osalig ande* is firmly lodged within this contemporary debate about sexual violence.

This chapter begins by arguing that *Osalig ande* depicts the traumatic effects of events which in previous fictional depictions had not always been recognized as rape, nor as traumatic. Within this framework, the chapter explores how the ghost figure is used to show how Marika's state of trauma arises from and is sustained by a number of specific conditions: shame, the victim's simultaneous experience of invisibility and unwanted visibility, and the social mechanisms of remembering or forgetting past abuse. I also discuss how the novel uses spectrality to juxtapose and problematize the two different generic modes available to women's rape narratives within its setting (1980s upper-middle-class Stockholm): art and medical discourses.

Osalig ande is not translated into English and therefore, all quotes from the novel appearing in this chapter are translated by me.

Osalig ande (1990)

The title of Rydberg's novel can be translated to "restless" or "unholy" spirit. This is a common Swedish way of describing a ghost, or someone excluded from heaven, as well as a simile often used to describe anxious people. Thus, the novel's strong focus on the ghost as a figure of mental distress is already emphasized in the title. In the first few pages, the centrality of this theme is established even further: the novel opens with protagonist Marika's suicide, her spirit separating from her body and ascending to the roof of her bedroom, from which she proceeds to dryly comment on what she sees—and what she thinks about her husband, who is about to come home and find her.

As it turns out, Jonas was never a very supportive husband to Marika: apart from the fact that he is the physician who has prescribed her the pills which she ultimately uses to end her own life, he has also been in the habit of taking a large number of lovers despite Marika's objections. He belittles and mocks her artistic

[238] Nationellt centrum för kvinnofrid, *Antologi: sju perspektiv på våldtäkt*, 1. uppl., NCK-rapport, 2010:2 (NCK, Uppsala universitet, 2010), 19.

endeavors, and perhaps most importantly, his continuous emotional abuse can be read between the lines of Marika's remembrance of their life together.

The limited space of this chapter will not allow me to dwell on every twist and turn of the plot, but some of the main plotlines are the following: as Marika settles into her new ghostly existence, she moves in and out of scenes in which her family, friends, and acquaintances talk, fight, begin and end relationships, and occasionally express their feelings about Marika and her death. The dramatic interpersonal betrayals taking place among the living characters culminate towards the end of the novel, when Marika's husband is murdered by a contract killer who was actually hired to murder her twin brother Carl, but changes his mind.

Besides the tangled interpersonal relationships which the ghost Marika witnesses and narrates, I identify two other main plotlines: Marika's narration of past significant life events and the events taking place in Marika's afterlife. Gradually, the past horrifying events of her life are revealed: a 1960s and 1970s childhood and adolescence marked by a loveless upbringing in a wealthy but emotionally cold home, in which she is repeatedly sexually assaulted by her stepfather, Henrik. Meanwhile, the novel implies that 25-year-old Amanda, Carl's new private tutor, is in love with him, and their relationship is depicted as a mixture of what today would be called "grooming" and as an educational initiation rite for Carl. Amanda teaches him to draw and play instruments, and they visit exhibitions and go to Paris together. These events take place when the twins are between the ages of 13 and 14. Marika's mother refuses to acknowledge Henrik's abuse when finally confronted with it.

While Marika's focalization (marked by her limited access to the rooms where Carl and Amanda spend time alone) of Carl's and Amanda's relationship is romanticizing in nature—Amanda opened up a world of beauty and art to Carl, she thinks—her memories of her own relationship with her stepfather Henrik could not be more different: "I don't remember what he looked like. The only things I see are two brown, almost black eyes, a messy beard, a belly sticking out like that of a pregnant woman. I remember the smell of pipe smoke, too, the taste of tobacco and that other taste. But his facial features are erased" (19). (*"Jag minns inte hur han såg ut. Det enda jag ser är två bruna, nästan svarta ögon, ett rufsigt skägg, magen som sköt ut som på en havande kvinna. Jag kommer ihåg pipdoften också, smaken av tobaken och den andra smaken. Men hans anletsdrag är utsuddade."*) Here, repulsion is the dominating emotion attributed to Marika's memories of the abuse.

The relationship between Marika and her twin brother Carl is depicted as the most important and loving relationship of Marika's life. But it is a complicated and often sinister depiction of twin incest as both loving and unpleasant.

Marika's feelings surrounding her past childhood sexual relationship with her brother are depicted as ambivalent. On one hand, she remembers these situations being marked by simultaneous fear and arousal, mixed emotions which cause Marika to describe her brother as a "little demon" (*"en liten demon"*) (18). He is said to be the one luring her into these situations and her agency is depicted as limited at best.

Moreover, other potentially traumatic events include Henrik's gruesome death in a boat accident, as well as Marika's horrible experience of having a miscarriage during a stay in a remote cabin in the mountains. Moreover, the novel brings up many instances of dysfunction between Marika and her husband Jonas. When they enter into a relationship in their late teens, Jonas supports Marika when she tells him about the abuse she suffered in childhood, but soon his support is replaced by disbelief. Over the years, he becomes an alcoholic, repeatedly cheats on Marika, and displays controlling and emotionally abusive behavior.

Marika's narration returns to several memories from the past which become representative of a generally poisonous dynamic among her friends and family. Her mother is repeatedly remembered as withholding love and attention from her daughter while focusing completely on her son. In Marika's narration of her memories, different characters are also often quoted while degrading Marika's art and personality.

Marika's afterlife is fleshed out and partly merged with the plotline on Earth when she meets Sten Berggren, an agent from the afterlife who tells her that she is not supposed to dwell on Earth after her death. This afterlife is described in bureaucratic terms as a care facility to which Marika is to be admitted. When she refuses to leave Earth, two angels (Vietnam veterans whose American-ness is underlined by the fact that their lines are written in English) are sent to Earth to try to retrieve her. These three characters show up occasionally and engage in dialogue with the ghost Marika. At the end of the novel, Berggren carries out the heavenly authorities' decision to let Marika be reborn into her old family, this time as a boy.

Style, structure, and genre

Out of the four protagonists in this study, Marika is the one who is most clearly and actively shown to decide to stay on Earth as a ghost instead of moving on to the afterlife. She is aware that there "is somewhere else to go and I should probably have arrived there already, but I prefer to stay here" (7). (*"finns någon annanstans att ta vägen och förmodligen borde jag varit där för länge sedan men jag stannar hellre här."*) The reason for Marika's choice is implied to be related to her

fascination with her newfound position as a focalizer of her own death: "[w]atching yourself die is not something that happens every day," she notes (7). (*"Det är inte var dag man ser sig själv dö."*)

By making Marika a ghost, Rydberg is able to provide her protagonist not with omniscience but with a position as an external focalizer. In her new form, the invisible Marika "hovers around" below the ceiling (8), and as a ghost she can follow different characters around and account for their actions. But instead of seeing and depicting other people's thoughts and feelings, Marika's story about her living family members and friends is all about what people show to each other on a surface level: much of *Osalig ande* therefore consists of uncommented dialogue. In her invisible form, she is able to move around the city more freely than when she was alive, prompting reviewer Kristina Lugn to compare her to a protagonist of a flâneur novel.[239] Indeed, much of the novel takes place in the bars and streets of 1980s Stockholm, and inside the homes of its artistic bourgeoisie. But when Marika tells the reader about her life before the suicide, the focalization becomes internal and subjective. In both of these temporal modes, Marika occasionally slips into second person narration, addressing her loved ones directly but often in vain—they cannot hear her.

At the time I wrote this chapter (2024), the webpage of Rydberg's publishing house describes her style as follows:

> Several trips, including to the USA, China and India as well as an interest in film have influenced her writing. [...] her novels are dramatic and highly visual. Events are strongly charged, sometimes violent, and point towards a psychological abyss. Her style is hard-boiled and what is usually called masculine. She avoids explanations and embellishments and leaves much to the reader's own imagination.[240]

Rydberg is presented as a female novelist who writes about dark psychological subjects in a style that sets her apart from other female authors—a style which is "masculine." Also worth noting, considering the Swedish–American scope of this study, is the statement that Rydberg's writing is inspired by her travels in the United States.

The "hard-boiled" style marketed as Rydberg's hallmark is definitely to be found in the flat and matter-of-fact tone employed by the narrator and by the characters when they discuss events involving horrible abuse or their own feelings of hatred and disgust towards each other. Marika's narration is consistently misanthropic, and she has little praise for any character except her twin brother. The use of irony and sarcasm as rhetorical strategies creates a certain emotional distance between the narrator and the events being narrated, as well as between

[239] Lugn, "En dålig poets sällskap."

[240] "Carina Rydberg," Albert Bonniers förlag, accessed September 3, 2024. My translation.

narrator and reader.[241] However, the novel is no "hard-boiled" crime story. *Osalig ande* contains many elements of both melodrama and Gothic horror, which intermingle with irony and create a stark stylistic contrast.

The late 1980s and early 1990s in Sweden saw a rise in *skräckel* literature, a tendency within literary fiction which can literally be translated to "horror–disgust." *Skräckel* literature was characterized by its detailed depictions of sadism, evil, and disgust and of the body as a medium of violence. It often depicted harsh sexual violence. *Skräckel* has been classified as related to both postmodernism and Gothic horror. Rydberg's writing is usually considered a central part of this Swedish trend.[242] However, in this chapter I will explore how *Osalig ande* can also be read as trauma fiction.

Critical reception and previous research

Rydberg's writing has always been considered somewhat controversial in Sweden. In her most famous work to date, the autofictional *Den högsta kasten* (1997), Rydberg depicts her relationships with cultural figures of the 1990s Stockholm arts scene.[243] The novel was met with fury and led to what Lisbeth Larsson describes as a "formidable literary feud" in the Swedish newspapers.[244] The feud continued with the publication of *Djävulsformeln* (2000), another autofictional novel.[245]

Parallel to autofiction, horrifying sexual violence has been a continuing theme in Rydberg's writing. To name the most prominent examples besides *Osalig ande*, *Nattens amnesti* (1994) depicts a gruesome rape, and both Rydberg's novel *Den som vässar vargars tänder* (2006) and her play *Satanisterna* (2009) are

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[241] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines irony as "The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect [...]." *Oxford English Dictionary*, "irony, n. meanings, etymology and more," accessed August 12, 2024.

[242] Dominik Dziedzic, "Den skräckelfyllda kroppen. Feminism och hysteri i Carina Rydbergs *Nattens amnesti*," *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, no. 9 (2014): 45–59; Kay Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," in *Att läsa världen: ny litteraturkritik i systemskiftenas tid*, ed. Göran Greider and Björn Gunnarsson (Daidalos, 1992); Sveriges Radio, "1989: Året då svenska romaner utmanade med våld och äckel—P1 Kultur," November 4, 2019.

[243] The literary genre of autofiction blends elements of autobiography with fictional elements.

[244] Lisbeth Larsson, "The Return and Transformations of True Stories," *The History of Nordic Women's Literature*, October 13, 2016.

[245] On the subject of these two novels as autofiction, see: Christian Lenemark, *Sanna lögner: Carina Rydberg, Stig Larsson och författarens medialisering* (Gidlund, 2009).

stories about family secrets and trauma.[246] All in all, Carina Rydberg has published eight novels.[247]

Surprisingly, *Osalig ande* has not been subject to much previous academic research despite the fact that it is commonly referred to as Rydberg's breakthrough novel. The critical text which has most often come to frame later academic inquiry into Rydberg's novels was the poet and critic Kay Glans' article "Skräckellitteratur" from 1991, which coined the term *skräckel* and sparked a debate about it as a tendency in Swedish 1980s literature. According to Glans, the fictional violence used in *skräckel* serves as "surrogate violence" which exists because literature at the turn of the decade in 1990 failed to consider political conflicts, resorting instead to stories about "psychological and physiological conflicts."[248]

Despite the central role that sexual violence played in *skräckel* literature, Glans views it as an empty shock effect meant to denounce moralism, rather than as a site of political power struggles. His critique is situated in a historical moment when sadomasochism was a debated literary topic in Sweden.[249] When Glans conceptualizes rape as an aesthetic element rather than as a political subject matter, this is typical of many Swedish writers at the time.

Glans' summary of Rydberg's writing differs from his summary of that of her male peers in that he deems her writing to be less profound. According to Glans, Stig Larsson's protagonist's attempt to rape an 11-year-old girl in *Komedin I* (1989) serves as the "ultimate breach of boundaries" and as one of the ways in which a "shock effect" is created.[250] Magnus Dahlström's fiction in turn strives to provide an "ecstatic and mythical dimension" to violence, which he does "skillfully" in his "best work, *Fyr* (1987), a Swedish equivalent of Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967)."[251] Both Larsson and Dahlström depict sadistic sexual violence from the perspective of the perpetrators.

Rydberg's depictions of violence, written from the victim's perspective in *Osalig ande*, are dismissed by Glans as "cold-hammered sensationalism" and as

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[246] Elin Viksten, "Rydbergs skräck för att vara tråkig," *Gefle Dagblad*, February 15, 2010.

[247] *Kallare än Kargil* (1987), *Månaderna utan R* (1989), *Osalig ande*, *Nattens amnesti*, *Den högsta kasten*, *Djävulsformeln*, *Den som vässar vargars tänder*, and *Vitt slödder* (2022).

[248] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 206. My translation.

[249] See, for example: Bengt Anderberg, "Symaskinen bestiger en sågbock," *Expressen*, February 23, 1992; Ingrid Elam, "Alla dörrar öppna för markis de Sade," *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, April 8, 1989.

[250] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 198.

[251] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 198. The comparison to the American writer and wife-stabber Norman Mailer is a significant one. While hailed in the 1960s as a literary rebel of the sexual revolution, his depictions of rape and femicide from a male, arguably glorifying point of view have been critiqued by feminists for offering a sadistic view of "true" sex as consisting of men abusing women. See: Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 31–32; Louis Menand, "The Norman Invasion," A Critic at Large, *The New Yorker*, October 14, 2013; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (Viking, 2000), 153.

"soap opera."[252] While he describes Larsson's and Dahlström's work in terms of being "interested in the shock-effect created by perversion" and "psychological insight," Rydberg's prose is deemed a product of unintentional or unconscious affect: "for Rydberg, the naked desire to attract attention with sensational elements is the most visible, and if there are other intentions [...] they vanish in these fireworks of effect."[253] This is in line with how Swedish women's narratives about sex and rape have been received by many critics historically: criticized not mainly on the grounds of the subject matter but for its allegedly flawed aesthetic style.[254] Although Glans proceeds to criticize all three *skräckel* authors' depictions of violence for being nihilistic and ethically deprived, Rydberg's work is indirectly rendered the least aesthetically important.[255] Also worth noting is that Glans' definition of *skräckel* makes no distinction between sexual violence as depicted from the perpetrator's and the victim's points of view.

In a book chapter chronicling the style of Swedish women writers of the 1980s and 1990s, Ebba Witt-Brattström notes a general trend in the literary sphere of the 1980s of denouncing feminism and offering women writers less visibility than was the case in the previous decade. She discerns a misogynist backlash in the general culture of the time.[256] At the turn of the decade (in 1990), however, a tendency to problematize the prevailing idea that equality between the sexes has been achieved can be discerned. Many times, this results in a bleak literature of alienation: the young women writers focus on their "inner experience of emptiness, a depressive feeling of being worthless, and also describe confusion and sadness over the fact that man is no longer there for woman."[257]

In Carina Rydberg's writing, women are confronted with the reality that men are in fact capable of love—but only of other men, not of women. Witt-Brattström

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[252] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 199. Witt-Brattström echoes Glans' characterization of the novel as a soap opera. See: Ebba Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," in *Att skriva sin tid: nedslag i 80- och 90-talet*, ed. Claes Wahlin and Madeleine Grive (Norstedt, 1993), 311.

[253] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 198–200. For an analysis of the gendered differences in the media reception of Rydberg's and Larsson's autobiographical writing, see: Lenemark, *Sanna lögner*.

[254] See Witt-Brattström's examples in *Historiens metoo-vrål* (2019): The lifetime legacy of Sophie Sager, often considered one of the first feminists in Sweden and the first woman in Sweden to report an attempted rape and win the court case, was described in *Nordisk familjebok* (1916) as "grotesque and ridiculous." Still, in 1949 the book *Svenska män och kvinnor* claimed that "[a]llmost everything she wrote was marked by a lack of style and a bombastic quality, which corrupted her statements." Moa Martinson's novel *Kvinnor och äppelträd* (1933), which contained groundbreaking depictions of sex from a woman's perspective, was deemed by Anders Österling's review in *Svenska Dagbladet* to contain an atmosphere "saturated with misery, gossip and lust [...] the genital aspects dominate." Ebba Witt-Brattström, *Historiens metoo-vrål: #är jag inte människa* (Norstedts, 2019), 46, 51. My translation.

[255] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 201, 205.

[256] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 298–303.

[257] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 305–306.

reads *Osalig ande* as a "meta-analysis of the increasingly open homosociality that characterizes the cultural scene today."[258] In Rydberg's fiction, everything is shameful for women, especially their sexuality.[259] Witt-Brattström reads the ending of *Osalig ande* as a way of solving all the aforementioned conflicts by letting Marika be reborn as a boy; and in the capacity of a boy, to be loved.[260]

In a 1993 essay in the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet,* Anna Williams discusses what the reasons might be for the horrific violence permeating Swedish literary fiction in the 1980s and early 1990s. She suggests that *skräckel* literature is not necessarily devoid of moral and ethical reflections as Glans had argued two years earlier. Instead, *skräckel* literature makes visible the political, social, linguistic, and spiritual alienation which characterizes contemporary society. *Osalig ande* serves as an example of this tendency: the ghost protagonist "watches from afar and beyond all communication the people she once lived with…hence, a completed alienation." Williams relates the alienation depicted in Swedish fiction at the time to larger shifts in society and politics: in the 1980s and early 1990s, Sweden saw political decisions and debates that

> have effects on equality at the expense of women's freedom of choice and emancipation—concrete events that nevertheless illuminate our contemporary attitudes of gender politics, order of priorities and readiness for action (cuts in childcare is one example, another is the discussion about maids, where certain voices seem to want to bring us back to the social structure that we have spent more than half a century trying to escape from. […]) In literature written by women, one finds a formulation of an existential disorientedness that is likely related to such setbacks.[261]

In Williams' interpretation, Rydberg's style of writing can be read as a reaction to anti-feminist political debates and reforms in 1980s Sweden. Williams suggests that Swedish women writers of the 1980s and 1990s who explored victimhood and women's marginalization did not necessarily write masochistic and withdrawn novels, as Witt-Brattström had suggested. Instead, "all these strong images and sights originate, in my opinion, in the revolt against linguistic, spiritual, and bodily abuse."[262]

Although Tamara Andersson focuses on Rydberg's autobiographical writing in her dissertation *Den ensamma sjöjungfrun: om Carina Rydbergs jagberättande ur ett genreperspektiv* (2015), one of her results becomes specifically relevant in relation to

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[258] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 310–311.

[259] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 311.

[260] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 312.

[261] Anna Williams, "En svensk litteratur av skräckel och våld," *Svenska Dagbladet*, September 19, 1993. My translation.

[262] Williams, "En svensk litteratur av skräckel och våld."

this chapter's examination of how rape trauma is narrated in *Osalig ande*. Andersson recognizes a pattern in Rydberg's writing where she repeatedly positions her role as an author as an absolute opposite to life itself. The role of the woman writer is depicted as akin to being one of the living dead, Andersson notes.[263]

It is remarkable that so little previous research has focused specifically on the theme of rape trauma which is central in so much of Rydberg's writing. Dominik Dziedzic touches on the subject in the article "Den skräckelfyllda kroppen. Feminism och hysteri i Carina Rydbergs *Nattens amnesti*" (2014), in which he interrogates how violence against the body of the protagonist—a woman who has been raped and suffers in its aftermath—renders her "hysterical." Referring to Elaine Showalter's *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), Dziedzic claims to follow her definition of hysteria, which he understands as a consequence of the cultural violence which reduces women to sex objects.[264] However, I would argue that Showalter, to a much greater extent, views hysteria in the 1990s as an epidemic of paranoia that spreads through media, in which women blame external sources ("a virus, sexual molestation, chemical warfare, satanic conspiracy, alien infiltration") for psychic problems. She views the feminist designation of sexual violence as a potential source of traumatization as an example of a misguided attempt to "claim hysteria" and "admire its victims."[265]

Tamara Andersson also briefly uses one iteration of the concept of trauma as an analytic tool. She reads society's expectations of women as tragic in and of themselves for Rydberg's heroines, and suggests that they find themselves in the same situations over and over again because they act according to the Freudian "repetition compulsion." Andersson applies this theory, inspired by the interpretation of Michelle Massé, who posits that trauma victims unconsciously seek out and repeat the same traumatic situations over and over again in order to, in Andersson's words, "reactivate the trauma so that the victim will force herself to try to acknowledge what happened." In Rydberg's autobiographical writing, the repetition compulsion manifests itself in the same way as in many female-centric Gothic stories: through the heroine longing for heterosexual marriage, although this means her return to domesticity and her repetition of a restrictive version of womanhood.[266]

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[263] Tamara Andersson, *Den ensamma sjöjungfrun: om Carina Rydbergs jagberättande ur ett genreperspektiv* (Umeå universitet, Institutionen för kultur- och medievetenskaper, 2015), 168–170.

[264] Dziedzic, "Den skräckelfyllda kroppen," 48.

[265] Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (Picador, 1997), 4, 11, 60–61, 206.

[266] Andersson, *Den ensamma sjöjungfrun*, 104–107, my translation; Michelle A. Masse, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, 2nd ed. (Cornell University Press, 1992).

Osalig ande was reviewed in several Swedish newspapers at its time of publication. Positive reviews stated that the novel was entertaining and suspenseful with efficient prose, (Hessler; Werkmäster). Lennart Bromander was of the opinion that Rydberg's unconventional premise offers an "original approach to dark family conflicts, which if told trivially would perhaps have seemed trivial, but which one now follows with excitement and curiosity."[267]

Negative reviews in turn critiqued the novel for being too trivial. Magnus Brohult stated that Rydberg's narrative "ultimately ends up being mostly a prosaic relationship novel," a "love carousel," and "it is only as unpretentious entertainment literature that the novel has any merit."[268] Several reviewers disapproved of Rydberg's choice to include Berggren and his two Vietnam veteran helpers as representatives of the afterlife. The choice to include them was deemed to compromise the rest of the novel's serious subject matter (Englund; Hessler; Lugn). It is an "unnecessary irony" and a "postmodern flirt with B-movies," Hessler states. Lugn was also skeptical of the Berggren character but draws the conclusion that *Osalig ande* is still a very good novel—otherwise she would not have been so annoyed by it.[269]

Marika's position as a ghost narrator draws the attention of almost all the reviews, and is discussed in most detail by Lugn. The problem with the otherwise well-written novel, she states, is "that it is not that very interesting that its narrator is dead." Death has finally granted the character Marika some well-needed self-distance and indifference, but why then is the novel called "restless spirit"? In fact, Lugn argues, it is the living characters who are restless.[270]

The journalistic reception generally did not identify sexual and gender-based violence as a main theme of the novel. In many of the reviews, it is not mentioned at all, while in two reviews it is mentioned only through the euphemisms "sexual deviances" (Werkmäster), and "a hodgepodge of sexuality, between little and old, between sister and brother [...]" (Hessler). Lennart Bromander's review stands out when it states that Marika has been "brutally sexually abused by her stepfather."[271]

Generally, the reviews did not talk about the novel directly through a framework of trauma, although Bromander writes that the instances of sexual violence which Marika has been subject to make it understandable that she has turned

[267] Hessler, "En studie i skuld och våld"; Werkmäster, "En andes längtan efter svar"; Bromander, "Mörk familjetragedi."

[268] Brohult, "Flyhänt om oknytt."

[269] Englund, "Når inte ända fram"; Hessler, "En studie i skuld och våld"; Lugn, "En dålig poets sällskap."

[270] Lugn, "En dålig poets sällskap."

[271] Werkmäster, "En andes längtan efter svar"; Hessler, "En studie i skuld och våld"; Bromander, "Mörk familjetragedi."

into a “failed woman.”[272] Most relevant to the social dynamics of trauma which my study is interested in is Lugn’s analysis that “[w]hen [Marika] finally becomes free [through death], she is struck by homesickness. In this fact lies a psychological realism of such a serious kind that not even a less seriously intended death can defeat it.”[273]

Analysis

Osalig ande as a narrative of rape trauma

I will open my discussion of *Osalig ande* by disagreeing with Tamara Andersson’s view of the function of trauma in Rydberg’s writing. Andersson is right about the fact that Rydberg’s protagonists find themselves repeating destructive patterns of behavior and thought, but this is not necessarily because of a “repetition compulsion” related to trauma.[274] One should be hesitant to, as Andersson does, read trauma as merely an overarching metaphor for women’s experiences of being compulsively stuck in prevailing societal norms concerning the kinds of lives women ought to live. By doing so, one risks broadening the concept of trauma to mean essentially the same thing as female experience.

What this chapter will do instead is focus on trauma, not as a metaphor for womanhood, but as a specific literary subject matter, and explore how *Osalig ande* directly portrays sexual abuse and rape as events that affect the protagonist’s psyche. *Osalig ande*, being among the first Swedish or American novels about sexual violence to blend ghost story and realism after Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, takes a very different stylistic approach. While Morrison avoids depicting rape directly and lets the ghost Beloved’s narration be scattered—a stylistic choice reflected in Whitehead’s criteria for trauma fiction—Marika’s narration of traumatic events is straightforward in comparison, perhaps in part a reflection of the fact that it was written before the popularization of the psychoanalytically influenced trauma theories of the Yale School. However, integral to the

[272] Bromander, “Mörk familjetragedi.”

[273] Lugn, “En dålig poets sällskap.”

[274] I join a non-Freudian tradition in which the concept of the repetition compulsion is no longer considered relevant. Contemporary psychotraumatology discusses repetitive behaviors without this psychoanalytic superstructure. Instead, it centers memory functions, social functions, and biological functions as factors in people’s repetitive behaviors. Today, psychotraumatology has different and much simpler ways of understanding why a person ends up in similar situations over and over again; for example, because their life situations tend to stay the same due to external circumstances. See: M. Andrew Holowchak and Michael Lavin, “Beyond the Death Drive: The Future of ‘Repetition’ and ‘Compulsion to Repeat’ in Psychopathology,” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 32, no. 4 (2015): 645–68.

style of Rydberg's novel, like the trauma fiction identified by Whitehead, is the self-conscious use of style and form to engage in reflection or critique.[275]

The ghost's casual and sarcastic tone of narration is an example of the novel's critical use of style as a mode of critique. *Osalig ande* opens by having the protagonist Marika address the readers directly: "I'm sorry but you came too late. I'm already dead" (7). (*"Jag är ledsen men ni kom för sent. Jag är redan död."*) Right away, the novel thus asks its reader to let go of any expectation of a romantic narrative of death. It also questions the expectation, expressed by Whitehead (who in turn is inspired by Felman and Laub), that readers of novels can serve as witnesses to the trauma of literary characters in meaningful ways.[276]

Marika has committed suicide, but on the first page of the novel we also learn that dying was not necessarily her intention: she left the door unlocked, to give herself a chance to be saved (7)—but like Marika's husband, the reader arrives too late to intervene. Marika's suicide is typical of people who are currently diagnosed with PTSD, as the *DSM-5* associates PTSD with suicide attempts.[277] The novel's choice to include the information that Marika left the door unlocked, perhaps hoping that she will be saved, makes *Osalig ande* a narrative that departs from the kind of depiction which, in Mithu Sanyal's opinion, exaggerates the psychological impact of rape to be worse than death, and imbues this pain with moral virtue.[278] Here, rather than a symbol of virtue, death is the partly unintentional consequence of severe mental anguish. Right after her suicide, Marika is fascinated by her new, external gaze on her own body. She finds that the reality of her death is not as aesthetically pleasing as she would have hoped: although the evening sun falls over her face and her skin is "deathly pale" the picture is interrupted by a string of brown saliva that has escaped her mouth (7). In combination with the sarcastic tone of narration, this scene subverts the presumptions of a link between aesthetic value, female virtue, and death, perhaps most famously exemplified by the Gothic writer Edgar Allan Poe's proposition that "the death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."[279]

The sexual violence inflicted on Marika by her stepfather when she was a young teenager would, outside of fiction, be labelled child sexual abuse. The fact that Glans, in his article, notes in passing that "incest and abuse of minors have made the news headlines during the 80s" indicates that these discussions were

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[275] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 3

[276] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 8.

[277] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 278.

[278] Sanyal, *Rape*, 63–64.

[279] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 59; Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven, and The Philosophy of Composition* (2017).

indeed noticed by Swedish literary circles at the time.[280] Partly because she included the theme of incest, Rydberg's story about rape trauma opened up interpretations in which it was read as a sensationalist story aiming for the most extreme forms of violence possible (Glans), or in which the theme of childhood sexual abuse was framed as just another shocking sex act among many others (Hessler; Werkmäster). This interpretation is especially close at hand when *Osalig ande* is read as a part of the Swedish trend of *skräckel* literature.

But in *Osalig ande*, sexual violence is no empty apolitical shock effect like Glans claims. What he calls the "elementary psychological and physiological conflicts" of *skräckel* literature do, in fact, tie into important political discussions of the 1970s and 80s, namely feminist theorizing and consciousness-raising about rape.[281]

Bearing in mind Mieke Bal's insight about the importance of considering focalization in stories about sexual violence, Glans' definition of *skräckel* needs to be challenged on the grounds that he fails to distinguish between stories that depict rape from the perpetrators' and the victims' perspectives.[282] Like many American rape novels of "the long 1990s," as identified by literary scholar Robin Field—Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1992), Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1996), and Sapphire's *Push* (1996)—*Osalig ande* depicted the topic of incest or child sexual abuse from the victim's point of view. In Rydberg's novel, rape is not portrayed as a pleasurable act, focalized through the perpetrator, but indeed, like a horrible, potentially traumatic experience. And like mid-1980s anti-rape activists, the novel emphasized the existence and impact of marital rape, a previously quite unrecognized and downplayed form of violence.[283] It is remarkable that this dimension of the subject went unrecognized to such an extent in the novel's critical reception.

The unwanted visibility of sexual violence

The fact that victims' experiences of sexual violence are often ignored is conceptualized by Judith Herman as a tendency which renders them invisible.[284] However, Esther Peeren notes that living ghosts—people who are ignored and considered expendable—are not necessarily completely invisible. The person may

[280] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 204.

[281] Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Northeastern University Press, 2000), 152, 154; Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 151; Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 24, 63, 145; Williams, "En svensk litteratur av skräckel och våld."

[282] Bal, *Narratology*, 159.

[283] Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 154; Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 151.

[284] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

indeed be seen, but is not believed to have an interior life that exceeds the material.[285] When depicting sexual assault, *Osalig ande* illustrates this dynamic.

While Marika retells the story of how she was sexually abused as a child, the novel depicts not only the invisibility of this violence within Marika's home—where her mother fails to notice and stop the abuse—and in society in general, but also the vulnerable *visibility* involved in the sexual harassment she experiences. Her memory of how her stepfather Henrik gradually approaches her is depicted as her being seen by the perpetrator in a special and secret way—a gaze which nobody else in Marika's family notices: "Henrik had a special way of looking at me. No one but me noticed it. It was like a secret agreement. Once, he kissed my cheek and I felt the moisture from his saliva but I couldn't wipe it away, I let it dry" (33). (*"Henrik hade ett särskilt sätt att titta på mig. Ingen annan än jag lade märke till det. Det var som en hemlig överenskommelse. En gång kysste han min kind och jag kände fukten från hans saliv men jag kunde inte stryka bort den, jag lät den torka fast."*)

Not only is Marika pinned down by the gaze of her stepfather; one of the strategies he uses as a part of his sexual advances is to convince her that he can see into her mind, know her most secret and private thoughts. They happen to be exactly the kinds of thoughts he would like her to have:

> – Even though you're so young, I know you can understand this, he used to say. You are an intelligent girl. Mature for your age. [...] You don't have to answer, I can see it in you. You and I understand each other better than anyone else. You understand me.
>
> – But you have Mom.
>
> – Yes, but I sometimes feel that there are certain things that only really young people understand, precisely because you are young. You have a kind of intuition that we older people lack.
>
> I guess I never quite grasped what kind of intuition he meant, but somehow I was proud that he wanted to share his secrets with me (33).

> *– Trots att du är så ung, vet jag att du kan förstå det här, brukade han säga. Du är en intelligent flicka. Mogen för din ålder. [...] Du behöver inte svara, jag ser det på dig. Du och jag förstår varandra bättre än några andra. Du förstår mig.*
>
> *– Du har ju mamma.*
>
> *– Ja men ibland känner jag att det finns saker bara riktigt unga människor begriper, just därför att ni är unga. Ni har en sorts intuition som vi äldre saknar.*
>
> *Jag begrep väl aldrig riktigt vad för sorts intuition han menade men på något sätt var jag stolt över att han ville dela sina hemligheter med mig.*

Henrik uses the same rhetorical strategy when he escalates the abuse:

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[285] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 36.

I had almost forgotten about that kiss until one day he took my hand and brought it to the zipper of his pants and said:

– I know you know about this.

He started taking me to the movies. [...] We sat in the back. When the lights went out he grabbed my hand. He never took his eyes off the screen. [...] He wrapped his fingers around my hair and pressed my head down. *I know you know about this*. I never understood how he could know so much about me. It was only years later that it occurred to me that maybe he didn't know at all. That maybe he was just pretending to know (34, emphasis in novel).

Jag hade nästan glömt bort den där kyssen ända tills han en dag tog min hand och förde den till blixtlåset på sina byxor och sa:

– Jag vet att du känner till det här.

Han började ta med mig på bio. [...] Vi satt längst bak. När ljuset släcktes grep han tag om min hand. Han släppte aldrig bioduken med blicken. [...] Han slöt sina fingrar kring mitt hår och pressade ner mitt huvud. Jag vet att du känner till det här. *Jag förstod aldrig hur han kunde veta så mycket om mig. Det var först flera år efteråt det slog mig att han kanske inte alls visste. Att han kanske bara låtsades veta.*

The childhood violation Marika is shown to suffer is an experience marked by the frightening—and shame-filled—belief that the adult perpetrator can see into her mind. And perhaps, in a way, he does. By authoritatively telling her what *he* envisions her innermost thoughts to be, they become true. She internalizes a view of herself as being transparent. As a result, she feels that she cannot hide from her perpetrator—and is also unable to formulate her own counternarrative that would label what is going on as abuse.

But in *Osalig ande*, there are also other ways of feeling seen: comforting and empowering ways. Rydberg paints the experience of genuinely being noticed by a person other than the perpetrator as the crucial catalyst for Marika's decision to resist her stepfather's assaults. What finally makes her disrupt the abuse is the following event: Henrik has regularly been bringing Marika to half-empty cinema theaters where he repeatedly sexually violates her, and this time he takes her along to a violent movie with an age limit of 15. In a symbolic intertextual nod, the film is *Deliverance* (1972), which contains one of cinema history's most infamous rape scenes. A cinema employee stops them at the door and asks about Marika's age.

– Is she fifteen? he asked.

– Of course she is, Henrik replied.

The janitor looked at me.

– Is that really true?

I felt Henrik's hand on my arm. I said nothing. With a sigh, the man tore our tickets (34).

– Är hon femton? frågade han.

– Visst är hon det, svarade Henrik.
Vaktmästaren granskade mig.
– Är det verkligen sant det?
Jag kände Henriks hand mot min arm. Jag sa ingenting. Med en suck rev mannen våra biljetter.

What happens next I read as a direct consequence of the cinema employee's concerned gaze and his questioning of the relationship between the adult man and the young girl. Inside of the theater Marika thinks of the cinema employee and then of Carl—and she is finally able to escape. She lets go of Henrik and rushes outside, where she considers ending her life by jumping off a bridge. But Marika changes her mind (35). Choosing disclosure over death, she goes home and wakes her brother up with the intent of telling him about the sexual abuse. When he asks what is going on, if it couldn't wait until tomorrow, she persists—she needs to say it there and then.

– He does things. He makes me do them too. The kinds of things you and I did. Only worse. Much worse, Carl.
I said no more. I was half-lying in his bed with my face pressed against his blanket. He lifted my legs into a more comfortable position.
– Why didn't you tell me before?
– I don't know.
– Don't tell mom. I'll make sure he doesn't do it again, but mom can't know. Never, ever (35).

– Han gör saker. Han får mig att göra dom också. Såna som du och jag gjorde. Fast värre. Mycket värre, Carl.
Jag sa inte mer. Jag halvlåg i hans säng med ansiktet pressat mot hans täcke. Han lyfte upp mina ben och lade mig till rätta.
– Varför har du inte berättat tidigare?
– Jag vet inte.
– Säg ingenting till mamma. Jag ska se till att han inte gör så igen men mamma får inte veta. Aldrig någonsin.

Marika says she does not know why she has not told anyone about the abuse before, but the novel gives us a clear hint: up until the cinema employee questions Henrik for bringing Marika to see a violent film although she looks too young, there is no evidence in the novel of anybody else noticing Marika's relationship with Henrik and asking her about it.

When Marika involves Carl, together they manage to stop the abuse. Carl sits in between them at the cinema theater and he and Marika sometimes sleep in the same room, sometimes change rooms with each other. But Carl's commitment to protecting Marika from Henrik is also self-serving. He starts blackmailing Henrik using the threat of telling their mother about the abuse, making

Henrik give him money and buy him things he wants. Marika describes the changed social dynamic as follows: "Henrik didn't see me anymore. He only saw Carl and he was scared" (36). (*"Henrik såg mig inte längre. Han såg bara Carl och han var rädd."*) The abuse has been stopped through the threat of male revenge, but in the process, Marika is rendered invisible yet again.

But while being seen by the cinema employee and believed by her twin brother represent two kinds of helpful social support, Marika's mother is shown to make her trauma worse by refusing to believe or even listen to her story.[286] When the story about Henrik's abuse of Marika finally reaches her mother's ears, Marika's lack of agency in this situation is underlined by several components of the scene. Importantly it is Carl who tells their mother, not Marika, and his disclosure comes in a situation in which a conflict between Carl and their mother is taking place—Marika is present but without agency in the situation. Reacting desperately when their mother tells him that she is sending him alone to Austria as punishment for his rebelliousness, Carl brings up Henrik, whom he calls a creep, after which their mother slaps him across the face.

> – Do you know what he did when you were alone upstairs in the bedroom? Do you know what he did to Marika?
>
> She hit him again. She hit him several times, and the sound of her palm hitting his cheek grew louder with each blow.
>
> – Quiet! Be quiet! I don't want to hear about it!
>
> – We never told you about it because we thought it was better that you didn't know. He's dead. But now I'm telling you. And it's your fault that I'm telling you! Ask Marika what he did to her! Ask her!
>
> She was crying now. Carl was crying too, and his cheeks were red from the slaps.
>
> – Get out of here! she said. I don't want to see you two.
>
> Carl left, but I stayed in the room. Mom had put her hands to her face and it was as if she didn't notice that I was standing there, only a meter away from her. It was strange. I was as invisible as I am now. When I finally left her I thought: She'll ask me about it this afternoon. And if she doesn't, she'll ask tomorrow.
>
> But she didn't ask. She never asked me to talk about it, not once in the fifteen years I had left to live (64).
>
> *– Vet du vad han gjorde när du låg ensam uppe i sovrummet? Vet du vad han gjorde med Marika?*
>
> *Hon slog honom igen. Hon slog honom flera gånger och ljudet när hennes handflata träffade kinden blev högre för varje slag.*

[286] Here, the novel reflects the state-of-the-art in contemporary psychotraumatology: negatively experienced interactions tend to increase the risk of developing trauma, whereas positively interactions tend to lead to measures of post-traumatic growth; for example, a sense of personal strength, or a greater appreciation for life. See: Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307.

– Tyst! Du är tyst! Jag vill inte höra talas om det!

– Vi berättade aldrig om det för vi tyckte det var bättre att du inte visste. Han är ju död. Men nu säger jag det. Och det är ditt fel att jag säger det! Fråga Marika vad han gjorde med henne! Fråga henne!

Hon grät nu. Carl grät också och hans kinder rodnade efter örfilarna.

– Gå ut härifrån! sa hon. Jag vill inte se er två.

Carl gick men jag stannade kvar i rummet. Mamma hade fört händerna till ansiktet och det var som om hon inte märkte att jag stod där, bara en meter ifrån henne. Det var underligt. Jag var lika osynlig som jag är nu. När jag till slut lämnade henne tänkte jag: Hon kommer att fråga mig om det i eftermiddag. Och om hon inte gör det så frågar hon imorgon.

Men hon frågade inte. Hon bad mig aldrig tala om det, inte en enda gång under de femton år jag hade kvar att leva.

In *Osalig ande*, confiding in your closest family members about traumatic events is shown to be dangerous, because your secrets will either not be believed, will be used against you, or as in the quote above, be met with physical violence and then completely ignored. Marika's mother's refusal to acknowledge what has happened to her daughter makes Marika think of herself as being equally invisible then as she is now, a ghost.

While Marika's mother is shown to ignore her daughter's story altogether, Marika's husband Jonas doubts that she is telling the truth (21–22). However, he does not let her keep stories about her sexual experiences to herself, either. He repeats that they should keep no secrets from each other (50, 51). The controlling undertone of this statement echoes through the novel and hints at a relationship marked by emotional abuse. Jonas' demand for transparency manifests in him accusing Marika of checking out another man when they are on a date together, when in reality Marika did not even notice the man (51). As a ghost looking back at her marriage, she expresses regret about telling her husband too much about the traumatic events of her life: "[w]e knew a lot about each other, you and I. Things we told each other during our infatuation stage, when we didn't think anything could do any damage. Things you should never tell. But indeed, later we learned the price of honesty" (9). (*"Vi visste en del om varann du och jag. Saker vi berättade på den tiden vi var nykära och inte trodde någonting kunde göra skada. Saker man aldrig ska berätta. Men nog fick vi lära oss vad ärlighet kostar."*)

Bearing in mind all the instances in which the novel shows Marika punished for telling people about the sexual violence she has suffered—and all of the instances in which she is shown to have her secrets revealed without her consent—it follows quite naturally that silence and self-imposed invisibility are often depicted in the novel as forms of self-protection. As the abuse by Marika's stepfather is still ongoing, the novel shows how her silence becomes a refusal to let the perpetrator into her room, body, and mind. Marika tells the reader about how even after Henrik's abuse was interrupted, she would still wake up from him

turning the door handle trying to get into her locked bedroom. She hears him whisper from the other side of the door:

> – What's wrong with you Marika? Why are you doing this? It was you and me. It was our secret. Why did you tell him?
>
> And I lay there mute and thought I could feel the scent and taste of him seeping in through the keyhole. I don't want your secrets, I whispered. I don't want them anymore (36).

> *– Vad är det med dig Marika? Varför gör du så här? Det var ju du och jag. Det var vår hemlighet. Varför berättade du för honom?*
>
> *Och jag låg där stum och tyckte mig känna doften och smaken av honom sippra in genom nyckelhålet. Jag vill inte ha dina hemligheter, viskade jag. Jag vill inte ha dom längre.*

Here, Marika's silence is depicted in a multifold way: partly, she is mute out of shame. Fear is another reason for her silence: she lies frozen and unable to hold back traumatic memories of the assault. But a third aspect of her silence is defiant: she refuses to receive Henrik's confidences, because he uses them to manipulate her, tying her to him against her will.

Marika's invisibility continues when she becomes a ghost. As a specter, most of the time she watches others without being seen, finally hidden from her husband's disapproving gaze. At times her silence and invisibility even seem voluntary. Marika chose to not leave a suicide note (8), thus refusing to communicate her trauma to her family through written narrative, something that is usually expected of a person committing suicide. If she lacked agency in life, nothing points to the possibility that her story of rape trauma would be taken any more seriously by her loved ones if they read it from a suicide note. In fact, part of her seems to hope that her *lack* of communication will get her husband in trouble by making him a suspect of murder (8).

To summarize, *Osalig ande*'s use of a ghost protagonist lets the novel engage with unwanted visibility and invisibility as two mutually non-exclusive positions imposed on victims which work together to enable sexual violence. Marika is shown to be able to speak about the abuse only when she is seen in a different way by a concerned stranger. However, Marika's disclosure is used against her by her loved ones, resulting in her subsequent withdrawal of speech.

Incest and marital rape as two potentially traumatic events

Reading *Osalig ande* as a Swedish equivalent of the American rape trauma novel, rather than as a part of the Swedish *skräckel* genre, the depictions of incest cease to be cynical "shock effects." Moreover, another important instance of rape in *Osalig ande* also becomes visible: marital rape.

> All those nights in the room at his parents' house, Carl had already been gone for a year and Jonas lay over me and whispered Can't you relax now, Marika, can't we make love?
>
> I didn't even fight back. There was no need. I was impenetrable, nothing could get in there, not in that place. He tried and tried, thrusting his member harder and harder against me, but I closed my eyes and pushed him away and that's when I heard the sound. It was a sound I knew, and I slid down and my lips closed around the head of his penis and the sound got louder, the canoes plunged down the rapids and hit the rocks (86).
>
> *Alla de där nätterna i rummet hemma hos hans föräldrar, Carl hade redan varit borta i ett år och Jonas låg över mig och viskade Kan du inte slappna av nu Marika, kan vi inte älska?*
>
> *Jag kämpade inte ens emot. Det behövdes inte. Jag var hopsnörd, ingenting kunde ta sig in där, inte på det stället. Han försökte och försökte, stötte sin lem allt hårdare emot mig men jag slöt ögonen och sköt honom ifrån mig och det var då jag hörde ljudet. Det var ett ljud jag kände till och jag gled ner och mina läppar slöt sig kring hans ollon och ljudet blev starkare, kanoterna störtade sig nerför forsen och slog emot klipporna.*

Following the definition of rape which I outlined in the previous chapter—it is a non-consensual, unwanted or coerced sexual act—this scene, in which Marika's husband-to-be Jonas wants to have sex and Marika does not, depicts a clear case. Two important things are going on in this section. First, Rydberg lets Marika believe that fighting or denying Jonas is unnecessary because she believes that it is impossible to rape a resisting woman. This is not true, but a common rape myth.[287] When she realizes that her belief about the nature of rape is false, Marika starts hearing the sound of canoes tumbling down a waterfall—the sound of the film playing in the background when she was last assaulted by her stepfather.

The text thus implies that on a sensory level Marika is transported back to another traumatic moment. The implication of rape becomes even clearer since the film in question is referenced directly in the novel: *Deliverance*. At its release it became notorious not because of the canoe scene, but because of the rape scene which preceded it.[288] Thus, when narrating this scene to the reader, Rydberg is drawing a connection between the film scene, Henrik's assault of Marika in the movie theater, and Jonas' forced sex with Marika: all of them depict rapes.

By including another, less obvious scene of rape in the narrative, Rydberg resists the catastrophizing rape myth according to which rape is only committed by inhuman monsters, and shows how it may be committed by beloved spouses,

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[287] Bourke, *Rape*, 23.

[288] Roger Ebert, "Deliverance," Reviews, *RogerEbert.Com*, October 9, 1972; Adam Scovell, "How Masterly Horror Deliverance Set a Controversial Trend," *BBC*, June 28, 2022. Another intertextual reference here could be T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922), which also contains an image of a canoe in relation to a depiction of rape. See: Schottenius Cullhed, *Filomelas förvandlingar*, 136.

as well.[289] During a time in which incest was debated to the point that some people found it sensationalistic—or "hysterical," as many participants in the Swedish debate called it—*Osalig ande*'s likening of the events of incest and marital rape underlines the previously downplayed hurt caused by marital rape.[290] At the same time it de-sensationalizes incest by comparing it to the more ordinary-seeming experience of a wife unsuccessfully resisting her husband's advances. Additionally, the scene shows how Marika's trauma is reinforced, undoing and reversing the process of healing she to some extent had started. Here, Marika's trauma is not explained by a singular instance of rape, but is shown to stem from several different forms of abuse, which occurred at different times in her life.

At the time of publication of *Osalig ande*, marital rape had only been illegal in Sweden for 25 years and the law was tried for the first time only six years earlier, in 1984.[291] Rydberg's combination of ghost story and what one reviewer derogatorily called a "prosaic relationship novel" allows her to depict two different potentially traumatic events, as well as two different kinds of sexual violence—childhood sexual abuse and marital rape—which during the time of the novel's publication were usually not conceived of as similar phenomena, and show how they still resemble each other in their traumatizing effect on the protagonist.

And indeed, Rydberg's departure from realism in a first-person depiction of rape trauma was a typical stylistic feature of American rape fiction of the same time.[292] By positioning Rydberg's story alongside this literary tradition, I want to call attention to the fact that this kind of literature already existed in Sweden 1990. Demonstrating that the novel reflects the debates around incest at the time, I also want to acknowledge the kind of knowledge that fiction can entail—but which can easily be overlooked by literary scholars reading the work through other generic expectations, within which this knowledge is invisible.

Shame and mythologies of rape trauma

As Witt-Brattström notes, many things, and especially sexuality, is portrayed as shameful for the women in *Osalig ande*.[293] Indeed, psychological research has shown that shame is deeply connected to both sexuality and processes of social

[289] Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 409.

[290] Nilsson, "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," 31.

[291] Gothenburg University Library, "Kärlek, makt och systerskap: Viktiga årtal," Gothenburg University Library, accessed April 27, 2025.

[292] Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 152, 154; Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 149–151.

[293] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 311.

rejection.[294] However, more specifically, shame has also been shown to be a predictor of how PTSD symptoms develop over time in victims of violent crime.[295] In the following, I will explore the role played by this emotion in how rape trauma is depicted in the story.

Heidi La Bash and Anthony Papa summarize the emotion of shame, as it is known in contemporary psychology, as follows: it is "a highly aversive negative emotion arising when a part of the self is thought to be corrupted by an irredeemable act or by a contaminating event that evokes the perceived judgment of others."[296] For Marika, narrating her life story as a ghost, the main "irredeemable act" that she repeatedly evokes as the reason for other people's judgment of her is her failure as an artist: "I would have given up my life to reach at least half of Carl's level of skill. But I was a bad actress, failed as an artist, embarrassing as a poet. I was nothing" (12). (*"Jag hade gett upp mitt liv för att nå upp till åtminstone hälften av Carls nivå. Men jag var dålig som aktris, misslyckad som konstnär, pinsam som poet. Jag var ingenting."*) This sentiment, that she is an inherently bad artist, and in extension, a worthless person, resonates throughout the story.

However, Marika's attribution of her shame to being a bad artist is not echoed by the novel as a whole. Instead, shame is shown to originate partly in the sexual abuse Marika experienced as a child. Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed emphasizes the social aspect of shame when she states that "shame feels like an exposure—another sees what I have done that is bad and hence shameful [...]."[297] Or in Erik H. Erikson's words: "[o]ne is visible and not ready to be visible."[298] Marika is indeed depicted as being "visible and not ready to be visible" several times throughout the story, and especially in connection to the sexual abuse her stepfather subjects her to in her early teens: as discussed in the previous section, the perpetrator's acts of shaming were used as coercive tactics of sexual abuse.

Moreover, shame is shown to rise from people's responses to the abuse in its aftermath. In the following, I will consider the ways in which male characters

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[294] John A. Terrizzi et al., "How Does Disgust Regulate Social Rejection? A Mini-Review," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (June 2023); John A. Terrizzi and Natalie J. Shook, "On the Origin of Shame: Does Shame Emerge From an Evolved Disease-Avoidance Architecture?," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 14 (February 2020); Joshua M. Tybur et al., "Microbes, Mating, and Morality: Individual Differences in Three Functional Domains of Disgust," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 1 (2009): 103–22.

[295] Bernice Andrews et al., "Predicting PTSD Symptoms in Victims of Violent Crime: The Role of Shame, Anger, and Childhood Abuse," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 109, no. 1 (2000): 69–73; Heidi La Bash and Anthony Papa, "Shame and PTSD Symptoms," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 6, no. 2 (2014): 159–66.

[296] La Bash and Papa, "Shame and PTSD Symptoms," 159.

[297] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.

[298] Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2. ed., (W. W. Norton, 1963), 244. See also: Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.

shame Marika in the aftermath of the abuse, by evoking different ideas of women's sexual trauma—but I also show how other characters sometimes reduce her shame by responding with belief.

First of all, Rydberg shows how Marika's stepfather continues to intimidate her even after he has been forced to stop the most obvious, physical abuse. In a memory of Marika's childhood, she and her brother are supposed to join Henrik for a fishing trip. When he tries to leave before Carl gets a chance to join them in the boat, Marika exclaims that they need to wait for him. Henrik then tells Marika:

> – Sit down, goddammit? What's wrong with you? Can't you manage without your brother for half an hour?
>
> And then, in a lower voice, barely audible over the sound of the engine:
>
> – You don't need to get hysterical. There's no need whatsoever. That's over (40).
>
> *– Sätt dig ner för helvete? Vad är det med dig? Kan du inte vara utan brorsan en halvtimme?*
>
> *Och sedan, med lägre röst, så att den knappt överröstade motorljudet:*
>
> *– Du behöver inte bli hysterisk. Det finns ingen anledning alls. Det är slut med det där.*

Here as well as elsewhere in this chapter I interpret Rydberg's use of the word "hysteria" not so much as an iteration of the psychoanalytic concept fleshed out in Dziedzic's article, but as an efficient way in which the novel's characters put girls and women down and make them feel unserious when they try to assert their bodily autonomy. Evoking the idea of female hysteria is shown to be a manipulation tactic used by her stepfather to make her feel ashamed of trying to escape his advances.

Hence, Marika's feelings of shame in the immediate aftermath of sexual violence are not merely a natural consequence of her having suffered rape, but an emotion which her perpetrator tries to induce in her, to maintain his control over her. In this scene, a psychoanalytic framework is not employed to explain Marika's trauma—rather, it shows how this framework is used by men to dismiss girls' reactions to sexual assault, framing them as mentally unstable for standing up for themselves.

Unlike Witt-Brattström, I do not read sexuality in and of itself as the origin of shame in *Osalig ande*.[299] In fact, the plot indicates that when Marika has sex with men who respect her and take her account of past abuse seriously, it facilitates trauma healing because it reduces her feelings of shame in relation to sex.

[299] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 311.

In Marika's recount of her and Jonas' first meeting, her story about rape trauma even plays an important role: it brings them closer together. Marika tells Jonas the story about how she was sexually abused by her stepfather:

> But I told him about Henrik. At first with a cheerful tone in my voice, as if it were a joke, but after a while I was crying. I had never cried with anyone but Carl. You were perfect, Jonas. A real gentleman. I sat with my head on your shoulder and saw the lights of the city and the traffic below us. It was beautiful. I thought that for you I wouldn't have to keep any secrets (21).
>
> *Men jag berättade om Henrik. Först med glättig ton i rösten, som om det var ett skämt men efter en stund gråtande. Jag hade aldrig gråtit hos någon annan än Carl. Du var perfekt, Jonas. En riktig gentleman. Jag satt med huvudet mot din axel och såg ljuset från staden och trafiken nedanför oss. Det var vackert. Jag tänkte att för dig skulle jag inte behöva ha några hemligheter.*

Jonas listens to her story and believes it. Initially he also respects Marika's sexual boundaries and does not try to force her to sleep with him before she feels that she is ready. When they finally have sex, Marika finds that she enjoys it: "once we had done it for the first time we couldn't stop. What nights" (21). (*"när vi väl gjort det första gången kunde vi inte sluta. Vilka nätter."*)

But almost immediately after this reminiscence, Marika's narration turns to an interaction with Jonas which happened later in time, and which brought back her strong feelings of shame in relation to sex. One day, Jonas, who is now studying to become a physician, starts to think that her sexual appetite is too large for her to be a believable victim of childhood sexual abuse:

> – It couldn't have hurt you very much, you once said.
>
> – What?
>
> – Your stepfather. It couldn't have done any serious harm. If it had, you wouldn't be who you are.
>
> I let out a short laugh.
>
> – We're studying psychology right now, you continued. There are theories that some children have the ability to make up things like that.
>
> I sat up. I had been lying on the floor, on the red Moroccan rug with a pillow under me.
>
> – I wasn't a child.
>
> – You were hardly an adult.
>
> I didn't answer. You lit a cigarette. I suddenly saw someone moving in the house across the street and I crawled across the floor and pulled my sweater over my head (21–22).
>
> *– Det kan inte ha skadat dig särskilt mycket, sa du en gång.*
>
> *– Vad då?*
>
> *– Din styvfar. Det kan inte ha gjort någon allvarlig skada. I så fall hade du inte varit den du är.*

Jag skrattade till.
– Vi läser psykologi just nu, fortsatte du. Det finns teorier om att vissa barn har förmåga att fantisera ihop sånt där.
Jag satte mig upp. Jag hade legat på golvet, på den röda marockanska mattan med en kudde under mig.
– Jag var inget barn.
– Du var knappast vuxen.
Jag svarade inte. Du tände en cigarett. Jag såg plötsligt hur någon rörde sig i huset mitt emot och jag kröp över golvet och drog min tröja över huvudet.

The dialogue illustrates Jonas' newfound simultaneous alignment with two rape myths: the catastrophizing myths that a rape cannot be real unless the woman or girl is permanently psychologically damaged from it, and the minimizing myth that women (and children) lie about rape.[300] Having been a young adolescent when suffering the abuse by her stepfather, Marika is perfectly capable of remembering it. However, Jonas equivalates her memory with a child's ability to "make up things like that," echoing a notion held by many contemporary professionals—a notion which Swedish feminists argued against during the 1980s media debates about incest.[301]

Significantly, Jonas internalizes these myths while studying psychology, which is presumably a part of his medical school education—providing an example of how myths about rape and trauma can travel from academic settings, impacting the lives of victims. In order for Marika to be a believably traumatized rape victim according to the psychiatric consensus implied in the novel, she cannot simultaneously remain a sexual, embodied person.

Jonas' withdrawal of belief in Marika's story ends her blissful period of shame-free and safe sexuality. Suddenly she feels watched and judged and wants to cover up her body. This, I would argue, is depicted as one of the major betrayals of Marika's life after first suffering the trauma of sexual abuse in her teens. Not being believed by a person entrusted with her story is shown to increase Marika's feelings of shame and worsen her state of trauma: later, she refers to herself as feeling "damaged," and her trust in other people, especially Jonas, is shown to be severed (89). In this way, Rydberg's novel depicts how shame, one of the emotions associated with PTSD, can emerge long after the traumatic events took place, as the result of a previously supportive person changing their mind. After being socially validated for a time, the event of childhood sexual

[300] Bourke, *Rape*, 23–24; Sanyal, *Rape*; Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 409.
[301] Nilsson, "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," 23.

assault is being pushed back out of the realm of "socially validated reality," to use Hermans's terms.[302]

After Jonas has dismissed Marika's story about sexual abuse in childhood due to her enjoying sex too much, Marika becomes unable to have sex with him. According to the logic of Jonas, if she can still enjoy sex, her story about experiencing rape trauma must be untrustworthy. The novel shows how Marika's attempted internalization of Jonas' view of trauma causes her to try to push down her own sexual desire, and to feel immensely ashamed when her body and her desires do not conform to his version of reality.

But later when Marika, still in her late teens or early twenties, visits Carl in Prague where he now lives, an interaction with him changes how she feels about herself and about sex. In the following section Rydberg lets Carl deliver an alternative truth to the rape myth by which Jonas and now also Marika lives:

> – I've missed you, I said. There's no one I can talk to anymore.
> – You have Jonas.
> – Jonas can't understand everything. He can't understand how damaged I am.
> – Why would you be damaged?
> – I don't know. It's just how I feel.
> – One never becomes as damaged as one thinks. I know (89).
>
> *– Jag har saknat dig, sa jag. Det finns ingen jag kan prata med längre.*
> *– Du har ju Jonas.*
> *– Jonas kan inte förstå allt. Han kan inte förstå hur förstörd jag är.*
> *– Varför skulle du vara förstörd?*
> *– Jag vet inte. Det är bara så jag känner mig.*
> *– Man blir aldrig så förstörd som man tror. Jag vet.*

Carl proceeds to imply that the reason why he knows this is because he himself has been sexually abused during his time living away from home. And from earlier in the novel, the reader is also aware that Carl, too, was sexually abused as a teenager by their aunt Greta. The twins laugh together in understanding (90). This section reveals the importance the novel places on social support in the wake of rape trauma: of being believed, listened to without judgment, and understood.[303]

Moreover, in *Osalig ande*, the insight delivered by Carl that a rape can be both real and traumatic at the same time as the victim's inner self does not have to

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[302] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8. See also: Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307.

[303] See: Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307; Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 27.

be, in Mithu Sanyal's words, "hurt to the point of unrestorability," is painted as completely transformative and healing.[304] It allows Marika to let go of the terms laid out by Jonas—that her sexual trauma is only real if she hates sex forever—terms that are impossible for her to live up to, causing her shame. Here, positive social support means that Carl challenges a rape myth and provides Marika with another narrative, which can encompass the pain she experiences in the aftermath of sexual violence, without requiring that she adopts an identity as "damaged." Carl's belief validates Marika's experience of rape, making it real again. This is shown to temporarily reduce Marika's crippling feelings of shame. However, this feeling is still shown to follow Marika throughout her life.

The unbearability of shame is described in an interesting way by Ahmed, who states that in shame, "I feel myself to be bad, and hence to expel the badness, I have to expel myself from myself [...] In shame, the subject's movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself. In shame, the subject may have nowhere to turn."[305] This is why, according to Ahmed, prolonged experiences of shame may bring people close to suicide—and indeed, shame seems to have played a role in Marika's suicide.

In Rydberg's story, shame follows Marika even as she becomes a ghost and thus is disconnected from her body. After dying, Marika views herself from above, ashamed of the string of saliva that has escaped her mouth, and declares that "I didn't want anybody to see me like this" (7). (*"Jag vill inte att någon ska se mig så här."*).[306] Here, Rydberg's novel's vision of shame differs from the significant body of psychological research that associates shame with bodily concern.[307] Instead, Rydberg's use of the ghost narrator designates shame as a fundamentally intersocial emotion: even in ghosthood, when Marika is all mind and no body, shame is shown to persist alongside her awareness of her loved ones' unfavorable opinions of her. Commenting that she feels sad hearing the nasty things people say about her, Marika reflects that "[I] would probably feel better sitting around playing solitaire up at unit B" (79). (*"Jag skulle antagligen må bättre av att sitta och lägga patience uppe på enhet B."*) Here, shame is shown not to be inherently linked to Marika's existence in a body, but to other people's judgement, which persists even after her demise.

Reading this trauma narrative with attention to the workings of shame, Marika's post-traumatic suicide can be seen as a realistic depiction of a person

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[304] Sanyal, *Rape*, 63–64.

[305] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 104.

[306] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.

[307] Kenneth Goss and Steven Allan, "Shame, Pride and Eating Disorders," *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 16, no. 4 (2009): 303–16; Rozsika Parker, "Body Hatred," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 19, no. 4 (2003): 447–64; Terrizzi and Shook, "On the Origin of Shame."

who cannot escape shame in the aftermath of sexual violence. This differs from Mithu Sanyal's argument that in western culture, death (literal or metaphorical) is a way for raped women to maintain their honor and avoid shame.[308] The shame-filled spectrality in *Osalig ande* could thus be read as the novel's exposal of the origin of shame not within the body, nor within a general culture of honor, but in the social relationship of being perceived in an unfavorable way by others. The presence of shame and stigma have been shown to negatively affect the social support received by traumatized people.[309] However, *Osalig ande* moves beyond the relatively well-known facts that victims of sexual violence often feel ashamed, and that the stigma attached to rape may prevent friends and family from successfully communicating their support. Shaming is also shown to be an active act of intimidation.

Despite her shame and hurt, Marika remains on Earth as a focalizer, partly out of curiosity and partly due to a longing for her twin brother Carl, whom she loves too deeply to relinquish (79). And Marika's style of narration—indeed, her very act of narration—also expresses a kind of resistance to shame. It balances between unaffected coolness and furious, direct accusation. She is surprised when finding out that death has not mellowed her harsh feelings against people that wronged her in life: "[s]trange that a spirit can feel the desire for revenge" (7). ("*Underligt att en ande kan känna hämndbegär.*")

I read her furious refusal to disappear from Earth despite being unwanted there as a form of spectral shamelessness. By turning Marika into a disagreeable ghost who refuses to stop haunting her family and friends, the novel asserts its respect for the legitimacy of its main character's emotions. Marika's narration can be described as striving to resist the negative stereotype of a hysterical woman, but simultaneously she longs for the release of emotions which she thinks are too shameful to exhibit. In *Osalig ande*, ghost focalization amounts to a kind of spectral agency, in which Marika refuses to leave Earth and defies the shame that has been used to silence her in life. Although the responses she receives from the living are mostly negative, her presence is sometimes noted, and the idea that she is watching makes the living uncomfortable (85, 142, 152, 184).[310]

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[308] Sanyal, *Rape*, 39.

[309] Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307–308; Punamäki et al., "The Deterioration and Mobilization Effects of Trauma on Social Support."

[310] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 15.

Conflicting modes of the trauma story: art, popular culture, and medical discourses

Rydberg's rendering of the afterlife, which so confounded reviewers, can be read as the novel's vision of the kind of worldview that holds authority over the characters of *Osalig ande*. As the novel's heaven is essentially a mental hospital operated by stock characters from American action and thriller movies—I will elaborate on this below—I discern two competing traditions of trauma discourses in the novel: psychiatry and fiction. In the following, I show how *Osalig ande* experiments with these two traditions and their respective formal possibilities to encompass a narrative of Marika's experience of rape trauma.

In its rendering of the afterlife, *Osalig ande* enters into intertextual dialogue with cinematic depictions of violence and trauma. Rydberg has made the novel's heavenly authorities consist of the most macho stock figures of American popular culture imaginable. Marika's first meeting with the spirit who serves as her heavenly case manager is narrated as follows: "I look up. Across from me sits a man in a trench coat and a hat with a turned-down brim. He looks like he stepped out of a gangster movie from the 40s and he's looking straight at me" (26). (*"Jag tittar upp. Mitt emot mig sitter en karl i trenchcoat och hatt med nerfällt brätte. Han ser ut som om han stigit ut ur en gangsterfilm från 40-talet och han tittar rakt på mig."*) The spirit, Sten Berggren (whom Ryberg has given an almost absurdly average Swedish name), is accompanied by two spectral Vietnam veterans. The inclusion of the latter is hard not to read as a nod towards the common perception of the time of the typical person suffering from PTSD—an American man traumatized by war.[311]

Whenever the other ghosts appear in the plot, they distort the novel's realistic style, providing an absurd element which accentuates the fictionality and intertextuality of these scenes. When they are about to take Marika away in a US Air Force helicopter, for example, the engine is broken and their dialogue is parodical, written as if they were characters in a bad action film:

> – *What's wrong?* Berggren asks.
> – *The fucking thing won't start*. [...]
> – *I hate to tell you this*, says Berggren, *but it's getting late and we have to...*
> – *You shut up man*! Stu screams. *Just shut up*!
> The cigar trembles between Berggren's teeth (96, emphasized text written in English in the original).

> *– What's wrong? frågar Berggren.*
> *– The fucking thing won't start. [...]*

[311] See: Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

– I hate to tell you this, säger Berggren, but it's getting late and we have to…
– You shut up man! skriker Stu. Just shut up!
Cigarren darrar mellan Berggrens tänder.

I read the veterans as a reminder that Rydberg is conscious about the presence of trauma discourse in her narrative. By including the parodic veterans, she underlines how the kind of trauma suffered by Marika both resembles and differs from depictions of men with PTSD in popular culture of the time. The quote above lets us think about the different degree of normalization of men's and women's trauma in 1980s culture. When Rydberg represents previous narratives of PTSD it is through a Vietnam veteran unable to contain his nervousness due to a plane engine refusing to start. We have been transported into the dialogue of an American action movie, a genre in which the post-traumatic subjects are men, traumatized by war—not women, traumatized by sexual violence.

Moreover, by modeling the agents of the afterlife on popular clichés of machismo, Rydberg creates a novel which takes place in a world in which the rule of patriarchy is inescapable, even metaphysical. By modeling the institution of Heaven on a mental hospital, an association is created between what the novel conceives of as unsophisticated masculinity and the field of psychiatry. Rydberg's rendering of the afterlife as a care facility can be read as an allegory of psychiatric institutional responses to women's trauma—and of medical bureaucracy as replacement for religion in modernity.[312]

In *Osalig ande*, heaven, hell and purgatory have been replaced with units A, B and C. "The comfort level of the different units is fairly similar," Berggren assures Marika. "It is the processing time for the return to the physical world that varies somewhat" (27). (*"Komforten är i stort sett densamma. Det är handläggningstiden för återvändandet till sinnevärlden som varierar något."*) Berggren, when he finds her, reprimands Marika for not showing up and registering after her demise. When she replies that she did not know that she was supposed to register, Berggren tells her that it was her own responsibility to inform herself (27). Marika is assigned to unit B, formerly known as Purgatory, but when she wants to appeal this decision, Berggren replies:

[312] The Swedish psychiatric reform of 1995, which would come to significantly reduce the role of mental asylums in Sweden, had not yet been implemented at the time *Osalig ande* was published in 1990. However, the government decision to begin the investigation leading up to the reform had begun already in 1989. During the decades leading up to 1990, large mental institutions had also been criticized in Sweden and the Anglosphere by the antipsychiatric movement as well as by feminists. These critiques showed up in literature of the time as well. Psykiatriutredningen, *Välfärd och valfrihet: service, stöd och vård för psykiskt störda. Slutbetänkande*, no. 73, Statens offentliga utredningar (SOU, 1992); Ohlsson, *Myt och manipulation*, 25; Svedberg, *Omvårdnadstraditioner*, 44–45; Tomes, "Feminist Histories of Psychiatry," 1994.

– Take it easy. As I said, the difference between purgatory and paradise is now very slight. You will have access to most of our hobby activities, chess, backgammon, tennis, even cricket if you feel like it. But be happy you were born and died after we carried out this reform program. Suicide was not something that was looked kindly upon. It would have been hell straight away.

– I don't know. It seems a bit dull up there. Besides, I don't have any hobbies. What would I do all day? I would probably just wander around doing nothing.

– You're not supposed to stay there forever. Eventually you'll of course be reborn.

– But how long will that take?

– Well, with the current processing time and after the usual investigation... about a hundred and fifty years (28).

– Ta det lugnt. Som jag sa är skillnaden mellan skärselden och paradiset numera hårfin. Du kommer att ha tillgång till de flesta av våra hobbyaktiviteter, schack, backgammon, tennis, ja till och med cricket om du skulle känna för det. Men var glad att du föddes och dog efter att vi drev igenom det här reformprogrammet. Självmord var något som inte betraktades med blida ögon. Det hade blivit helvetet direkt.

– Jag vet inte. Det verkar lite trist där uppe. Dessutom har jag ingen hobby. Vad skulle jag göra hela dagarna? Jag skulle förmodligen bara gå omkring och slå dank.

– Det är inte meningen att du ska stanna där för evigt. Så småningom blir du ju återfödd.

– Men hur lång tid tar det?

– Tja, med nuvarande handläggningstid och efter den sedvanliga utredningen... ungefär hundrafemtio år.

Here, I discern a nod to the development of modern medicine and psychiatry, which by replacing the older Christian beliefs about sin, save Marika from going to hell for committing suicide. What, then, has replaced eternal damnation for the 1980s Stockholm woman who commits suicide due to traumatic sexual violence? Eternal damnation, in this case, is replaced by the boredom of institutionalization. Marika is, however, not interested in the mundane hobby activities available to her in unit B. Thus, she refuses to go.

– You can have my answer right away. I won't set foot on any of your units. Either you reincarnate me right away or I will stay here.

He gets up from his chair.

– It is terribly sad that you have that attitude. Now I have to let your case go further up to the board and then it may become a question of forced collection (28).

– Du kan få mitt svar direkt. Jag sätter inte min fot på någon av era enheter. Antingen återföder ni mig direkt eller också stannar jag här.

Han reser sig från stolen.

– Det är hemskt tråkigt att du har den attityden. Nu måste jag låta ditt ärende gå vidare upp i styrelsen och sedan kan det bli fråga om tvångshämtning.

Considering this exchange, Marika's strong statement of refusal is contrasted with Berggren's condescending, allegedly rational tone. The novel's pervading characterization of Marika as a difficult woman also extends to the dimension of the afterlife: in the eyes of the heavenly authorities, she is an obstinate patient refusing institutionalization. In this way, the novel underscores the lack of agency experienced by institutionalized women during the time depicted in the novel. Because of the afterlife's logic of compulsory care, which stipulates that Marika does not know what is best for her own mental health, her desire to remain the focalizer of the story is interpreted by Berggren as self-destructive. He says: "[t]ell me, do you like this? Do you like staying down here and listening to what your relatives are whispering about when they think you're not listening?" (94) (*"Säg mig, tycker du om det här? Tycker du om att vara kvar här nere och lyssna på vad dina anhöriga tisslar om när dom tror att du inte hör?"*)

However, Marika's reply hints that regardless of the pain it might cause her, she finds inherent value in listening and observing: "I hear what I hear" (94). (*"Jag hör vad jag hör."*) This statement portrays the ghost Marika as an outsider, intent on observing the world as it is, including its darker sides. This puts her in a position not unlike a certain type of artist or writer. One could even say that according to the aesthetic and ethical ideals of *Osalig ande*, there is value in the fact that a woman who has become an outsider due to experiencing sexual violence continues to mercilessly observe people on the inside—even if this worsens her state of trauma. In Rydberg's text, creating art based on this kind of merciless observation is an important way to hold people accountable, granting traumatized people a kind of ambivalent, spectral agency.[313] Psychiatry, on the other hand, can only provide a storage place for traumatized women: keep her out of the way so that she will not create cosmic disorder.

The novel repeatedly shows how Marika portrayed traumatic experiences of sexual violence through art when she was alive. Still in school, she tries to tell the story of Henrik's abuse through the medium of the essay: "I wrote an essay in school titled 'The Angel of Death.' Henrik was that angel. He knew who I was and he was going to kill me" (34). (*"Jag skrev en uppsats i skolan med titeln 'Dödsängeln'. Det var Henrik som var den ängeln. Han visste vem jag var och han skulle döda mig."*) Marika does not mention any teacher reaching out to her afterwards, which suggests that despite Marika finding the courage to write about the subject, the teacher was unable or unwilling to take the story at face value and ask her about it.

As a young adult, Marika tries out several different art forms, but is convinced that she lacks the natural talent of her brother (12). As she reaches adulthood Marika starts a theater class, but when she momentarily forgets a line while

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[313] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 15, 24, 182.

performing in a play, she takes it as proof that she is not a real artist: "But something had happened. I was no worse than I had been a few seconds earlier, but suddenly I heard myself. I wasn't an actor. Not even a bad actor" (49). ("*Men något hade hänt. Jag var inte sämre än jag varit några sekunder tidigare men plötsligt hörde jag mig själv. Jag var ingen skådespelare. Inte ens en dålig skådespelare."*) She is overwhelmed by shame and quits theater for good.[314]

Later, when Marika has quit theater and spends four years trying to become an artist, her paintings continue to allude to sexual violence and even directly to her stepfather: "[m]y style of painting was gloomy, anxiety-ridden, without any nuance. Naked women and men as black as death. That didn't exactly cheer anybody up. I was rejected by [the art schools] Konstfack and Mejan, stood in line outside of Liljevalchs, in vain" (107). (*"Jag målade mörkt, ångestfyllt, nyanslöst. Nakna kvinnor och män svarta som döden. Det blev ingen gladare av. Jag avvisades av Konstfack och Mejan, köade förgäves utanför Liljevalchs."*) The novel thus draws a parallel between her "anxiety-ridden" subject matter—traumatic experiences of sexual violence—and the art world's rejection of her. Anxious art is art without nuance, is the narrator's conclusion.

However, Rydberg problematizes Marika's assumption that she lacks talent. Another explanation for Marika's belief that she is worthless is discernible in the novel: this is what she has constantly been hearing from her own mother. In one of Marika's reminiscences of past moments in her life, her mother criticizes her paintings and says that she cannot understand why Marika must try to compete with Carl all the time (Carl is also a painter). She suggests that Marika asks Carl for help to improve. Marika lashes out at her: "—I made them like this because that's how I want them, I said, turning away from her. Why can't you let me paint the way I want?" (107) (*"—Jag har gjort dom så här därför att det är så jag vill ha dom, sa jag och vände mig ifrån henne. Varför kan du inte låta mig måla som jag vill?"*) Her mother contends: "[s]ome get the talent, some don't. It's nature. Nature isn't always fair." (*"Vissa får begåvningen, andra får den inte. Det är naturen. Naturen är inte alltid rättvis."*) But, indeed, the novel hints that nature is not so much to blame for Marika's failed attempts at making art as are her circumstances.

Besides the fact that Marika receives no support in her artistic endeavors, *Osalig ande* points out that making art when traumatized is hard in and of itself. While she was still alive, Marika remembers saying: "[w]hy marry a doctor? I also wanted to be an artist. I still want to. There is so much I want, I can't keep track of everything, my brain is working all the time but there are no results, no order, it's probably the pills, the anxiety, that constant anxiety" (122). (*"Varför gifter man*

[314] As Andersson contends in her study of other novels by Rydberg, the difficulty of making art as a woman is a broader theme in much of her writing. Andersson, *Den ensamma sjöjungfrun*, 67, 124.

sig med en läkare? Jag ville också bli konstnär. Det vill jag fortfarande. Det är så mycket jag vill, jag kan inte hålla reda på allt, min hjärna arbetar hela tiden men det blir inget resultat, ingen ordning, det är väl tabletterna, oron, den där ständiga oron.") This statement steers the story towards an interpretation in which it is not necessarily Marika's womanhood that is the sole reason for her having a hard time creating art—her constant state of mental unease and her medication make it virtually impossible.

Within the earthly setting of the novel, thinking about trauma through the lens of medicine is reserved for the two major villains of the story, Marika's physician husband Jonas, and her mother. In a letter to Carl, Marika's mother writes: "[w]hat happened to Marika I will never understand. She fell ill. That's how I imagine it. She fell ill, like when a person gets cancer or leukemia" (92). (*"Vad som hände med Marika kommer jag aldrig att förstå. Hon blev sjuk. Det är så jag tänker mig det. Hon blev sjuk, som när en människa får cancer eller leukemi."*) Within her mother's conceptualization of her trauma as something as equally inexplicable as it is biological lies a denial of her own guilt, her own complicity in the events that traumatized her daughter. Conversely, Marika herself describes her trauma in social rather than diagnostic terms. "Depressed. I don't know if I'm depressed. I've never known. I just want someone to look for me" (183). (*"Deprimerad. Inte vet jag om jag är deprimerad. Jag har aldrig vetat det. Jag vill bara att någon ska leta efter mig."*) Here, depression is rendered a word devoid of meaning—loneliness and lack of connection are the pressing issues for Marika.

As we have seen, Jonas is shown to contribute to Marika's mental unease, but he also contributes to her medication. By continuously prescribing Marika psychotropic medication, Jonas solidifies her trauma as an inherent medical condition which is located within her body. Within their marriage, Jonas has more authority—and income—as a physician than Marika has as an artist, and thus he is shown to be the one dictating their reality.

A scene from when Marika was alive poignantly illustrates the novel's point about what happens to women who try to make art about traumatic subjects. Instead of Marika's paintings being recognized as good art or even functioning as successful communication about the sexual violence she has been subject to, they are used by her husband to symbolically diagnose her. Marika catches Jonas while he, without her permission and without involving her, shows his physician colleague her paintings:

> Jonas was showing him my paintings. He had pulled out every single one, the ones that had been tucked away, the ones that were unfinished. He was showing them. They spoke softly. I didn't hear everything they said.
>
> – It's exactly as you described it, Mikael said. Exactly as you said.
>
> And they both studied the canvases, as if they were examining a patient to decide on the right diagnosis.

I half-ran back to the house. I felt a strange pressure over my chest. You shouldn't have done that, Jonas, I thought. You should have been careful with me (117).

Jonas höll på att visa mina tavlor för honom. Han hade plockat fram varenda en, de som legat undanstoppade, de som var ofärdiga. Han visade dem. De talade lågt. Jag hörde inte allt de sa.

– Det är precis som du beskrev det, sa Mikael. Precis som du sa.

Och de studerade dukarna båda två, som om de var i färd med att undersöka en patient för att ställa rätt diagnos.

Jag halvsprang tillbaka till huset. Jag kände ett underligt tryck över bröstet. Du skulle inte ha gjort så, Jonas, tänkte jag. Du skulle ha varit rädd om mig.

The quote above points to the breach of trust felt by Marika in this situation. She has tried to use art as a means of expressing trauma but finds that the art world does not want to engage with her paintings (107). Now, insult is added to injury when two medical practitioners discuss her paintings not as art, but as mirrors of Marika's allegedly damaged psyche, which is to be diagnosed. This is depicted as an immense betrayal. Expressing her story on her own terms and having this story be taken seriously by other people might have granted her agency, but what happens instead is the opposite—her artistic representation of rape trauma is revealed in a way that she did not intend, misunderstood, and used to label her as mentally unstable.[315] Again, Marika is shown to be "visible and not ready to be visible," the essence of shame according to Ahmed and Erikson.[316]

In *Osalig ande*, the means to accurately express experiences of sexual violence are ultimately deemed to be artistic rather than medical. But on the level of the plot, the only successful artistic communicators are men. While Marika's paintings are not generally viewed as good art, her twin brother is considered by many, including their mother, to be a genius. After Marika's death, Carl paints a series of works detailing the violent and terrible events that have befallen Marika. According to the novel's characters, these paintings are good—and unlike Marika's own art, they have the power to communicate her trauma to an audience in a way that makes people believe it.

When Berggren finally sees Carl's paintings, he changes his mind and assigns Marika a quicker rebirth than she was originally granted: "There are certainly some things in your past that we could have taken into account in our processing—if you had only informed us, that is. In certain special cases—for those who've had it especially rotten, I mean… […] In certain cases, it is possible to get priority. Priority to a new life, simply put" (147). ("*Det finns onekligen en del saker i ditt förflutna vi hade kunnat ta hänsyn till i vår handläggning—om du bara hade*

[315] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 15.

[316] Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 244. See also: Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.

informerat oss, vill säga. I vissa speciella fall—för dom som haft det så där extra jävligt menar jag… […] I vissa fall går det att få förtur. Förtur till ett nytt liv helt enkelt.")[317]

However, this institutional acknowledgment of her trauma comes only through her brother's artistic act of witnessing, which is far from the kind of ethical vision expressed by Felaman and Laub, where witnessing is a collaborative act, strongly involving the victim's own narration.[318] In *Osalig ande*, Marika's own narrative is destroyed: her paintings are burned by her husband Jonas later the same night, after the opening of Carl's exhibition (152), and Marika's representation of trauma is forever erased in favor of Carl's.

And importantly, Carl exhibits the paintings depicting Marika's trauma and death without her consent, which it is far from certain that she would have given were she alive. The novel expresses the unease of Marika's situation through her dry complaint at the opening night that as a ghost, she cannot even get drunk: "[a]fter all, it is my life that the walls have been decorated with" (144). (*"Trots allt är det ju mitt liv man har dekorerat väggarna med."*) Berggren, who in his invisible form shows up during the opening night, also comments to Marika: "[s]ome of these paintings are… how should I put it… quite revealing, aren't they?" (147) (*"Några av dom här målningarna är ju… hur ska jag säga… ganska avslöjande, eller hur?"*) Even Marika's aunt expresses concern about what Marika might have thought about the exhibition (149). To summarize: as a creator and interpreter of her own experiences of sexual violence, Marika is made invisible, but as an object, studied by male artists and psychiatrists, she is made visible in a way that takes agency away from her; her body and psyche are put on display for the world to ogle.

However, on a meta-level, spectral focalization and narration in *Osalig ande* functions as an attempt to turn a traumatized woman's narration of rape into art against all odds. The very existence of the novel *Osalig ande* becomes the only example of Marika's successful artistic communication. As a specter, she is finally able to narrate the story of her trauma to the reader of the novel.

On a meta-level once removed, *Osalig ande*'s status as a ghost novel can be interpreted as Rydberg's attempt to, like several American writers of rape trauma fiction during this time, write fiction about traumatic events that happen to many women, but were rarely considered interesting subject matters for

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[317] Here, I discern an alignment with a trauma discourse which was developing during the years leading up to *Osalig ande*: the psychoanalytic idea of female hysteria is replaced by a growing awareness that people often develop trauma after suffering catastrophic events. At the time of the novel (the late 1980s), the new diagnosis of PTSD may be applied to Marika because she is a female rape victim (and not just a war veteran), allowing her to be moved to the front of the reincarnation waiting list.

[318] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 85.

art by critics during the late 1980s and early 1990s backlash against anti-rape feminism.[319] It was partly successful: as we have seen, one literary critic stated in his review of the novel that Rydberg's ghost narrator adds an original angle to the, in his opinion, otherwise potentially trivial subject of "dark family secrets" (read: child sexual abuse).[320] However, most reviewers at its time of publication did not even recognize the theme of rape as a driving force of the novel. Through Tanya Serisier's framework, Rydberg's novel can be said to have largely been cast outside the genre of rape trauma narratives by failing to confirm to the expectations of critics.[321]

The ghost reborn—remembering and forgetting trauma

In *Osalig ande*, the afterlife is post-Christian, and functions according to the bureaucratic logic of the mental hospital—but also contains elements of reincarnation characteristic of Hinduism and Buddhism. This brings about a quite perplexing ending to the novel, in which Marika is born again as the son of her twin brother Carl and his old teacher, Amanda. This rebirth is the result of a bureaucratic process: towards the end of the novel, Berggren appears again and lets Marika know about the heavenly authorities' decision to let her be reborn into her own old family, as Carl's and Amanda's child.

> – [...] I have good news. Your application has been granted. You will be reborn in six months. So, it is nice to see that you have already started to get to know your new mother. But of course, you won't have any memory of it when you are born.
> [...] This can only mean one thing. I will become the daughter of my own brother (198).

> *– [...] Jag har goda nyheter. Din ansökan har blivit beviljad. Du kommer att återfödas om ett halvår. Så det är trevligt att se att du redan har börjat bekanta dig med din nya mor. Men naturligtvis kommer du inte att ha något minne av det när du föds.*
> *[...] Det här kan bara betyda en sak. Jag kommer att bli dotter till min egen bror.*

But Marika is wrong—she is not to be a daughter this way around, but a son—a reality so unthinkable Marika cannot anticipate it.

But what does this kind of ending mean for the novel's understanding of rape trauma? Is it just, as Witt-Brattström implies, the novel's unsatisfying way of solving the problem of misogyny by simply letting Marika escape the perils of womanhood? Or is it, on the contrary, the work of a "god of vengeance and

[319] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 151–152.

[320] Bromander, "Mörk familjetragedi."

[321] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 146.

justice," as Kristina Lugn thinks in her review of the novel?[322] In my opinion, a fairer interpretation would be to read the ending as a critique of the fact that women in Rydberg's fiction, caught in a universe which is patriarchal on an earthly as well as on a cosmic level, have no possibilities of happiness at all.

We have to remember that the reincarnation which Marika goes through is not her own idea, but the execution of a cosmic psychiatric praxis which is controlled by men. The reader never meets a single woman representative of the afterlife—instead, Rydberg chooses silly and stereotypically masculine characters of American popular culture as representatives of the policy of rebirth. In her review, Lugn stated that it is a pity that Rydberg lets "a loser like Berggren" represent a "god of vengeance and justice"—it is simply not believable.[323] But I argue this is the point: what happens to Marika after her death is completely up to incompetent male characters from American popular culture, and perhaps there is no fair god at all, but just another clueless, misogynist psychiatrist to rule them all. Although Marika does decide to sign the reincarnation application form handed to her by Berggren, she has nothing to lose and has no agency in her own process of rebirth: "I sign the paper. It can't make things worse than they already are" (147). (*"Jag undertecknar papperet. Det kan ju inte göra saker värre än de redan är."*)

Neither is the process of rebirth depicted as pleasant for Marika—rather, the opposite can be discerned in the following recount of Marika's existential dread as Amanda's pregnancy proceeds:

> Am I dissolving? Maybe my soul is made of atoms, held together by a magnetic field, and when that field disappears, the atoms drift apart and I truly cease to exist. I imagine one spark of my consciousness wandering around in the room while another circles around in the universe; confused, aimless. I don't want to die that way. I don't want to be erased (159).
>
> *Håller jag på att upplösas? Kanske består min själ av atomer, sammanhållna av ett magnetfält och när det fältet försvinner, driver atomerna åt skilda håll och jag upphör verkligen att existera. Jag föreställer mig hur en gnista av mitt medvetande irrar kring i rummet medan en annan cirklar runt i universum; förvirrad, utan mål. Jag vill inte dö på det sättet. Jag vill inte suddas ut.*

As more and more of her consciousness merges with the growing fetus, she fears disappearing and losing sight of her own purpose.

The last chapter of the novel begins with Marika's rebirth. Here, a new position of focalization takes over from the spectral gaze which has prevailed during the novel this far. Marika now sees the world through the limited gaze of a baby:

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[322] Lugn, "En dålig poets sällskap."

[323] Lugn, "En dålig poets sällskap."

"[n]ow I am lying wrapped in a blanket on the grass and if I turn my head I can see the water and the trees growing on the shore" (225). (*"Nu ligger jag insvept i en filt på gräset och vänder jag på huvudet kan jag se vattnet och träden som växer vid strandkanten."*)

But it is also the gaze of a boy. A completely new experience for Marika is the way her gaze is now met by her mother: "—Here you are, bundled up like in the freezing cold of winter," she says, smiling. It's a new smile that I don't recognize. She's never smiled at me like this before" (225). (*"—Här ligger du påpälsad som på smällkalla vintern, säger hon och ler. Det är ett nytt leende som jag inte känner igen. Hon har aldrig förut lett mot mig på det här sättet."*) Here an important consequence of Rydberg's decision to tell the story through a ghost's, and then a baby's perspective is revealed: agency does not necessarily begin with action or speech, but with a returned gaze—a gaze which communicates love and respect that you have earned just by virtue of existing. In *Osalig ande,* this kind of warm gaze is reserved for men only, and it begins in infancy.

But something is off with Marika's new baby focalization. Although her gaze has become that of a baby's, she is still narrating in her adult-woman voice. This is the reason why at the very end of the novel, Berggren and his Vietnam veterans return in their helicopter. They have to repair the bug in the system, which is Marika's stubborn consciousness, still refusing to leave Earth.

> – Well, here you loll, he says.
> – As you can see.
> – I must say that this hasn't quite gone according to plan. You're not supposed to remember them. If you don't forget everything at once, we will have to come and pick you up.
> – You can't do that.
> – Oh, you don't know how easy it is. Sudden infant death syndrome. Happens every so often (228).
>
> *– Ja, här ligger du alltså, säger han.*
> *– Som du ser.*
> *– Jag måste säga att det här inte alls gått riktigt som vi tänkt oss. Det är inte meningen att du ska minnas dom. Om du inte glömmer bort allting med en gång, blir vi tvungna att hämta upp dig.*
> *– Det kan ni inte göra.*
> *– Å du vet inte hur lätt det är. Plötslig spädbarnsdöd. Händer titt som tätt.*

But instead of killing Marika, Berggren blows cigarette smoke in her face, making her forget. "—This will help. Then everything will be in order again. And order is what we want, isn't it?" (228) (*"—Det här kommer att hjälpa. Då är allt i sin ordning igen. Det är ju ordning vi vill ha, eller hur?"*) Emphasizing the need for order, Berggren once and for all expels the element of undecidability, the

Derridaean aporia, that Marika's defiant ghostliness contributed to the novel's universe.[324] The final lines of the novel are the following: "I feel the warmth of Carl's body and see the helicopter rise into the sky. In a moment I will have forgotten everything. It doesn't matter to me. I am a child, and I am happy" (229). (*"Jag känner värmen från Carls kropp och ser hur helikoptern stiger mot himlen. Om en stund har jag glömt allt. Det gör mig ingenting. Jag är ett barn och jag är lycklig."*)

As we can see, remembering and forgetting in Rydberg's narrative of rape trauma differs from the idea that would come to define discussions about sexual violence in Sweden from the middle of the 1990s onwards: that traumatic memories from childhood are often repressed.[325] Marika has always remembered everything, and her memories of childhood sexual abuse are not repressed at all. Here, *Osalig ande* departs from several other novels and autobiographies about incest from the same time period.[326]

In fact, the person whose knowledge of the sexual violence is shown to be suppressed is not Marika at all, but her mother, who makes a point of her inclination towards forgetting past atrocities: "—I thank God for those memory losses, says mom. How would you feel if you walked around remembering the feeling of all the wrongs you've been subjected to? You could never forgive anything. I believe in reconciliation" (177). (*"—Jag tackar Gud för dom minnesförlusterna, säger mamma. Hur skulle man må om man gick omkring och kom ihåg känslan av alla oförrätter man blivit utsatt för? Man skulle aldrig kunna förlåta någonting. Jag tror på försoning."*)

Thus, *Osalig ande's* vision of post-traumatic memory and forgetting turns some popular conceptions of trauma on their head. Forgetting is the privilege of the perpetrators and their enablers, while traumatized people remember past traumatic experiences, even after they die. No traumatic memories need to be recovered, because they have stayed with Marika all her life, and follow her even into the afterlife.

It is not until Marika is reborn as a boy that all of her traumatic adult memories can be erased and she, consequently, becomes "happy." In this, the novel's depiction of rape trauma may rather be read in light of the earlier argument made by 1980s feminists; that incest and childhood sexual abuse were common and a result of the patriarchal construction of family.[327] However, neither

[324] Derrida, *Aporias*, 15; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 6.

[325] Nilsson, "Incestdebatten i Sverige 1982–96," 18.

[326] The American writer Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991) is a noteworthy example. Another example, from Sweden, is Anna Kali's *Det kan inte vara sant* (1993).

[327] See, for example: Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, with Lisa Hirschman (Harvard University Press, 1981), 7–21.

remembering sexual abuse nor having a male twin witness the abuse is enough for justice or acknowledgement of Marika's own experience of rape trauma to be achieved: the only relief left is the amnesia of rebirth, given to her by heavenly authorities as a sort of compensation for her suffering.

Within the novel's plot, something akin to a critique of the origins of Freudian psychoanalysis can be discerned. In *Trauma and Recovery*, published two years after *Osalig ande*, Herman chronicles Freud's abandonment of his initial theory of hysteria, which, based on his patients' stories of childhood sexual abuse, suggested that these kinds of experiences were the underlying cause of hysteria among women. However, he soon became, in Herman's words,

> increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of this hypothesis. Hysteria was so common among women that if his patients' stories were true, and if his theory were correct, he would be forced to conclude that what he called "perverted acts against children" were endemic, not only among the proletariat of Paris, where he had first studied hysteria, but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna, where he had established his practice. [...] It was beyond credibility.[328]

Therefore, Freud stopped believing his patients. Their accounts of sexual violence instead were interpreted as made-up fantasies, a notion that came to be an integral part of psychoanalytic thought throughout the following century.[329] It is in line with this context that the label "hysterical" is used earlier in the novel by the perpetrator, to make Marika feel out of line for asserting her boundaries (40). But within Rydberg's story, the reality of childhood sexual abuse is undeniable—although a significant part of the critical reception was reluctant to recognize any connection between the contents of its plot and violence committed outside of the literary genres of *skräckel* or "unpretentious entertainment literature," to which they perceived *Osalig ande* as belonging.[330]

Ultimately, amnesia in relation to the traumatic events of childhood sexual violence is, in *Osalig ande*, a practice which has nothing to do with Marika's psychic trauma, but with other people's refusal to believe, or acknowledge, that something like this can happen within "respectable bourgeois families." Fittingly, the main offenders of this denial—Marika's mother and Marika's husband—are depicted as aligning closely with medical discourses to support their refusal to engage with rape trauma within their own social setting.

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[328] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 14; Freud, *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis*, 215–216.

[329] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 14.

[330] Glans, "Skräckellitteratur"; Brohult, "Flyhänt om oknytt."

Concluding remarks

Reading Rydberg's novel with attention paid to historical context has highlighted the important fact that rape trauma existed as a topic in Swedish literature in the 1990s. This chapter demonstrated that *Osalig ande* participates in two literary directions of the 1990s which have previously mainly been identified within an English language context: the rape novel and trauma fiction.

Sexual violence is a completely central topic in *Osalig ande,* despite it being ignored or unrecognized by literary critics at its time of release. I have argued against Kay Glans' influential interpretation of the novel and shown that the sexual violence depicted in Rydberg's writing is not just "surrogate violence" replacing some other, apparently more real, political conflict of the time, but an urgent topic itself. Instead of merely serving an aesthetic function, a common conception within Swedish literary studies and critics of the 1980s and 1990s, rape appears in *Osalig ande* in a profound and affecting way.

Osalig ande has rarely been read as a part of a feminist tradition; in fact, in the early 1990s, it received critique from feminists for depicting women as inherently isolated and deficient. The novel's violence was characterized by an influential literary critic as "cold-hammered sensationalism."[331] In this chapter, I departed from this view and argued that *Osalig ande*'s depiction of a woman's refusal to rest in peace and leave her family alone in fact amounts to a groundbreaking Swedish novel about rape, narrated from the victim's perspective—a remarkably early Swedish counterpart to the American rape fiction of the "long 1990s," as identified by Robin Field.[332]

Another main result of the chapter is that there is much to gain by reading *Osalig ande* as trauma fiction, as it reflects several important understandings present in trauma theory.[333] However, the novel does not comply with the generic expectation, popularized among literary trauma theorists and writers only a few years later, that trauma inherently is a "crisis of representation," and that the most fitting aesthetic representation of traumatic experiences should occur through omissions and silences.[334] Indeed, rape trauma is characterized by silence in *Osalig ande*—however, this silence is not an inherent symptom of trauma, but rather a socially sanctioned state of isolation, brought into being by other people's refusal to acknowledge the violence.

Published during a time when feminist psychology was studying and debating the hurt of incest, as well as criticizing previous patriarchal practices within

[331] Witt-Brattström, "Fula flickor, masochism och motstånd," 312; Glans, "Skräckellitteratur," 199.

[332] Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 154; Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 149–151.

[333] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 3–4.

[334] Caruth, "Introduction," 7; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 5.

psychiatry, *Osalig ande* taps into both of these discourses.[335] The novel also clearly connects Marika's trauma to the new PTSD diagnosis introduced in 1980 in the *DSM-III*. However, this diagnosis, symbolized by the nervous outbursts of the Vietnam veterans, is in contrast to the rape trauma suffered by Marika; the latter which, instead of being depicted as a state of fear and hypervigilance, is much more strongly characterized by a generally hopeless outlook on the world.

Moreover, the novel's view of trauma is characterized by the intense shaming involved in the perpetrator's acts of violence, as well as in Marika's family's treatment of her after the abuse ended. In this aspect, the novel aligns with contemporary research that associates PTSD with shame.[336] The novel connects the cultural taboo around speaking of incest to other characters' unwillingness to engage with Marika's memories of abuse. Through the ghost figure, but also through metaphors of invisibility, the novel emphasizes Marika's perceived lack of agency, a result of Marika's family's dismissive and blame-filled responses to her narrative of rape.[337] However, being seen in ways that support her own assessment of the sexual violence as horrible and wrong—yet not completely destructive for her later chance at wellbeing—is shown to decrease feelings of shame.

The novel embodies a dynamic which has been confirmed by psychotraumatological studies from the twenty-first century: positive social support facilitates the recovery process from trauma, whereas a lack of social support or negative social support increases the likeliness of developing trauma.[338] The novel also reflects the results of twenty-first century research, which shows that women tend to receive more negative responses than men after suffering traumatic events, and that victims of events that are considered shameful—as rape tends to be—are more likely to receive negative social responses.[339] The analysis found that *Osalig ande* allows both Jonas and Marika to believe in rape myths, and that

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[335] See: Harriet Clayhills et al., *Uppror eller sjukdom? Om kvinnor och psykiska problem* (LiberFörlag, 1979); Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*.

[336] Lisa M. Hathaway et al., "PTSD Symptoms and Dominant Emotional Response to a Traumatic Event: An Examination of DSM-IV Criterion A2," *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping* 23, no. 1 (2010): 119–26; La Bash and Papa, "Shame and PTSD Symptoms."

[337] See: Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307–308; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*; Punamäki et al., "The Deterioration and Mobilization Effects of Trauma on Social Support."

[338] Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 305–307; Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 27.

[339] Andrews et al., "Gender, Social Support, and PTSD in Victims of Violent Crime"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307–308; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8, 72; Punamäki et al., "The Deterioration and Mobilization Effects of Trauma on Social Support."

this prevents them from forming a relationship that could support Marika's growth and healing from the trauma caused by sexual violence.

In contrast to Marika's invisibility in relation to her mother, her memories of past abuse instead detail a feeling of intense, unwanted visibility: the narrative indicates the disgust and shame involved for the child Marika when her stepfather looks at her in a certain, secret way, and when he convinces her that he can tell by the way she looks that she is "mature for her age" and thus available for his sexual advances (33). When Marika later is shown to attempt to become visible on her own terms, by telling her boyfriend about the past abuse and by making art about it, she finds herself invisible again, as her family members and loved ones refuse to believe that the traumatic events ever took place.

Osalig ande depicts invisibility and silence as destructive, but also as *helpful* in relation to Marika's attempts to protect herself from rape and to live with rape trauma. During childhood, silence helps her to refuse to acknowledge the perpetrator and his demands. But to completely hide from and refuse him, Marika must first break her silence and tell her brother about the abuse. However, the strategy of telling people she trusts about traumatic sexual violence to receive support is compromised when so many of her loved ones prove untrustworthy recipients of her confidences. Her mother refuses to even hear the story, and later in life Marika's husband simultaneously does not believe her, tries to diagnose her, and reveals her secret to another man against her will, causing her even more shame.

Osalig ande places art in opposition to medical discourses, the latter of which are mainly used by other characters to delegitimize Marika's traumatic memories of abuse by instead viewing them as mere expressions of illness. Art, on the other hand, is framed as an ideal but unachievable medium of women's post-traumatic communication. Marika is transparent about the rape trauma she suffered in her own art, but because she is a woman, it is not taken seriously, and instead her trauma is mainly communicated in situations over which she has no creative control.

In death, Marika's grudges against the people who have hurt her allow her to refuse institutionalization throughout the course of the novel. This chapter noted the significance of Berggren and the heavenly mental hospital, which many of the reviewers of the novel thought was a failure. I further show how Rydberg's choice of hypermasculine popular cultural stock figures as representatives of a medicalized version of the afterlife amounts to an engagement with 1980s trauma discourses, as well as with feminist critiques of previous psychiatric approaches to rape trauma.

Interestingly, the psychoanalytically influenced ideas of trauma that rose to prominence only a couple of years later, through the Yale School, are largely

absent in Rydberg's narrative. There are no signs of Caruth's proposed uncontrolled repetition of traumatic memories, nor of any difficulty on Marika's behalf to remember or grasp what has happened to her.[340] For Rydberg, rape trauma is not characterized by the victim's forgetting of the event. In fact, the only way out of remembering traumatic events for Marika is to literally have her memory erased. Amnesia is the result of a sedative, non-consensually imposed on her by a cosmic mental hospital policy enforced by Berggren, the ever-present figure of the popular cultural patriarch.

Osalig ande's portrayal of Marika's life, afterlife, and rebirth convey a view of remembering and forgetting traumatic sexual violence according to which the memories of traumatic events are accessible to victims—rendering its view of trauma different from the narratives of repressed memories that would become widespread in the 1990s. *Osalig ande* depicts a woman whose refusal to forget rape is integral to her ghosthood: she haunts the other characters, as does her largely unacknowledged story of sexual violence.

Forgetting is instead a sanctioned measure to keep peace and order, imposed by the cosmic mental institution that erases Marika's memory after her rebirth. Keeping the peace (with men) is also Marika's mother's goal—rather than believing Marika's story about being raped by Henrik, her mother first refuses to listen to it, and later states that she embraces the "memory loss" of past injustices.

Through rebirth, Marika is finally able to achieve the amnesia which the other non-traumatized characters in the story have dwelled within throughout the novel. But the erasure of her memories of womanhood, violence and trauma is not her own choice but Berggren's. Ultimately, Marika's rebirth as a boy without memories is a sinister ending, not a happy one.

[340] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11, 91–92.

4. The ghost yearning for the familiar: Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002)

In several aspects, Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002) formally resembles *Osalig ande*. Here, too, we meet a ghost narrator whose death is the result of having suffered rape. Here, too, a major feature of her continued existence on Earth after her demise is an intense desire to watch and communicate with her remaining family. However, where Marika was shown to commit suicide many years after suffering sexual violence, Sebold's teenage protagonist Susie is murdered in connection to being raped.

Sebold's and Rydberg's novels differ in other formative ways. Marika's narrative style was characterized by detached irony, but Susie's tone of voice is one of good-natured earnestness. And while the design of Rydberg's heavenly mental hospital left her protagonist with minimal self-determination in her afterlife, Sebold does the opposite and offers up a cosmology of wish-fulfillment: after her demise, Susie's spectral residence in the "Inbetween" is marked by the fact that it is modeled on her own desires and fancies in life, providing a soothing fantasy of compensation for a raped and murdered girl.

However, just like Marika, Susie is unfulfilled by the afterlife and returns to Earth as a ghost. In the following chapter, I demonstrate that Susie's ensuing haunting of her family and community serves as a means for the novel to explore grief as an emotional reaction to the events of rape and murder. I also show how haunting functions as a means for connection between Susie and her loved ones, but that this contact is marked by an eerie transmission of emotions between the living and the dead, as well as an uncanny dynamic which sees victims of sexual violence seek solace through the domination of others.

A bestseller upon its time of release and later adapted into a film directed by Peter Jackson and starring Saoirse Ronan in 2009, *The Lovely Bones* is a widely recognized narrative. The novel grapples with themes of sexual violence, loss, family, and 1970s American suburbia, but its most distinctive feature is its protagonist's unconventional position as a murder victim turned ghost narrator. The novel's investment in white suburban ideas of safety and coziness has been criticized by several previous scholars. In the following chapter, I will make use of this critique to explore how this book navigates the subject matter of rape trauma in the afterlife.

The Lovely Bones (2002)

The protagonist of *The Lovely Bones* is Susie Salmon, a fourteen-year-old white girl in an unnamed 1970s suburban American neighborhood who, when walking home from school, is lured by a neighbor into an underground shack he has constructed, where he proceeds to rape and murder her. This scene is narrated to the reader by the specter Susie, who looks back at the events from her position in the afterlife.

While her body remains hidden from the police and her family, Susie's spirit exists throughout the novel as a spectral entity. Although she resides in the Inbetween—a place which reflects the dreams and wishes Susie had on Earth—she remains heavily invested in the earthly lives of her family as well as in the life of the man who raped and killed her. Mr. Harvey is portrayed as an overtly conventional murderer: a middle-aged loner living in a suburb otherwise populated by families, with odd habits that neighbors consider eccentric, yet harmless. Susie's family desperately wish for her body to be found and her murderer to be brought to justice, and while watching their pain, so does Susie.

What follows is a curious plot for a first-person rape narrative. A reverse murder mystery—where Susie's father and sister strive to prove Mr. Harvey's guilt—is intertwined with subplots that follow the lives of Susie's family after her demise. Through Susie's narration, the reader learns about her family's different ways of processing the loss. Her younger siblings, Lindsey and Buckley, grow up, while her mother, Abigail, struggles with, rejects, but ultimately embraces her roles as a mother and a housewife. The numerous subplots add a certain convoluted quality to the novel, and for the sake of readability, this chapter will not summarize all of them.

Four important characters are featured in addition to Susie's immediate family. The first one is Susie's grandmother, who comes to live with the Salmon family after Susie's death, providing some relief by altering the family dynamics. Second, there is Detective Len Fenerman, the police officer who unsuccessfully investigates Susie's murder, and who becomes romantically involved with Abigail. The third significant character is Ray Singh, Susie's schoolmate and crush. He plays an important part in Susie's life just before her death and she experiences her first kiss with him only two weeks prior to the murder. On the day of the murder, he tucked a love note into one of her schoolbooks, which makes the police initially suspect him. From her vantage point in the Inbetween, Susie continues to think about him.

Finally, a significant character is Ruth, a schoolmate of Susie's who happens to be near the murder scene and accidentally comes into contact with Susie's spirit as she transitions to the Inbetween. Prior to her death, Susie regarded the artistic Ruth as first weird, then special, "subversive," and "more talented than

her teachers" (77). Ruth is convinced that she saw Susie's ghost and shares a unique connection with Susie and other murdered girls and women. Beyond this obsession, Ruth's personality is described in the novel as vaguely alternative, feminist, and lesbian.

Style, structure, and genre

Susie, deceased when the novel begins, serves as its narrator and protagonist. Events are focalized through her. As a ghost recounting the aftermath of her own death, Susie is the main character, yet is physically absent from the events that take place on Earth. Generally, Susie's narration emanates from a place above, distinctly detached from the narrated events. She is spatially distanced from Earth and temporally removed from the traumatic incident.

Susie's vantage point from heaven grants her a bird's-eye view of earthly events, which makes her seem like an omniscient narrator. She narrates scenes involving other characters, and in addition to describing their actions, she divulges some of their emotions and inner thoughts. However, when narrating events featuring other individuals, Susie consistently reminds the reader of her presence, emphasizing her position as spectator. Consequently, all events remain heavily focalized through her fourteen-year-old perspective.

The main plot's timeline primarily unfolds chronologically. Narrating in past tense from her heaven, Susie, as the narrator and focalizer, is situated at a future point in time. After recounting the murder, Susie proceeds to describe the events that transpire in the lives of her family and other characters over the course of the eight years following her death. Time in both Susie's heavenly realm and on Earth appears parallel, allowing Susie to visit any place on Earth during the present, but not the past or the future. However, the perceived linearity of lived time for those left behind is set against the stopped time of Susie, in her existence in the Inbetween. While narrating the story's present events, Susie occasionally delves into reminiscences of past experiences from when she was alive.

The novel's spatial dimensions are notably confined: the plot mainly takes place in the Salmon home, with brief excursions into other areas of the suburb where the family resides. The novel seems cognizant of these suburban constraints, and Susie frequently remarks on the claustrophobia of these spaces. The murderer is also continuously linked to small or enclosed spaces: he builds dollhouses as a pastime, keeps the bones of animals hidden in his basement, rapes and murders Susie in an underground shed, and hides her remains in a locked safe, which he throws into a sinkhole.

Susie's perspective as a ghost serves as a narrative device to provide a distinct viewpoint of the unfolding events and emotions experienced by those left behind. The novel addresses the disruption of safety and predictability, as well as loss, in the wake of a traumatic event. This disruption affects not only the living characters but also informs Susie's ghostly existence and her understanding of the world. Consequently, *The Lovely Bones* can be framed as a trauma novel that investigates the far-reaching consequences of a violent act, offering insight into the emotional and psychological ramifications on both the living and the deceased.

Susie's haunting of her family evokes elements of classical ghost stories.[341] While the novel's preoccupation with Gothic architecture and claustrophobic spaces aligns with the tradition of Female Gothic narratives, its focus on specifically suburban anxieties—the destabilizing of previously assumed notions of suburban safety and ahistoricity—is characteristic of the Suburban Gothic.[342] *The Lovely Bones* also, to some extent, adheres to the narrative structure of the romance novel as defined by Pamela Regis: it "tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines."[343] Like romance novels, it features a happy ending brought on by the romantic union of heroines and their love interests, although in this chapter I will argue that its happy ending is ambivalent.

Critical reception and previous research

Compared to the other novels examined in this book, *The Lovely Bones* has been subject to extensive previous research.[344] In the following, the studies most

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[341] According to Brian Norman, Susie bears traits of classic ghost story narrators, but her narration is updated "for a postmodern age of self-conscious narrators and ecumenical spiritualism." She "exhibits traits common to occult fictions, such as indirectly affecting material objects in a familiar poltergeist motif." Other well-known tropes of haunting which Susie fulfills are her position as a watcher of her family, and her desire to rejoin the living, which manifests in classic tropes of dangerous possession. Norman suggests that the ghost story serves as a vehicle of grief, and notes that most of the mourning takes place on Earth: Susie's narration mainly focuses on what her living family is doing. Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 145.

[342] See, for example: Martin Dines, "Suburban Gothic and the Ethnic Uncanny in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*," *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 4 (2012): 959–75.

[343] Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 19.

[344] See: Shahid Ahmad and Shanthi Nadarajan, "Thought Presentation in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*," *Journal of Language and Literature* 20, no. 1 (2020): 70; Alice Bennett, "Unquiet Spirits: Death Writing in Contemporary Fiction," *Textual Practice* 23, no. 3 (2009): 463–79; Ann V. Bliss, "'Share Moments, Share Life': The Domestic Photograph as a Symbol of Disruption and Trauma in *The Lovely Bones*," *Women's Studies* 37, no. 7 (2008): 861–84; Jane Kilby, "Saving the Girl: A Creative Reading of Alice Sebold's *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones*," *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 3 (2018): 323–43; Norman, *Dead Women Talking*; Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi, *Young Adult Gothic*

relevant to this chapter will be presented, focusing on how *The Lovely Bones* has been read alongside Sebold's rape memoir *Lucky* (1999), readings of the novel as a therapeutic narrative, as well as readings that investigate its use of elements from different genres.

In a comparative reading of *The Lovely Bones* and *Lucky*, which recounts a rape the author suffered as a college student, Doris L. Eder traces parallels and differences between their plots.[345] The most prominent example of a similarity presented by Eder is the way in which both works contain a protagonist who is "obsessed" with taking care of her family after having suffered a rape: "[m]ost children expect their parents to protect them, but teenagers Alice and Susie expend inordinate time and energy trying to protect their family members."[346] Eder's insight about the importance of this family dynamic has bearing on how Susie's haunting of her family can be understood, which I will discuss in the analysis.

The Lovely Bones has previously been interpreted as a story about healing and recovery.[347] The supposedly therapeutic quality of the novel is the focus of Sarah Whitney's article "Uneasy Lie the Bones: Alice Sebold's Postfeminist Gothic" (2010), in which she observes that the novel's utilization of popular therapeutic grief discourses encourages passivity instead of anger as a means of letting go of trauma. For Susie, Whitney states, incorporating this therapeutic idea of recovery has gendered consequences, as she at the end of the novel "reinterprets her death as a beautiful 'sacrifice' necessary to bind her family together."[348] Whitney connects the influence of therapeutic discourses to the historical moment of the novel's writing, during which postfeminism was a dominant cultural force. She contends that postfeminist discourse tends to view victimhood and survivorship as opposing modes for women, with survivorship being preferable because it "symbolically places the subject's trauma in the past and denies the event the ability to define her." Although *The Lovely Bones* does not strictly adhere to this narrative, as Susie is deceased and therefore not a survivor, Sebold creates a unique "form of literary survivorship for the heroine," Whitney suggests.[349] Susie manages to evade "death's finality through expanded consciousness and

Fiction: Monstrous Selves/Monstrous Others, Gothic Literary Studies (University of Wales Press, 2021); Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones."

[345] Doris L. Eder, "The Saving Powers of Memory and Imagination in Alice Sebold's *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones*," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*, accessed November 13, 2025.

[346] Eder, "The Saving Powers of Memory and Imagination."

[347] Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, 6; Eder, "The Saving Powers of Memory and Imagination;" Field, *Writing The Survivor*, 187; Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave."

[348] Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 360.

[349] Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 351, 355, 359.

narrative control," embodying elements of both postfeminist survivor mystique and Female Gothic fantasies of victims triumphing over perpetrators.[350]

Previous research has also noted that the element of ghost story in *The Lovely Bones* subverts and plays with genre, discarding common literary expectations for stories about murdered girls. Alice Bennett notes that in *The Lovely Bones*, Susie's narration changes the temporal makeup of what otherwise would constitute a crime narrative. While the crime always remains outside the narrative in a conventional murder mystery, here, the reader becomes witness to it at the beginning of the novel. The dead narrator, she further contends, "expands the beginning of the story back in time, so that it does not begin with a mute corpse […]."[351]

Brian Norman interprets *The Lovely Bones* as a coming-of-age story in his book chapter "Dead Woman Coming of Age" (2013). He argues that in its attempt to grant Susie some kind of justice or closure, so that she can move on from her spectral limbo, the novel considers a number of different generic modes, the conventions of which allow for very different visions of a happy ending. He argues that instead of choosing the convention of crime fiction, in which justice is often equivalent to the capture of the killer, Sebold goes for the formula of a coming-of-age narrative: Susie's greatest wish after her murder is to grow up in a conventional way, to be a conventional teenager and later, woman. As Susie's concept of justice is rooted in normative girlhood, arrested at the age of fourteen by the murderer, she does not question dominant ideologies of patriarchal American whiteness, but instead idealizes them.[352]

Norman identifies sinister undertones and a demanding quality in Susie's haunting. For example, he calls attention to the issue of consent in a particularly unsettling scene, where Susie inhabits Ruth's body to engage in sexual activity with her middle school crush, Ray. He observes the rape imagery present in this scene and notes how Susie is portrayed as the perpetrator in a reversal of the rape she herself suffered in the beginning of the novel. He reads the troubling aspects of this scene as partly hidden, smoothed over by the writer.[353]

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[350] Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 356. Drawing on Kate Ferguson Ellis' definition of the Gothic as "a resistance to an ideology that imprisons [women] even as it posits a sphere of safety for them," Whitney posits that postfeminist Gothic literature "offers readers an opportunity to question the claims of safety and equality that underpin the postfeminist experience." She argues that *The Lovely Bones* can be read as a Gothic novel tempered by postfeminist ideals, reflecting a cultural moment that sought to minimize claims of gendered inequity and violence. Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 351–352. See also: Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), x.

[351] Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, 107.

[352] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 155.

[353] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 150, 152. Norman ultimately believes that the novel aligns with Susie's vision of justice, implying that the troubling aspects of the aforementioned scene are unintentional. He contends that the novel's vision ultimately is not feminist, while the novel's

Perhaps due to its format as a genre hybrid, upon its publication, *The Lovely Bones* was interpreted in very different ways and received polarized reviews. Favorable critics included Michiko Kakutani, who stated in her *New York Times* review that the novel serves as an "affecting meditation on the ways in which terrible pain and loss can be redeemed [...] through love and acceptance."[354] Ali Smith, on the other hand, penned a scathing review in *The Guardian*, dismissing *The Lovely Bones* as timid and sentimental.[355] These reviews represent two conflicting tendencies of critics' interpretations of *The Lovely Bones*: the first perceives the novel as an uplifting story about a girl healing from trauma through the power of love, while the second regards the novel as overly sentimental and conservative.

When the Swedish translation of Sebold's novel, *Flickan från ovan*, was published in 2003, it was reviewed in several of Sweden's largest newspapers and in the literary magazine *BLM*. Several of the Swedish reviews emphasized the novel's stark "Americanness," as well as its bestseller status in the United States.[356] One reviewer interprets its bestseller status as a result of it being "one hundred percent American," (Johan Berggren) and another states that if something becomes big in the United States it arrives in Sweden sooner rather than later (Jonas Thente). Berggren identifies four components of the novel that are especially American: first, the focus on the nuclear family as its emotional center—in which the father is painted as the softest family member, "a departure from most real families." Second, the suburban middle class as the natural foundation of society. Third, the novel's self-evident spirituality, which in his opinion reflects that the United States is a very religious country. And fourth, "a serial killer, this self-invented boogeyman of American middle-class culture."

Interestingly, two Swedish reviewers love it precisely due to this Americanness (Berggren; Jesper Högström), while two others starkly dislike it for the very same reason. Berggren, calling the novel a "masterpiece," deems the writing so exuberant that one is unable to defend oneself from its American values:

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portrayal of suburban racism is "unhooked to an antiracist vision." According to Norman, "Susie's lost innocence and desirable whiteness fall in the mainstream of American crime fiction." Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 155–156.

[354] Michiko Kakutani, "The Power of Love Leaps The Great Divide of Death," The Arts, *New York Times*, June 18, 2002.

[355] "*The Lovely Bones* is a determined reiteration of innocence," Smith writes. She argues that the novel becomes bland after the poignant first 50 pages, as its narrative is stifled by an overemphasis on creating a sense of safety. The novel "becomes a hybrid of realism and wishful thinking." Ali Smith, "A Perfect Afterlife," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2002.

[356] Johan Berggren, "Flickan från ovan," *BLM*, no. 3 (2003); Hanna Gardell, "En mysig död," *Sydsvenskan*, April 10, 2003; Jesper Högström, "Den gråtande recensenten," *Expressen*, April 15, 2003; Eva Johansson, "För mycket söta tillsatser," *Svenska Dagbladet*, April 10, 2003; Jonas Thente, "Två debutanter: läs och häpna," *Dagens Nyheter*, May 10, 2003. My translations.

"indoctrination on a powerful literary level!" According to Eva Johansson, who dislikes the novel so much she states that she would rather go to hell than to Sebold's "Norman Rockwell" heaven, the novel's significant problem is best summarized "with a word that characterizes a broad tendency in American culture: inspirational."[357] Hanna Gardell's review is titled "En mysig död" ("A Cozy Death") and deems the central problem of the novel to be that it is unexpectedly bright—too sentimental, cute, and idyllic. This brightness "appears to be the only reasonable explanation for why Alice Sebold's debut novel has become such an outstanding success in the United States," Gardell speculates.

The Swedish critical reception generally identified rape as a main theme of the novel, and one review refers to the plot as "the outcome of a post-trauma."[358] Moreover, *The Lovely Bones* was evoked in Swedish media at the time as a potential trend-setter: in a 2003 article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, Sebold's novel is used as an example when the journalist argues that straightforward explorations of death might be a new trend in Swedish literature, public debates, and music.[359]

Analysis

The ghost—a figure of empowered survivorship?

The Lovely Bones positions itself close to two different cultural discourses of speaking out about personal experiences of rape: the feminist notion that personal narratives about sexual violence are acts of empowerment that can change the world, and the therapeutic view of narrative as a tool of healing from trauma.[360] This chapter will argue that neither of these two narrative modes are shown to be successful within the plot.

Part of the well-known storytelling surrounding *The Lovely Bones* is Sebold's wish to do justice to its protagonist, who is loosely modeled on a victim of rape and murder that Sebold had heard about. It thus partakes in an ethical project of looking with the specter, or in Peeren's words: acknowledging the ghost's own vision with "a willingness to look at the world, and at oneself, through its eyes."[361] Writing *The Lovely Bones* in tandem with her own autobiographical rape trauma narrative, the memoir *Lucky*, Sebold stated in an interview that she felt

[357] The word "inspirational" is written in English in the review.

[358] Tomas Jakobsson, "Mästerligt, Sebold!", *Gefle Dagblad*, October 21, 2003. My translation.

[359] Anneli Rogeman, "Färgstark debut med Svart dam," *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 31, 2003.

[360] See: Serisier, *Speaking Out*; Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD."

[361] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 27.

compelled to integrate her personal experience of rape trauma into a separate narrative, in order to preserve Susie's story as the central focus in *The Lovely Bones*.[362]

> As weird as this sounds, I think that after writing the first chapter of *Lovely Bones*, in which Susie is raped and killed, there was some urging on Susie's part that I get my own business out of the way before writing further into her story. When I say "on Susie's part" I mean: the demands of her wanting to tell her story and using me to do so meant that I had to unload *my* story someplace else. It wasn't going to fit into the book I wanted to write for her.[363]

Sebold suggests that she is writing *The Lovely Bones* for Susie, the protagonist, relinquishing her authorial control and allowing Susie, a fictional character, to shape the novel's direction. In Sebold's ambition, echoes from the Yale School's idea of ethical trauma witnessing can be discerned: Susie is placed in the role of testifier and Sebold becomes the witness who, to the best of her ability, listens sympathetically while trying to avoid appropriating Susie's story and identifying too closely with it.[364]

This aspiration also reflects the understanding of trauma popularized by Judith Herman: that because the moment of trauma involves losing one's power, control, bodily integrity, and autonomy, an important component of the healing process involves empowering the survivor: "[s]he must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery."[365] However, Sebold's goal seems to be less about recovery and more about self-determination as an end goal: Susie should be allowed to shape the story in whichever direction she wants. The ethical premise of Sebold's narrative about rape and murder is complete solidarity with the imagined victim's perspective.

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[362] *Lucky* (2002) recounts the story of Sebold's harrowing experience of being raped by a stranger while she was in college. The memoir follows the insensitive police investigation and court case, as well as Sebold's complicated relationship with her family after the rape. Sebold dryly recounts how the police compares her rape with the fate of another girl who did not survive: "[i]n the tunnel where I was raped [...] a girl had been murdered and dismembered. I was told this story by the police. In comparison, they said, I was lucky." (Sebold, *Lucky*, 3). Sebold's autobiography was an integral part of the marketing and storytelling surrounding *The Lovely Bones*. On the literary market, Sebold's memoir, as well as her personal interviews have lent the fictional sister novel an air of authenticity, but because Sebold's status as a "real" victim is connected to the court case described in *Lucky*, it was also widely questioned in the numerous media stories following the news that the man previously incarcerated for the rape of Sebold was sentenced on insufficient grounds, and found innocent forty years later, in 2021. I want to stress that this chapter investigates Sebold's fiction and not Sebold's motives or emotions as an individual.

[363] "The World Meets Alice Sebold," Interview, Powell's Books, October 10, 2006 (emphasis in text).

[364] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 7.

[365] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33, 53, 133.

Although sympathetic, this goal poses problems for the narrative: first, because the victim who inspired Sebold to write *The Lovely Bones* is dead, her narrative voice must originate in Sebold's imagination. Second, because the character conjured up by Sebold is a fourteen-year-old with very limited experience of the world, she seemingly must harbor hegemonic cultural ideas about what justice and recovery means.

This problem is interpreted by literary scholar Sarah Whitney as a sign of the novel's buying into a certain late 1990s postfeminist formulation of the "survivor," the popularity of which, according to her, "signals the profound cultural influence of therapeutic discourses." These discourses, she continues, "map a narrative in which a traumatized subject moves from psychological fragmentation to health. The act of naming oneself a survivor symbolically places the subject's trauma in the past and denies the event the ability to define her." Of course, the fact that Susie is per definition not a survivor—she is dead—is noted by Whitney, but she argues that by making Susie a ghost, Sebold is able to create a "unique form of literary survivorship" for her.[366]

While I agree that *The Lovely Bones* is invested in ideas of personal survivor narratives as both healing and able to bring about social change, I want to explore the fact that on the level of the plot, these ideas are shown to work only in part and ambiguously, at best. A ghost is, after all, far from a straightforward literary figure of empowered survivorship. While sometimes used as a melodramatic figure, another common connotation is fear and unfinished business that demands closure or revenge.[367] These disconcerting qualities of the ghost sometimes surface in *The Lovely Bones*; for example, in the possession scene, as pointed out by Norman.[368]

Indeed, the novel, consciously or not, sometimes undermines its own supposedly empowering narrative of survival. It implicitly comments on the deceitfulness of narratives when Susie describes how easily the police officer investigating her murder is duped by Mr. Harvey's made-up story about his life: "Each split-level contained a narrative. To Len Fenerman especially, George Harvey's seemed a compelling one" (63). Just like the novel's glossy suburbia contains hidden claustrophobic spaces, forgotten old buildings, and a serial killer, the sweet and inspirational tone of *The Lovely Bones* can also be read as the glossy surface of a story concerned with dark emotions—and with what happens when there is no language to address them.

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366 Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 355.

367 See: Walker, *Modern Ghost Melodramas*.

368 Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 150.

The Lovely Bones as a narrative of rape trauma

Susie's experience of rape is detailed in the very beginning of the novel. Having been trapped with the murderer, Susie describes her disbelieving horror when realizing that the man is "no character," as she had previously told herself, but is deliberately blocking the door, trapping her. The absurdity of the murderer's awful statements is displayed ("[b]ig white panties, he said [14]"), as well as the terror and powerlessness experienced by Susie:

> I fought hard. I fought as hard as I could not to let Mr. Harvey hurt me, but my hard-as-I-could was not hard enough, not even close, and I was soon lying down on the ground, in the ground, with him on top of me panting and sweating, having lost his glasses in the struggle. I was so alive then. I thought it was the worst thing in the world to be lying flat on my back with a sweating man on top of me (12).

The emotional devastation of the experience is also described: "I felt huge and bloated. I felt like a sea in which he stood and pissed and shat. I felt the corners of my body were turning in on themselves and out [...]" (14). *The Lovely Bones*, like many narratives about rape, uses the image of a self that is separated from the body and leaves it behind: "[a]s he kissed his wet lips down my face and neck and then began to shove his hands up under my shirt, I wept. I began to leave my body; I began to inhabit the air and the silence." But Sebold's narrative is clear about the fact that there is a difference between metaphor and reality: you either die, or you survive. Susie knows that Mr. Harvey is going to kill her, but while she is still alive, "a powerful knowledge took hold. He had done this thing to me and I had lived" (14). Thus, Sebold's narrative makes a similar point as Mithu Sanyal, when she claims that cultural conceptions of rape trauma risk conflating it with spiritual death by viewing rape as "soul murder."[369]

Interlaced with the narration of Susie's encounter with Mr. Harvey, there are small scenes from what she calls "my heaven," (in other places referred to as the Inbetween) in which Susie comments on the events as a spectator. This provides pauses in the narration of the rape and murder and instead of the raw immediacy of a traumatic flashback, the reader is provided with a story of something horrible, told much later from a place of safety. Throughout the horrible events taking place in this scene, the reader is aware that this is not the end for Susie: she will continue to exist in a better place.

Susie's spectral narration of this scene is marked by regret; she looks back on the event wishing that she would have known then what she now knows: "[a]fter I was dead I thought about how there had been the light scent of cologne in the

[369] Sanyal, *Rape*, 63.

air but that I had not been paying attention [...].” When Mr. Harvey greets her with her name, Susie states that “I wish now that I had known this was weird. I had never told him my name” (6). Susie, exhibiting the kind of self-blame listed as a part of the *DSM-5*’s PTSD diagnosis, ponders why she didn’t just leave when she felt uncomfortable.[370] But her “intake-counselor” in heaven, Franny, says that “these questions were fruitless: ‘You didn’t and that’s that. Don’t mull it over. It does no good. You’re dead and you have to accept it’” (8). This piece of advice is formulated in a way that encourages Susie to suppress any thoughts of the event. Instead of processing it through narrative, she is told to just “accept it,” unprocessed. And indeed, the rape is narrated only once, in the beginning of the novel, which differs from Marika’s gradual revealing of past traumatic events in *Osalig ande*.

The Lovely Bones has been read by several previous studies as a novel about trauma, and indeed, it contains the intertextual and supernatural elements attributed to trauma fiction by Anne Whitehead.[371] However, the abrupt flashbacks and temporal experimentation found in more formally modernist trauma fiction are absent, and *The Lovely Bones* employs a more traditionally coherent, if not completely chronological, temporal structure. Susie’s memories of non-traumatic events are seamlessly integrated into the narrative, and in this instance the novel does not comply with Whitehead’s characterization of trauma fiction as mimicking the disruption of memory and time emphasized by Cathy Caruth and other American literary trauma scholars of the time.[372]

Aside from Susie’s recollections of events from her life—which are presented as coherent stories with clear beginnings and ends, resembling verbally accessible memories rather than disjointed flashbacks—the events on Earth unfold chronologically after Susie’s death.[373] The scene containing the rape and murder is bluntly described in the opening chapter, but images from this event do not resurface later in Susie’s narrative—it is not the repeated pattern of intrusive, distressing memories which is part of the current PTSD diagnosis.[374]

Instead, its linearity becomes an effect in and of itself. As literary critic Ali Smith put it in her review: the narrative is “a teeth-gritted celebration of something not dismembered or shattered at all, but continuous: the notion of the American family unit, dysfunctional, yes, but pure and good nonetheless.”[375] In

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[370] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 271–72.

[371] Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction*, 6; Bliss, “‘Share Moments, Share Life’,” Norman, *Dead Women Talking*; Prater, “Testimony from Beyond the Grave”; Whitney, “Uneasy Lie the Bones”; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 84.

[372] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 3–5.

[373] See: Brewin et al., “A Dual Representation Theory of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.”

[374] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 271–72.

[375] Smith, “A Perfect Afterlife.”

my opinion, it is this teeth-gritted quality that makes it interesting as trauma fiction: because despite the novel's determination to be linear and cozy, like any good Gothic story, it is haunted by the darkness that it tries to suppress.

Although not necessarily a novel about PTSD, I still read *The Lovely Bones* as trauma fiction, because its main plot portrays the impact of a potentially traumatic event on both the living and the deceased. It examines how Susie's family and friends cope, or fail to cope, with the loss, as well as how Susie, as a ghost, grapples with the residual emotional effects of her violent death. The novel also explores the emotional turmoil, grief, and healing process that the living characters undergo.

The Lovely Bones, I would argue, seeks to imagine how the emotional aftermath of rape and murder might have been manifested during a time before trauma was a widely discussed phenomenon—and before the feminist project of "breaking the silence" around sexual violence had resulted in women's stories about rape becoming a more common feature of media and popular culture.[376] The novel is set in American suburbia in 1973, a time which is in the past both from the perspective of the novel, which was published in 2002, and from the perspective of the narrator. In the beginning of the novel, Susie points out that the story takes place in a time before the rape and murder of girls—especially girls who were not white—regularly started to feature in American media, before people were hyperaware of these occurrences: "[i]t was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen" (5). This statement implies a kind of present perspective: Susie looks back on a time in which she thinks that a different social reality prevailed.

At the very beginning of the novel, Susie narrates the rape she suffers to the reader. Thus, within the novel, rape is not the kind of inherently ungraspable or unspeakable traumatic event suggested by 1990s literary trauma theory.[377] Rather, I would argue, the way in which rape all but disappears from the narrative after Susie's initial retelling mirrors the fact that rape is never discussed in the suburban setting of the novel, and lies firmly outside of what Herman has called "the realm of socially validated reality."[378]

In fact, the novel implies that transparent narratives of sexuality in general have been unavailable to Susie in life: for example, she has no word for her own genitals besides the metaphor used by her mother: the "baby-making machinery" (77). Another example: when Susie is lured into the underground room built by the killer Mr. Harvey, she evokes familiar narratives of strange men in order to make sense of the situation. "My father had a nice way of describing people like

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[376] See: Serisier, *Speaking Out*.

[377] See: Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.

[378] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

him: 'The man's a character, that's all.' [...] I imagined he was lonely. We had read about men like him in health class. Men who never married and ate frozen meals every night and were so afraid of rejection that they didn't even own pets. I felt sorry for him" (10–11). None of the narratives she draws from includes a narrative of rape. Tellingly, the only real way for Susie to recognize her fear of being trapped in an enclosed space with a man who behaves in a threatening way is through a word she herself has made up: Mr. Harvey gives her "what my friend Clarissa and I had dubbed the skeevies" (11). The word "rape" is only mentioned four times in the novel, and then only in connection to the murderer's other victims, never to Susie (182, 272, 292). I read this as a manifestation of the fact that Susie has no definite word for what happened to her.

The setting of *The Lovely Bones* is explicitly pre-feminist, by which I mean is that feminism is mentioned only in connection to the character Ruth, who, after having borrowed "a pile of huge books [...], all early feminist texts," from her social sciences teacher, walking back home has to carry them with their spines resting against her stomach so that nobody will catch sight of the titles (39). If we read *The Lovely Bones* as a novel invested in telling a story about rape and its emotional aftermath—which I believe we should, and which many previous researchers have—its explicitly pre-feminist setting becomes an argument for reading the characters' silences around rape as a deliberate feature of the plot. Feminist consciousness-raising has not yet placed the subject of rape on the agenda in the community pictured in the novel, and the popularization of the idea of trauma as a consequence of rape is still two decades into the future. Tanya Serisier's insight that generic form provides a structure that makes narratives of rape tellable and recognizable to readers can draw attention to an important fact of *The Lovely Bones*: in its setting, feminist "speaking out" about rape is not a known practice.[379]

Instead, the overwhelming tendency among other characters to think and talk about Susie as lost, rather than raped or even murdered, plays an operative role in the creation of Susie's post-traumatic spectrality. As Peeren notes, discourses surrounding missing people tend to construct them as spectral, because their fates are unknown and their status as living or dead is uncertain, and their non-presence requires others to speak for them.[380]

As a character, Susie complies with the gender norms that inform contemporary schemata of the genuinely missing person, whose disappearance warrants public engagement and sympathy. She is shown to be completely "innocent" in relation to her own disappearance, which complies with the ideal scenario which Peeren describes as a cultural expectation of someone who is truly and urgently

[379] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 158.

[380] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145.

missing. She has been "taken away, through no fault of [her] own, by an unknown person or persons to an unchosen, unidentified location."[381]

Additionally, she is a white, middle-class child—a demographic whose disappearance is generally considered a highly urgent event, both because of their generally active support systems and because of cultural ideas of the particular innocence and vulnerability of white children.[382] All this allows Susie to live on as a ghost and haunt the novel's suburban community with a tremendous force. Perhaps this is also part of the reason why the novel has lingered so persistently in the cultural imagination since its release, and why it was conceived of as so "American" by Swedish reviewers at the time.

Consistently but not unrealistically, none of Susie's family members ever refers to the possibility that Susie may have been raped, and almost never to the fact that she was murdered. Although Susie's elbow is found three days after the murder—something which makes the horrific violence of her death evident (10)—and the police tells her parents that "all evidence points to your daughter's death" (29), the violence of this fact is very seldom spoken aloud within her family. Towards the middle of the novel, Susie's mother expresses her frustration with this fact: "[n]o one says it. No one in the neighborhood talks about it. People call it the 'horrible tragedy' or some variation of that. I just want it to be spoken out loud by somebody" (147–148).

Violence as an unspoken subject within a family is not just a historical or fictional phenomenon, as traumatized people today still often experience difficulty in speaking about the traumatic event with family and friends.[383] Contemporary psychotraumatology has also found that the inability to talk with loved ones about what has happened presents a major obstacle to receiving positive social support in the wake of a traumatic event. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of developing trauma, and also makes healing more difficult.[384] And indeed, Susie's spectral inability to talk to her loved ones significantly affects the ways in which Susie is shown to cope with what happened to her. Moreover, I would argue, a general lack of available narratives about sexual violence in the

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[381] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145.

[382] Morgado, "A Loss beyond Imagining," 244, 253; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145; Wanzo, "The Era of Lost (White) Girls," 99–126.

[383] Michele Bedard-Gilligan et al., "Individual Differences in Trauma Disclosure," *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 43, no. 2 (2012): 716–23; Paula Thomson and S. Victoria Jaque, "'I Cannot Tell Anyone:' There Are Many Reasons," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 26, no. 1 (2025): 9–22.

[384] Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 305; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

novel's setting is shown to deny the ghost Susie a framework through which to process and understand the event.

The novel depicts the emotional consequences of potentially traumatic sexual violence for a victim whose social support network consists of people who grieve a lost child—but who mostly do not talk about the violence of her death. Thus, instead of depicting a post-traumatic experience through a contemporary psychiatric understanding of the PTSD diagnosis, using a ghost protagonist lets the novel explore another reaction to rape, contingent on the discourses of grief and yearning initiated by her remaining family.

Haunting through grief and yearning

Although Susie narrates events to the reader, the novel quickly establishes that this is not the kind of social relationship that Susie craves—rather, she desperately wants to connect with her family. Since the moment of her death, Susie's relationship to people on Earth is described as one-sided and lonely. She watches them from above, just like Marika did in *Osalig ande*. This relationship does not contain what Peeren would define as agency, which you only have if you are able to act and have this action noticed and taken seriously by someone else.[385] Susie expresses her frustration at this lack of agency: all she can do is talk, "but no one on Earth could hear me" (32).

As I mentioned above, the fact that Susie is constructed as a missing person in the eyes of the living serves as a major reason for her spectral lingering on Earth, as the finality of death is not attributed to her. In Peeren's words: "incapable of engineering their own recognition; [missing people], or, rather, the void left by their unexplained removal, can be conjured only by others, on their terms, which must, moreover, make sense in the wider social realm."[386] Susie's spectrality is, indeed, contingent on terms that make sense in the wider social realm of the suburban environment in which she grew up.

Her father, Jack, depicted throughout the novel as a dominating force in Susie's family, is also the family member who has the most trouble accepting her death. A sentence uttered by the police officer Len in the beginning of the novel, meant to soothe the grieving father and give him hope of finding his daughter alive, becomes decisive: "nothing is ever certain." Jack, in turn, uses this phrase to soothe Susie's mother Abigail (20). Towards the end of the novel, Susie recounts Abigail's reflections about the cruelty of this cliché: "Len had a fixed set of phrases. It was this same phrase that my father had borrowed to soothe his family. It was a cruel phrase that preyed on hope" (291).

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[385] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 15.

[386] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 146.

Jack becomes obsessed with proving Mr. Harvey's guilt, which culminates in a misguided attempt to hunt him down. Jack saw a light in the cornfield where Susie was murdered, assumes it is Mr. Harvey, and goes out with a baseball bat to beat him up. Instead, he finds two terrified teenagers making out, and soon the whole neighborhood knows that Jack Salmon "was crazy with grief and had gone out to the cornfield seeking revenge" (141). For many years, his remaining children adapt themselves to cater to his grief: "Lindsey and Buckley had come to live their lives in direct proportion to what effect it would have on a fragile father" (242).

The existence of both potentially traumatic violence and grief in a story like this is unsurprising, as they often overlap in people's lives.[387] While psychiatry considers acute grief a normal reaction to the event of losing a loved one, discussions about long and debilitating cases of mourning are currently taking place within the field. Contemporary psychiatric discourse suggests that individuals suffering from prolonged grief (previously called "complicated grief") struggle to grasp the finality of losing a loved one. The person may experience intense yearning for the deceased, intense sorrow and pain, and may be preoccupied with the circumstances of the death. The person may also have great difficulty accepting the death and feel very angry about it.[388] Katherine Shear describes the typical components that separate complicated grief from depression as follows:

> [They include] intense yearning or longing for the deceased, strong wishes to be reunited with the lost loved one, a desire to feel close to the deceased, intrusive or preoccupying thoughts of the deceased, and efforts to avoid reminders of the loss. People with CG feel the world could be made right instantly by the reappearance of the deceased.[389]

Parents who have lost children and adults who have lost intimate partners are at the highest risk of developing prolonged grief, with a study from 2012 showing that levels of complication related to prolonged grief approached fifty percent for people who lost loved ones to violent causes.[390] In *The Lovely Bones*, Susie's

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[387] Existing research shows that in case of violent and sudden death, people close to the bereaved person often suffer from both prolonged grief and PTSD. See: Andreas Maercker et al., "Depression and Complicated Grief," in *APA Handbook of Trauma Psychology: Foundations in Knowledge, Vol. 1*, ed. Steven N. Gold (American Psychological Association, 2017); M. Katherine Shear, "Grief and Mourning Gone Awry: Pathway and Course of Complicated Grief," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 14, no. 2 (2012): 123.

[388] Shear, "Grief and mourning gone awry," 119, 124; Holly G. Prigerson et al., "History and Status of Prolonged Grief Disorder as a Psychiatric Diagnosis," *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 17 (May 2021): 109.

[389] Shear, "Grief and mourning gone awry," 124.

[390] Maercker et al., "Depression and Complicated Grief."

father's process of intense grief is indeed prolonged: it is shown to be the dominating tone of the entire family for many years, until Susie's younger sister starts a family of her own after graduating college. In his declamatory expressions of grief, he is the main conjurer of the ghost Susie, and she is indeed conjured on his terms.

After Susie's death, father and daughter become united by a mutual strong wish to hold on to their shared past. Susie's ghostly presence is said to enact a "tug" on her father, pulling him "back back back" (48). Jack's grief, in turn, seems to shape his spectral daughter's priorities even after her own death. As a ghost, Susie consistently tries to fulfill her father's desires by getting her mother to return to the family, and pushing Lindsey both to break into the murderer's home to find evidence of his guilt—which Jack has obsessively been trying to prove—and pushing her to start a family with her high school sweetheart (184, 241).

Susie's frustration of being unable to connect with her family is temporarily resolved during a couple of scenes in which she becomes visible to her family members in something that resembles a haunting. In one of these scenes, Susie breaks the barrier between the Inbetween and Earth by "accident," she states (45), but I read it as directly connected to her father's intense expression of grief. In a key scene taking place after Susie's death, Jack, in a fit of grief and rage, destroys a collection of ships in bottles which Susie had helped him build before she died. When her father is standing amidst the shards of glass, Susie, without knowing how, briefly reveals herself by casting her face in the fragments. Jack reacts by falling silent for a moment, after which he laughs "so loud and deep, I shook with it in my heaven" (46). This is the kind of social connection which Susie has been craving—her father acknowledges her presence.

But it is still not an example of agency in Peeren's sense, because it is not Susie but her father who is the primary actor. Susie's appearance is a confirmation of his agency, not hers. She is mostly unable to set the tone for the interactions with the living, and the novel's depiction of the aftermath of rape and murder centers Susie's father's grief. This is interesting, as the components of this grief are taken on by Susie, as well. As a missing girl, her spectral existence is contingent on her father's conjuring of her, which results in an emotional interdependency between father and daughter. Jack struggles to grasp the finality of losing Susie, and as Susie longs to connect with her father, she cannot accept the finality of her own death, either.

Read alongside *Lucky*, in which Sebold describes how her own parents' clumsy remarks and controlling behavior shaped her experience after suffering rape, it becomes even clearer that *The Lovely Bones*—correctly—views a young girl's experience of the aftermath of rape as heavily affected by her parents'

reactions.[391] I argue that *The Lovely Bones*, through the ghost narrator, experiments with a potential emotional transference between the points of view of parents and children—opening up questions regarding how families' different kinds of reactions to violence might shape the post-traumatic reactions of victims who survive. Building on Mieke Bal's argument that the focalization of rape is a vital aspect of whether the event is understood as a rape at all, Sebold's depiction of the relationship between father and daughter underlines how other people's perspectives (besides the perpetrator's and the victim's) may powerfully shape how events of sexual violence are remembered, even by the victim herself.[392]

In popular culture, ghosts are associated with strong affects—obsession being among the most prominent. The obsessive quality of the ghost is used by Sebold to depict both her and her father's inability to accept that she is truly gone.[393] Furthermore, yearning, the major specific emotion related to prolonged grief, could also be described as a type of obsession.[394] The emotional register of the ghost Susie is indeed marked by yearning, which takes on an interesting double meaning: it is simultaneously a feature of grief and a marker of the sexuality Susie still exhibits as a ghost. Norman touches on the subject when he notes that Susie exhibits emotions typical of teenage girls' coming-of-age narratives: she "swoons" over her classmate Ray in "full teenage-girl crush fashion."[395] I believe that the psychological concept of grief-related yearning can shed some light on the entangled relationship between grief, sexuality, and romance which is at the heart of the story.

Associate professor of nursing Laura M. Waters describes yearning as "a prolonged unsatisfied, intense, and future-oriented desire toward a person, place, or thing that was treasured in the past."[396] In *The Lovely Bones*, yearning mediates Susie's relationships with the living. It is the force which lets Susie show up in mirrors, window reflections, and shards of glass. At one point she states that she "had never even let myself yearn for [her younger brother] Buckley, afraid he might see my image in a mirror or a bottle cap" (91). Towards the very end of the novel, Susie watches her mother who has returned to the family after being gone for years, and reflects:

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[391] In *Lucky*, the fragility of Sebold's mother's psyche and the awkwardness of her father is described as shaping their behavior during the aftermath of the rape. Sebold, *Lucky*, 55, 59. See, also: Eder, "The Saving Powers of Memory and Imagination."

[392] Bal, *Narratology*, 159.

[393] del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader*, 2.

[394] Laura M. Waters, "Measurement of Yearning in Bereaved Spouses," *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 31, no. 4 (2023): 748–55.

[395] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 149.

[396] Waters, "Measurement of Yearning in Bereaved Spouses," 748.

> When was it all right to let go not only of the dead but of the living—to learn to accept?
>
> I was not in the bathroom, in the tub, or in the spigot; I did not hold court in the mirror above her head or stand in miniature at the tip of every bristle on Lindsey's or Buckley's toothbrush. In some way I could not account for—had they reached a state of bliss? were my parents back together forever? had Buckley begun to tell someone his troubles? would my father's heart truly heal?—I was done yearning for them, needing them to yearn for me. Though I still would. Though they still would. Always (318).

Here, Susie's decision to finally stop haunting her family coincides with her statement that she, at least in theory, is done yearning and needing her family to yearn for her.

Within the novel, there is an interesting overlap between the concepts of grief-related yearning for a deceased loved one, and yearning in the sense of a reader's longing for a familiar kind of narrative closure. For example, at one point Susie reflects that a part of her "wished swift vengeance, wanted my father to turn into the man he could never have been—a man violent in rage. That's what you see in movies, that's what happens in the books people read" (58).[397] Crucially, the novel acknowledges that only a part of Susie harbors this desire and does not fully endorse this aspect of herself. Instead of viewing revenge as a realistic option, she considers this desire a product of the books she has read and the films she has watched—a kind of meta-reflection about how the narrative conventions that are available to us may shape our desires and yearnings.

Romance as a mode for Susie's story

As we have seen, within the plot of *The Lovely Bones*, genres through which rape narratives can be told are unavailable to Susie. She never tells the living about the rape and receives no social support in relation to this event. Instead, her longing for social connection is fulfilled through obsessive yearning, which functions as a link that allows the living and the dead to hang on to each other by enacting a grieving process of mutual longing for the past. The novel culminates in a narrative arc resembling those of the romance genre in literature, a genre in which another kind of yearning—romantic yearning—plays a significant role.[398] When the spectral Susie watches her crush Ray several years after her death, she describes a yearning with an explicitly romantic and sexual component: "I would

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[397] It is certainly what happens in the fiction her father prefers: the novel associates Jack with western films, war narratives, as well as with overarching fictional scripts of revenge (33, 184).

[398] See: Camilla Wallin Lämsä, *Yearning Hours: Desire, Darcymania, and Readerly Attachments in the Digital Jane Austen Fandom*, Linköping Studies in Arts and Sciences, 915 (Linköping universitet, Department of Culture and Society, 2025), 91.

watch Ray with a longing different from that which I had for anyone else. A longing to touch and hold him [...]" (224).

The following part of the chapter will explore the novel's experiments with genre elements from romance fiction, and their implications for how the novel imagines a kind of empowered post-traumatic spectrality for Susie. Although as a ghost she cannot communicate with her family through speech, the novel imagines a way for Susie to affect the living world through genre conventions of romance.

The assumption that women's feelings of boredom and unfulfillment will be transcended through heterosexual intercourse is commonly present within the romance genre, in which happy endings are usually contingent on the hero and heroine ending up in a loving relationship.[399] This idea prominently features in *The Lovely Bones*, where 1970s white suburban girlhood is depicted as rife with spatial and intellectual constraints. As Norman suggests, sex is portrayed in the novel as a magical event, believed to grant girls access to new and expanded worlds.[400] Having lost her body, Susie is frustratingly unable to experience this form of transcendence. Instead, her spectral state is used by the novel as a way of letting her indulge in the love lives of girls who are alive—an endeavor which aims to transport Susie out of the claustrophobic state of stagnation she finds herself in after her rape and murder.

As Norman notes, Susie heavily identifies with her younger sister Lindsey, believing the most critical aspect of Lindsey's transition to womanhood is her evolving relationship with her boyfriend Samuel.[401] And interestingly, her ghostly observations of her sister often resemble escapist practices of reading fiction: when Lindsey experiences her first kiss, for example, Susie reports her own intense emotional identification when observing the scene, as though describing her response to a particularly touching novel or film. "Lindsey's face flushed; mine flushed up in heaven. [...] She kissed him; it was glorious. I was

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[399] In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway's interview subjects selected the following traits as the most important features of romance novels: a "happy ending" and a "slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine." Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 66.

[400] Norman suggests that having sex with her crush is one of Susie's main desires, relating it to her desire of fulfilling conventional notions of coming of age as a teenage girl. Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 149.

[401] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 146. This relationship traverses all the traditional milestones, such as the first kiss, the first time having sex, and ultimately, a marriage proposal in a Gothic Revival building during a dramatic thunderstorm. Norman observes that Susie's reaction in this scene, exclaiming "My sister! My Samuel! My dream!" (241) resembles a phrase repeated by the ghost child Beloved in Toni Morrison's seminal novel with the same name: "I am Beloved and she is mine." This observation invites readings of *The Lovely Bones* that pay attention to the creepy and demanding qualities typical of literary ghosts, which are undoubtedly a part of how Susie's character is rendered.

almost alive again" (71).[402] By watching this scene with the kind of intense emotional identification which has often been attributed to romance readers, Susie feels "almost alive" again.

The feeling of aliveness is implied to be the result of Lindsey living out a fantasy that Susie was emotionally invested in before she died: Susie recalls how, as children playing with Barbies, she and Lindsey would have Barbie and Ken marry at sixteen. This fantasy is described as authoritarian: "[t]o us there was only one true love in everyone's life; we had no concept of compromise, or retries" (70). This ideal, of one uncompromised true love, guides Susie's narration throughout the novel. Her spectral focalization of Lindsey's life gradually moves from spectatorship to more powerful interventions, in which Susie is shown to have some kind of influence over Lindsey's actions: during the scenes in which Lindsay breaks into Mr. Harvey's house, and when she agrees to marry her boyfriend, Susie's spectral presence is palpable (180, 236, 241).

The ghost Susie's power over Lindsey resembles the kind of doll play mentioned above: the girl who plays holds narrative authority over how the doll's story is going to play out, but her decisions are often strongly influenced by master narratives of romance and domesticity. However, this romance narrative is undermined by the fact that in a typically Gothic fashion, Sebold plays with doubles and throughout the novel she inserts multiple references to the "gothic dollhouses" that the murderer Mr. Harvey enjoys building (26, 63, 128, 180, 192–193, 230).

In a similar vein to her support for Lindsey and Samuel's relationship, Susie begins to encourage the possibility of a relationship between her crush Ray, and Ruth, the classmate who saw Susie's ghost on the night of the murder and has since channeled Susie's spirit through poetry. Although Ruth is a lesbian, this does not deter Susie from actively attempting to direct her own heterosexual desire for Ray through Ruth.[403]

This quest reaches its definitive fulfillment in the arguably weirdest and most important scene of the novel, in which Susie possesses Ruth's body and has sex with Ray. In this section of the novel, several years have passed and Ruth and Ray, now young adults, decide to visit the local sinkhole, which, unbeknownst to them, is the place where Susie's body is hidden. At this symbolic site Susie

[402] There is a voyeuristic quality to Susie's preferred means of expanding her spectral existence. Giddily Susie notes that Lindsey "never would have told me any of this stuff" (71). This passage emphasizes the ghostly Susie's position as uninvited spectator, aware that Lindsey never would have chosen to tell her about this private moment.

[403] As the novel progresses, Susie's spectral yearning appears to influence Ruth and Ray more and more, prompting them to engage in a weird game of making out while pretending that Ruth is Susie. On the anniversary of Susie's death, during one of these make-out sessions, Ruth, although never having been attracted to Ray finally exclaims: "[s]hit! […] I think I feel something" (201–203).

manages to show her spectral self to Ruth, who asks a question that will take on great importance: "[d]on't you want anything, Susie?" (295). As the reader has been made aware, Susie in her ghostly state yearns for her loved ones, as well as for romance.

The scene at the sinkhole differs from other scenes in the novel when Susie has made contact with the living. While previously, she has mainly been an invisible presence on Earth and sometimes shown images of herself, this time Susie is represented as literally falling to Earth, where she finds herself in possession of Ruth's body. Here, she loses her elevated and allegedly omniscient position of focalization. Instead, she gains physical control over Ruth. Her "pitiful desire" is fulfilled, she states: "[t]o be alive again on this Earth. Not to watch from above but to be—the sweetest thing—beside" (299–301).

As Norman has noted, what follows bears an uncanny resemblance to the depiction of rape in the beginning of the novel: "Ruth pushed up against her skin, wanting out. She was fighting to leave, and I was inside now, struggling with her. I willed her back, willed that divine impossible, but she wanted out" (301). Although Susie wants the "divine impossible"—the complete alignment of Ruth's desire with her own desire—she cannot stop Ruth from exiting the situation by closing off a part of herself from what is being done to her body against her will. This situation resembles Susie's narration of her rape at the beginning of the novel, in which she states that "I began to leave my body; I began to inhabit the air and the silence" (14). She now watches Ruth do the same—although she herself is not represented as noting the parallel. "There was nothing and no one that could keep her down. Flying. [...] Then, like a hand unclasping from a tight lock, Ruth passed by [Ray]" (301). Ruth's mind is represented as splitting from her body in a way which resembles how Caruth suggests that the traumatic event cannot be experienced while it occurs.[404] But interestingly, this split is also depicted as an act of defiance, a refusal to stay present in the situation which can be compared to Marika's defiant ghostliness in *Osalig ande*.

An advancement from Susie's investment in her sister's love life, the possession is framed in the novel as a possibility for Susie to have a calm and sweet sexual encounter as a form of justice, as compensation for the horrible rape which she has had to endure: "I had never been touched like this. I had only been hurt by hands past all tenderness. But spreading out into my heaven after death had been a moonbeam that swirled and blinked on and off—Ray Singh's kiss. Somehow Ruth knew this" (304). However, this kind of compensation is only possible because Ruth temporarily leaves her body and takes Susie's place in the afterlife.

[404] Caruth, "Introduction," 7; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 5.

Susie is sure that her vision of closure is achieved through Ruth's altruism. But there is in fact not much proof in the text that the latter welcomes the possession. Rather, Ruth's consent to this act of haunted sex seems to be assumed on the basis of her general commitment to justice for victims of rape and murder, and specifically to Susie. When she kisses Ray, Susie describes it as a "precious package, stolen gift" (303), phrasing which summarizes the dynamic of the possession: the ghostly Susie knows that she is taking autonomy away from a living person while simultaneously believing that Ruth is giving it up to her of her own will. Here, the novel balances on the verge of the common rape myth that some categories of forced sex are not really rape.[405]

The descriptions of Susie's thoughts in this scene are marked by an uncanny unawareness or disregard for the possibility that she might hurt Ruth in the process. In fact, Susie is euphoric with the sensation of power, the thought that in this moment, her desire triumphs over Ruth's: "[m]y head throbbed then, with the thought of it, […] that when Ray kissed me or as our hands met it was my desire, not Ruth's, it was *me* pushing at the edges of her skin" (304). While Norman interprets the scene as Susie's reversal of the rape that opens the novel, my argument is that in *The Lovely Bones*, the particularities of the romance genre contribute to the (at least ostensible) naturalization of this later sexualized violence.[406]

Where Norman viewed the sex scene as a departure from the three genres which he argues guide the novel's vision of justice (coming-of-age story, domestic novel, and crime novel), I view it instead as a key scene of the novel's references to romance fiction.[407] In fact, the possession is right in line with Annika Herb's description of the narrative structures of YA paranormal romance, a genre in which a human female protagonist is generally introduced to a supernatural love interest, whose strength outstrips that of the protagonist. In these narratives, which eroticize forbidden and dangerous relationships between unequals, the hero's behavior

> escalates to acts of violence and coercive control before he ultimately exerts complete control over the heroine through supernatural possession, making literal Andrea Dworkin's ironic recognition that "[t]he good woman must be possessed" […].[408]

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[405] Bourke, *Rape*, 23–24.

[406] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 150.

[407] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 149.

[408] Annika Herb, "(Para)Normalizing Rape Culture: Possession as Rape in Young Adult Paranormal Romance," *Girlhood Studies* 14, no. 1 (2021): 73–74; Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (Dutton, 1974), 48. As examples of novels embodying this dynamic within their plots, Herb notes Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), Nina Malkin's *Swoon* (2009), and Becca Fitzpatrick's *Hush, Hush* (2009).

In light of Herb's suggestion that "under the lens of paranormal romance, abuse and unequal gender dynamics are rationalized and romanticized," Susie's possession makes sense.[409] It results in the novel's triumphant fulfillment of desires of domination and submission typical of romance, although it places Susie in the role of the hero rather than the heroine. Ultimately, the novel's aim to empower Susie through a romance narrative produces a focalization which to a great extent equates post-traumatic closure with experiencing a sexual encounter from the perspective of someone who is in complete control of the situation. This is achieved through the exercise of sexual domination.

Herb suggests that representations of heterosexual relationships in the genre of YA paranormal romance may offer insight into the processes that uphold rape culture.[410] Sebold's possession scene specifically demonstrates how the idea of entitlement to sex as a compensation for trauma is problematic. More generally, the novel's use of the romance genre as a vehicle brings forth aspects of coercion inherent in a predominant narrative structure of romance: the girl or woman must be united with a man through a sexual or romantic relationship in order for the story to end.[411] In the romance narrative, although mandatory, sex is generally romantic, and the potentially traumatic aspects of rape are suppressed. As Serisier notes, the discourses used by survivors to interpret their experiences of sexual violence can include conservative narratives.[412] Sebold's novel illustrates a scenario in which this happens.

However, this scene does not belong in a conventional romance novel, but in a work of rape trauma fiction in which different genre elements coexist and compete. *The Lovely Bones* is also a ghost story about trauma. Although sweet phrases are used to gloss over the unpleasant dynamic of coercion, these phrases in their absurdity tend to take on an eerie quality. For example, during the possession scene, Susie describes how "I looked at Ray and knew why I was there. To take back a piece of heaven I had never known" (304). This phrasing is such a cliché that it almost does not mean anything, but it becomes uncanny as you realize that Susie's possession takes the cliché literally: she wants to *take back* the "piece of heaven" she considers rightfully hers—having sex with Ray.

By acknowledging two important intertextual references, I want to take the time here to note that in the dynamics of grief, haunting, and coercion depicted in *The Lovely Bones*, we can find echoes of how these themes have been written about by other novelists during the decade and a half leading up to the

[409] Herb, "(Para)Normalizing Rape Culture," 73.

[410] Herb, "(Para)Normalizing Rape Culture," 73.

[411] See: Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 66; Catherine M. Roach, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2016), 174.

[412] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 41–42.

publication of Sebold's novel. Ruth shares her name with characters from two widely known works published in the years leading up to the publication of *The Lovely Bones*: Ian McEwan's *The Child In Time* (1987) and Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian novel *Affinity* (1999). In *Affinity*, Ruth is the lesbian lover and assistant of a spiritualist medium who claims to channel supernatural energy.[413] In *The Child In Time*, which conceptualizes parents' grief of a missing child in terms of ghosts and haunting, Ruth is the name of a little girl whom the father mistakes for his lost daughter, Kate.[414] When he finds out that the girl's name is not Kate, but Ruth, he refuses to let go of his thought that his daughter has returned, and rationalizes that Kate must have changed since he last saw her. But as Peeren argues in her analysis of the novel:

> Ruth refuses to accommodate Kate's shape, the latter slips through his fingers. In a final attempt to recover her, Stephen seeks solace in a spectral fantasy, imagining 'Kate's spirit' soaring in the sky like 'some kind of brilliantly colored dragonfly' and sweeping down to earth to 'inhabit the body of a young girl, infuse it with its own particular essence to demonstrate to him its enduring existence' (178). This fantasy compellingly keeps intact the "essence" of Kate, with other girls as momentary mediums facilitating her materialization.[415]

As we can see from Peeren's analysis of McEwan's novel, the father's grief of a missing daughter manifests as a wish to conjure her back through the body of an uncooperating living girl. While this only takes place in Stephen's fantasy, it literally happens in *The Lovely Bones*. However, Sebold's narrative imagines a strong mirroring of the emotions of father and daughter, and so, Susie's possession is the result of her own powerful desire.

Importantly, the nod to *A Child In Time* indicates that Sebold has written Susie's character inspired by the father's perspective of grief and wishful thinking, although *The Lovely Bones*, unlike McEwan's novel, centers her point of view through focalization and narration. Finally, through *Affinity*, we can also become aware of the troubling idea of the female medium as someone whose bodily autonomy is compromised in order for other people to imagine their own loved ones' return from death. From these intertexts we can conclude that *The Lovely Bones* writes itself into an English-language literary tradition of ghost stories and stories about missing white girls. Through the character Ruth, Sebold combines these seemingly different ideas, with the result that *The Lovely Bones* points to a

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[413] See the analysis of spectral metaphors and living ghosts in *Affinity* in Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 113.

[414] Peeren notes that *The Child In Time* "portrays a missing daughter's lingering, futural presence in her parents' lives." See: Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 147.

[415] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 150–151.

convergence between the two: unrelated girls are used to satisfy other people's grief- and trauma-related yearning.

Essentially, by seeking solace in the wake of rape and murder through voyeurism and by exacting force against others, Susie's ghost also bears an uncanny resemblance to the rapist–murderer of the story. He is depicted almost like a specter himself: having suffered repeated sexual violence in his childhood he now is completely alone in the world, spending his days watching the high school through his window and desiring to commit rape and murder (128).

In this way, the possession scene hints at the mechanisms allowing the hurt of rape to be passed on from one individual to another, without turning Susie into a monstrous character. Elements of ghost stories inserted into the narrative occasionally underline the uncanny mechanisms that grant Susie the power to possess the living, but no way to convey her story to the people she cares about. Because of its incorporation of ghost story elements, the dark, flawed aspects of *The Lovely Bones*' setting become visible. All in all, the ghost story serves as a mode through which the novel engages in a very slight but still present meta-critique of its romantic rendering of Susie's post-traumatic subjectivity.

What is frightening about the ghost in *The Lovely Bones*, and many other literary ghosts, is that they are subjective and sometimes unfair in their haunting. This does not mean that the ghost is wrong about the source of her trauma or that she is evil. Instead, the presence of a ghost underscores the fact that like all people, people who have experienced extreme suffering sometimes may hurt other people. In Sebold's literary universe, spectrality carries with it the implication of desiring closeness through violence—as exemplified by Susie's possession of Ruth, and Mr. Harvey's isolated existence, in which he dreams of rape and murder. This is the darkest aspect of the novel's imagining of the effects of unprocessed rape trauma on the interpersonal interactions between ghostly, traumatized protagonists and the rest of the world.

A "therapeutic" narrative lacking trauma therapy

The Lovely Bones has previously been interpreted as a narrative about overcoming trauma. Whitney suggests that the story is steeped in therapeutic discourses of grief, in which a female subject is supposed to move from victimhood to survival, from psychological fragmentation to wellness.[416] But does this supposed movement from victimhood to survival actually take place in the story? Is an individualist perspective in rape trauma fiction really equivalent to a "therapeutic" perspective? I think that this is a slip of meaning which has all too often guided

[416] Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 359.

critical readings of contemporary trauma fiction, and as I have mentioned, it has guided previous readings of *The Lovely Bones*.

Like the afterlife pictured in *Osalig ande*, the Inbetween is a strange, cosmic version of a mental hospital for the deceased. But where Rydberg's mental hospital was mostly a storage place for lost souls who played board games while waiting for their rebirth, Sebold's Inbetween is more visionary. At the beginning of the novel, Susie, having just arrived in the Inbetween, is greeted by Franny, her intake counselor. Outside of the novel and within the American healthcare system, the title "intake counselor" refers to the therapist or counselor responsible for the initial interview of a patient beginning therapy or being admitted into a mental hospital. It could also refer to a women's shelter. Unlike a conventional intake interview, which aims to gather information about the problems that prompted the patient to seek therapy, Franny does not inquire about the traumatic events leading to Susie's death.[417] Instead, the very first thing Franny asks Susie is: "[w]hat do you want?"[418]

When Susie replies that she does not know, Franny's response resembles the magical wish-fulfillment of a fairy godmother more than a therapist's advice: "[a]ll you have to do is desire it, and if you desire it enough and understand—really know—it will come" (19). Although inspirational (to use the word of reviewer Eva Johansson), this notion that if you desire something enough it will come to you is perhaps unexpected from a therapist whose objective is to help their client process a traumatic event.[419] However, here, the goal is not therapy and healing from the traumatic events preceding the patient's death, but compensation for a violent demise through the magic powers of desire and yearning.

The flawed therapy which Susie receives in the Inbetween matches the lack of therapy or successful professional help received by the living characters in coping with the traumatic loss of Susie. Immediately after Susie is murdered, the principal of the high school tries to talk to Lindsey but fails: instead of making her laugh, which Susie knows to be the successful way of reaching out to Lindsey, the principal's improvised strategies instead put more pressure on her: "'It's on your shoulders now.' He had no idea what he was saying, but he thought the silence might mean he was getting somewhere. 'You're the only Salmon girl now'" (32).

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[417] *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, "intake interview" (American Psychological Association), accessed November 13, 2025.

[418] As Alice Bennett points out, the name "Franny" is a probable reference to the protagonist Frannie in Susanna Moore's thriller novel *In the Cut* (1995): a woman who gets entangled in the investigation of a series of murders, revealing in the end of the novel that she, too, became a victim of the murderer. Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative In Contemporary Fiction*, 106–108.

[419] On the importance, within many contemporary therapies for PTSD, of arranging traumatic events into a narrative, see: Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD."

When the Inbetween provides Susie with something that resembles therapy, it takes the form of a group meeting with her murderers' other victims, in which the victims' sharing of their stories with each other is described as vaguely healing (186). However, this is not a thread that the novel follows any further, and instead, the plot quickly turns back to its main narrative of wish-fulfillment and compensation.

A subtle longing for another philosophy of healing can be discerned towards the end of *The Lovely Bones*. This philosophy is derived from the world of psychology, rather than from a suburban ideology of family values or from romance fiction. Lindsey, the character who for Susie symbolizes a kind of idealized vision of future adulthood, goes on to study psychology in college and later becomes a therapist (298).

If we take the novel's depiction of Lindsey as a figure of hope seriously, her academic interest in psychology has significant implications for *The Lovely Bones*' vision of trauma and healing. Earlier in the novel, Susie's mother Abigail has been represented as harboring a longing for her college years of studying literature and ancient mythology (151). This longing is completely directed towards the past, and does not change Abigail's life situation: she remains a housewife at the end of the novel. Lindsey's interest in psychology, on the other hand, seems to represent a promise of expanded knowledge of the workings of trauma within the setting of *The Lovely Bones*. Whereas the previous generation of women, exemplified by Susie's mother, expand their knowledge about the world through literature and myths, the psychology book which Susie watches Lindsey read holds the promise of other, potentially more productive ways of coping with trauma than the ones which have been within Susie's reach during the course of the novel. And indeed, Susie is shown to be soothed by Lindsey's pursuit (298).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Sebold's novel is invested in empowering a victim of rape and murder by letting her be a ghost narrator with the power to shape her own story. However, rape trauma is framed as an individual problem for Susie—the points of view and wishes of Mr. Harvey's other victims remain mostly unexplored. Ultimately, *The Lovely Bones* produces the kind of post-feminist rape narrative identified by literary scholar Aiyana Altrows, in which rape is portrayed as the cause of a pathological problem for the victim, which she is left to manage on her own, rather than as a political problem to be solved communally.[420]

This kind of individual focus has sometimes been called therapeutic.[421] However, as this chapter has shown, individualist approaches to trauma are not necessarily invested in therapeutic practices. Instead, the major vision of closure

[420] Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger," 3.

[421] See: Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones."

taking place in *The Lovely Bones* serves more of an ethical than a therapeutic function, which places the novel's vision closer to the kind of testimony and witnessing promoted by the Yale School's trauma theory than the practices of narration employed within contemporary evidence-based trauma therapies.[422] And although the ending of the novel is ostensibly happy, it remains unclear whether or not Susie actually has healed by the end of the novel.[423]

In both *Osalig ande* and *The Lovely Bones*, family and reproduction promises a kind of circular model for the protagonists' afterlives. In *Osalig ande*, Marika is quite literally reborn as the son of her own brother, offering her another chance at life within the same family that failed her when she grew up as a girl. Towards the ending of *The Lovely Bones*, Susie's sister settles down with her high school sweetheart in the same suburb they grew up in, and gives birth to the baby Abigail Suzanne, named after Susie (and her mother). This is not the same kind of repetition as the intrusive memories often linked to trauma. Rather, I would argue, it represents an optimistic fantasy in which it is possible to repeat the same life in the same world, only this time, without being the victim of sexual violence.[424] But while this kind of repetition is shown to partly be the result of Susie's authoritative haunting in *The Lovely Bones*, Marika's rebirth in *Osalig ande* is the result of the power exercised over her by a heavenly mental institution.

The Lovely Bones has been read as imagining a Christian afterlife, in which Susie goes to heaven. More significant, according to me, is Sebold's imagining of the afterlife as an optimistic space in which wishes are fulfilled through magic. But it is also a static space, in which Susie is not allowed to change and grow out of the desires she had at the age of her demise.

Reviewers before me have pointed out that Sebold's narrative prioritizes a happy ending before a feminist vision.[425] But I do not read the novel's ending as unambiguously happy—it is bittersweet, at best. The novel concludes with two strangers finding Susie's charm bracelet, lost for many years after the murderer has thrown it away. "This little girl's grown up by now," the stranger says. Susie, who is *still* watching Earth at the end of the narrative, comments to the reader: "[a]lmost. Not quite. I wish you all a long and happy life" (328). Susie's status as a ghost destabilizes the ending, avoiding complete closure.

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[422] See: Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD."

[423] Here, I depart from Robin Field's view that Susie "heals by reclaiming her sexuality, an important step in recovering from sexual trauma." Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 187.

[424] A concept which captures this sentiment well is Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism," which is the act of desiring something that is actually an obstacle to your flourishing—for example, a fantasy of a certain kind of love, or of the good life. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

[425] Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 155; Smith, "A Perfect Afterlife."

Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored *The Lovely Bones* as a novel that attempts to mediate a dead girl's story about rape on her own terms. By assuming the role of an author–vessel for a deceased girl, Sebold endeavors to "look with the specter" and restore power to a rape victim who, outside of the novel, possesses no agency due to her death.[426] Sebold aspires to let Susie be, in Herman's words, "the author and arbiter of her own recovery" by transferring focalization and narrative control of the story to her.[427] The ghost figure enables Sebold to explore the ambivalent experience of post-traumatic agency and power for a victim of rape and murder.

Read with attention paid to the trauma knot and to discourses of rape, *The Lovely Bones* can be viewed as a story in which ghost narration is used to imagine a kind of aftermath to rape and murder that can be encompassed and understood within the frameworks of knowledge and values held by the victim at the time of their death. It poses questions about what it means for a first-person narrative to be loyal to a deceased character's experience of trauma and desire. My reading has problematized the notion of an essential and pure narrator position of victimhood, as well as the novel's amplification of a Derridaean hauntological ethics, in which the imperatives of the powerful specter should not only be listened to and lived with, but unconditionally followed.[428]

Unlike Whitehead's conception of trauma fiction, Sebold's narrative does not include a collapsed temporality or recurring memories of the rape scene.[429] Moreover, most symptoms associated with PTSD were absent in *The Lovely Bones*, which is in itself interesting, bearing in mind that it has been read as a novel about trauma in several previous studies. I have argued that *The Lovely Bones* is indeed a trauma novel, albeit one concerned with what other kinds of emotional reactions to potentially traumatic events might have been more prominent during a time before the concepts of rape and trauma were available.

Instead of the rumination and intrusive memories which today are considered part of PTSD, the story explores another way in which characters may get stuck in the past after a traumatic event: Jack's grieving process, characterized by obsessive yearning, promotes a desire for the past as an ethical direction of the novel. Susie's gaze is aligned with her father's and she is torn between her desire to grow up—to change—and her yearning for the past and for her mother. Presenting the psychological concept of prolonged grief—which the current state of research has found to often appear alongside PTSD among people who

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[426] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 27.

[427] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.

[428] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 95.

[429] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 84.

lose a loved one to sudden, violent death—I have argued that Sebold's novel depicts Susie's haunting as structured by the intense yearning for loved ones lost through death.

Through Susie's spectral narration, focalization, and hauntings, Sebold's novel explores an array of ways in which boundaries between individuals may be broken. Murder is the ultimate breach of the boundaries of another human being, and the rape Susie suffers in connection to the murder is another clear example. But through the ghost figure, Sebold explores many other, less obvious breaches of personal boundaries which take place in the American suburban community. Through the ghost story mode, Sebold depicts uncanny attachments of trauma, grief, sexuality, and coercion.

While the frameworks for post-traumatic communication explored in *Osalig ande*—1980s psychiatry and fine art—contained stories of rape trauma that failed the protagonist's wishes to be understood and respected by other people, there simply are no such frameworks within the setting of *The Lovely Bones*. It depicts a setting in which previous narratives about rape and trauma are almost entirely lacking: 1970s American suburbia. Within this context, the discourse structuring the relationship between Susie and the living is that of missing white, middle-class children, rather than discourses of sexual violence. Consequently, I have argued, Susie's spectral existence is portrayed in the emotional register of grief, rather than the emotional register commonly used in depictions of rape trauma: shame and intrusive thoughts of the event.

The novel's plot pulls its reader in many directions, and struggles to find a language that can accommodate a story told from a dead girl's perspective about the aftermath of rape. Susie tests narrative techniques from several popular literary genres, one of which is explored in this chapter: the romance story. The fulfillment of romantic yearning is depicted as a force which is supposed to counterbalance Susie's horrible experience of rape. At the same time, yearning is rendered an eerie concept, as the novel equates the fulfillment of yearning with justice. My reading of the possession scene emphasizes the troubling implications of viewing sex with someone else as a right or as compensation for pain.

The yearning at play is not just sexual: generally throughout the novel, Susie's haunting is put into motion first by Jack's grief-related yearning, and then by Susie's yearning to live vicariously through Lindsey and Ruth, and model their lives after her vision. Because she is a ghost, the novel implies, Susie's visions for the future are identical to what she knows of the past. The justice which *The Lovely Bones* finds itself morally obliged to grant Susie is therefore wrapped up in the idea that the world should stay the same, generation after generation. Dying in 1973, Susie just misses the arrival of second wave feminism and trauma therapy in her American suburban setting. Instead of actively exploring feminist politics

or therapeutic approaches to healing, the novel's characters are left to get by with the largely unavailable emotional support of other community members.

The Lovely Bones' use of generic elements from the romance novel results in a narrative formula for Susie's story which centers her perspective and counters the myth that "rape is a fate worse than death," but which simultaneously also promotes the rape myth "some categories of forced sex are not really rape."[430] The romance formula grants Susie the closeness she craves with other characters, but not merely in the form of spectral agency in Peeren's sense—to be noticed and acknowledged by the living—but through a power fantasy of possession.[431]

The possession scene explores the notion of pleasurable sex as a reversal of the horrible ordeal of rape, with a primary goal of allowing Susie to experience sex as something beautiful rather than dreadful. It demonstrates how *The Lovely Bones* depicts sex as a freeing act for Susie. But a possession is ultimately also characterized by taking control over another person: Susie's wish fulfillment comes at the expense of Ruth's bodily autonomy. This scene points to the troubling implications of the idea of a victim having the right to sex as restorative compensation for rape trauma.

I do not read *The Lovely Bones* as a therapeutic novel. On the contrary, I read it as a novel which, like *Osalig ande*, uses the afterlife as a way of pointing out a historical lack of psychological knowledge about healing from rape trauma. It is in the absence of therapeutic and feminist discourses in the novel that a narrative of one-sided desire fulfillment is allowed to dominate the aftermath of Susie's rape. This kind of reading serves as a reminder of the fact that healing from rape trauma does not have to follow the example of a fictional ghost, and neither does justice have to look like wish fulfillment. We do not live in the imagined suburban 1970s of the story—in fact, as far as the author of *The Lovely Bones* is concerned, the year is 2002 and the future is already here.

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430 Bourke, *Rape*, 23–24; Sanyal, *Rape*.

431 Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 182.

5. The ghost returning against her will: Sara Stridsberg's *The Antarctica of Love* (2018)

Published in Sweden twenty-eight years after *Osalig ande*, and sixteen years after *The Lovely Bones*, Sara Stridsberg's ghost story *Kärlekens Antarktis* (2018) (*The Antarctica of Love* [2021]) is situated in a very different cultural context than its precursors. There are many similarities in content: as in *The Lovely Bones*, Stridsberg's novel is also narrated by a character who has been raped and murdered by a stranger, and just like Susie, the protagonist, Inni, is more interested in reconnecting with her family than in making the murderer pay for his crime. And just like in *Osalig ande*, the protagonist's narration is marked by a sense of hopelessness.

Susie's world is a sheltered American 1970s suburb, and the traumatic events of Marika's life take place in the setting of a bourgeois family in 1970s–1980s Stockholm. Stridsberg also sets her novel in 1980s Stockholm, but depicts a precarious working-class family, as well as a social community of addicts. While Susie, at the time of her death, is a teenager who thinks that her whole life is ahead of her, Inni is a mother who has lost her two children and does not hope for good things to happen in her life. *The Antarctica of Love* was originally published in 2018, at the height of the #MeToo movement—a period during which stories about sexual violence were more easily recognized than they had been during the early 1990s, when *Osalig ande* was published. In 2018, public discussion and knowledge of trauma had also become even more widespread than it had been in the early 2000s.

This chapter will investigate a narrative which, unlike Sebold's novel, does not try to make its story about rape trauma reassuring—quite the opposite. *The Antarctica of Love* is described by many people as a hard novel to finish due to its almost pitch-black rendering of traumatic experience. The chapter begins by considering the novel's depiction of the rape and murder, as well as Inni's addiction, and how the narration explores the meaning of these events in relation to rape myths and romanticizing cultural mythologies of women's death. It goes on to argue that the novel embodies a style typical of trauma fiction, and that it uses spectral metaphors to emphasize the cumulative impact of multiple traumatic events. The novel's problematizing of common optimistic expectations about trauma testimony and witnessing are discussed, after which the chapter

goes on to argue that the genres of crime fiction and media reporting are shown to structure Inni's personal experience of trauma through repeated visual and narrative patterns. The chapter concludes by suggesting that in the novel, Inni's act of watching her children results in the possibility of narrative progression, instead of the repeated flashbacks and memories of terrible past events that have largely structured her afterlife.

As the novel was translated into English in 2021 by Deborah Bragan-Turner, the quotes from the novel used in this chapter will be from this translation.

The Antarctica of Love (2018)

The opening scene of Swedish writer Sara Stridsberg's novel depicts the protagonist Inni, alone in the woods with a man who has raped her and is about to murder her. Time seems to be standing still. In a detailed, visual description of her dying moment, Inni sees insects, flowers, and drops of water move in slow motion, until everything is over. Except it is not completely over: after dying, she continues watching as the killer disposes of her body. Inni's death in the woods functions as an opening scene in several of the chapters, throwing her and the reader back into the same moment in time again and again. Just like Susie in *The Lovely Bones*, part of Inni's corpse is hidden by the killer in a sinkhole, into which, Stridsberg and Sebold imply, it was common during the time period depicted to dump garbage and other objects, making them disappear (61).

After dying, Inni does not end up in paradise, as she had hoped. Throughout the novel she instead maintains a spectral position, looking down at Earth from above.[432] She is stuck in a featureless place, almost not a place at all but a point of focalization, an immaterial position in which Inni is not much more than a gaze. From this position she can return to Earth, where she watches her loved ones while invisible to them.

By virtue of returning to Earth in an immaterial form after dying, Inni is a quite traditional ghost. She is also a traumatized ghost: her return is often mediated through the PTSD-like flashbacks of the scene in the forest. In these scenes, her haunting is depicted as involuntary and beyond her own control. Her return to her family members is also depicted as partly involuntary: "I mean to let your world be, but suddenly I find myself looking in again" (10). *("Jag tänker att jag ska låta er värld vara, men så plötsligt står jag där och kikar in igen" [10].)*

[432] The fact that her position is far above the planet becomes evident when she describes Earth: "[i]t has such beauty from a distance, the fragile, iridescent blue of the atmosphere surrounding your planet [...]" (10). *("Det är så vackert på avstånd, den sköra blå atmosfären som hänger runt er planet [...]" [10].)*

Alongside traumatic flashbacks of the rape and murder, Inni presents the reader with a series of past events in her life. While her story unfolds, the multiple potentially traumatic events that she has suffered throughout her life come into view.

Inni's childhood is marked by the neglect of her alcoholic parents, Raksha and Ivan. While her relationship with her mother Raksha is mostly loving, her parents often forget to take care of their children. While binge drinking, they are occupied only with each other, leaving Inni to tend to herself as well as to her younger brother Eskil. When telling the reader about Eskil, Inni remembers: "[w]e used to keep him in a laundry basket and transfer him from room to room, like a tiny candle that we had to keep alight. But a few days before my twelfth birthday he drowned in the river" (29). (*"Vi brukade ha honom i en tvättkorg som flyttades runt mellan rummen som ett litet tänt ljus som vi skulle hålla brinnande. Men några dagar innan jag skulle fylla tolv drunknade han i ån" [32].*)

The death of Eskil is depicted as traumatic, and Inni often returns to this event in her narration of her life. The accident happens during the family's visit to the riverside. While Inni's parents are lying on the beach, their attention focused on each other instead of on their children, Inni is left to keep an eye on her brother who barely knows how to swim as he plays in the water. She loses sight of him for a moment and suddenly he is gone. The horror of her brother's death is made worse not only because she is there to witness it, but also because she feels responsible for his death due to her role as caretaker in the family. This sense of guilt and responsibility follows Inni as she tries to make sense of other potentially traumatic events that happen to her later in life. In this chapter, I will use her brother's nickname of her, Inni, although in one scene, she is addressed by the social services by her birthname, Kristina.

After Eskil's death, Raksha withdraws, and for Inni, reaching her mother becomes even harder than before. Years pass until the story pauses at another defining moment in Inni's life: her first injection of heroin. It happens after a night of partying with her new friend Nanna, who offers her an injection and is unsurprised when Inni comes back for more. Inni does not become addicted immediately, yet she remembers her first high as a turning point. After this night, she claims that she does not feel truly alive in the world anymore. Her use ties her to Nanna and to a community of other addicts in Stockholm.

To obtain the money needed to sustain her addiction, Inni starts selling sex (23). She does not give the reader explicit details about her encounters with johns, except for the one who goes on to murder her. However, the novel describes repeated dynamics of objectification and coercion which characterize her encounters with men who pay her to have sex with them.

When Inni falls in love for the first time with fellow addict Shane, she describes this as a refuge from the living death she has inhabited all of her life: "[i]t

was as though life finally began when I met Shane" (34). (*"Det var som om livet äntligen började när jag mötte Shane" [39].*) Being seen by a romantic partner is an experience powerful enough to make Inni imagine the beginning of their relationship as marking the start of her life, but this feeling of being alive in the world fades as the couple continues to abuse heroin together.

With Shane, Inni gives birth to two children. With their first child, Valle, Inni and Shane hope that they will turn their lives around and become good parents, but eventually they relapse. After spending a few chaotic years with them, Valle is forcibly taken by the authorities and moved into foster care. When Inni becomes pregnant with her second child, Solveig, she decides that she will hand her daughter over immediately after giving birth. Shane can never forgive her and eventually leaves her, but Inni is convinced that she has made the right decision, that staying away from her daughter is the only good thing she can do for her. Inni's loss of her two children is depicted as two more traumatic events around which the novel revolves, and Inni's memories of these moments are made worse by the guilt she feels about hurting Valle while he was in her care and for abandoning Solveig.

Style, structure, and genre

The Antarctica of Love is a work of literary fiction, and its narrative style adheres closely to Whitehead's characterization of trauma fiction: trauma is not only the content of the plot, but also plays a central role in how the novel is structured. In addition to its inclusion of supernatural elements, it contains intertextuality, repetition, and a fragmented narrative voice.[433]

The novel is divided into unnamed sections, or very short chapters, often only two pages long. These sections detail specific events from Inni's life, the murder scene, and her reflections from the afterlife. The short sections add a disjointed quality to the scenes portrayed. They often include slight repetitions from previous sections, but also add new information that moves the plot forward. The novel is narrated in first person, and events are focalized through Inni's point of view.

Despite Inni's close resemblance to Catrine da Costa, a famous Swedish murder victim whose remains were found in the Stockholm area in 1984—a murder which has since become a highly mythologized and debated case in Sweden—there is a statement at the end of the book denying that the novel's characters are modelled on any real-life people (270). However, the obvious references to the da Costa case renders the novel's form something more akin to Stridsberg's

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[433] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 84.

previous works, in which she has used several famous and mythologized women as the basis for her characters. For example, in an introductory note in her novel *Drömfakulteten* (2006) (*Valerie* [2019]), in which the feminist Valerie Solanas is the main character, Stridsberg writes that the novel is not a biography, but "a literary fantasy" which is based on Solanas' work and life: "[a]ll the people appearing in the book must therefore be regarded as fictional, even Valerie Solanas."[434] I read *The Antarctica of Love* as a similar, although not as explicit, experimental literary fantasy that features and subverts the story of a woman whose life has already been the subject of extensive retelling by others.

Critical reception and previous research

Although no academic studies have yet been conducted about *The Antarctica of Love*, previous research about Stridsberg's writing has noted a strong emphasis on stories about women in precarious and vulnerable life situations. The literary scholar Lilian Munk Rösing suggests that a "general project in Sara Stridsberg's writing would seem to be the 'rehabilitation' of unpopular, or at least suspect and criticisable, women—whether they be actual historical people or fictional characters." About these motifs, Munk Rösing notes:

> Stridsberg is interested in the historically specific, in historical female characters associated with particular eras. Sally Bauer, triumphant at the same time as Adolf Hitler. Valerie Solanas, both part of and out of place in the women's movement of the late 1960s. Lolita, emblematic of the 1950s' burgeoning pop-, and sugar-, and teenager-culture.
>
> Yet at the same time, there is a current of something timeless, mythical, fairy-tale like in her writing.[435]

Among the mythologies most commonly featured in Stridsberg's work is the mythology of America: "American images from the 1950s as a kind of primeval modernity: lipstick and sunglasses, frocks and Jaguars, driving along with scarves fluttering in the breeze."

Describing the style of Stridsberg's previous novels, Munk Rösing notes that Stridsberg's prose tends to weave "various voices and narrative strands in and out of one another," and that Stridsberg describes nasty things just as poetically as beautiful things. She contends that part of Stridsberg's project is to take common narrative categories and scripts about women's mythologized misery, and

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[434] Sara Stridsberg, *Drömfakulteten: tillägg till sexualteorin* (Bonnier, 2006); Lilian Munk Rösing, "The Poetry of Exclusion in the Writings of Sara Stridsberg," *The History of Nordic Women's Literature*, December 1, 2014.

[435] Munk Rösing, "The Poetry of Exclusion in the Writings of Sara Stridsberg."

write "beyond" them, "lending poetry to even the most 'disgusting' and the most 'wrong', their own reality of sense impressions."

Furthermore, Munk Rösing notes that *Valerie*, Stridsberg's most famous novel, is composed "as a form of montage, cutting between a series of strands each with its own time and place [...]." The novel also features recurring, painterly motifs, which Munk Rösing finds characteristic of Stridsberg's prose: "she makes various specific sense-impression universes available to us by painting in a number of motifs and repeating them with variations."[436] All of these stylistic traits are also discernible in *The Antarctica of Love*.

Valerie has previously been read through a framework of trauma by Linda Sandbæk and Kjell Ivar Skjeringstad, in the article "Om møte mellom det litterære og kliniske i Sara Stridsbergs *Drömfakulteten—tillägg till sexualteorin*" ("About the encounter between the literary and the clinical in Sara Stridsberg's *Valerie*.") In this article, Sandbæk and Skjeringstad argue that the novel explores traumatic events as deeply connected to political processes, and thus breaks with a tendency within therapeutic discourses to decontextualize and individualize. They note that through the novel's rich intertextuality, which echoes Solanas' SCUM-manifesto, as well as through mythologies from media discourses and popular culture, *Valerie* expands the trauma story beyond the experience of the individual.[437]

After its publication in Swedish, *The Antarctica of Love* received almost unanimous praise by reviewers. In many of the reviews, the parallels between Stridsberg's novel and the murder case of Catrine da Costa are mentioned, despite the statement added by Stridsberg, claiming that "[a]ny resemblance to actual people or events is coincidental and derives only from the reality of violence" (270). (*"Romanens eventuella likheter med verkligheten har inte att göra med någonting annat än den realitet av våld ur vilken den är sprungen" [317].*)

Reviewers noted that *The Antarctica of Love* housed many of the features which characterize Stridsberg's earlier literary production: stories inspired by real or fictional women made iconic by popular culture; tragic women whose fates are saturated by symbolism; an attraction, balancing on the edge of romanticization, to darkness and the figure of the outsider; and an aesthetic style characterized by poetic repetition and the evocation of certain images—a style which at its best results in stylistic beauty and immediacy, according to most of the reviewers.

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436 Munk Rösing, "The Poetry of Exclusion in the Writings of Sara Stridsberg."

437 Linda Sandbæk and Kjell Ivar Skjeringstad, "Om møte mellom det litterære og kliniske i Sara Stridsbergs *Drömfakulteten—tillägg till sexualteorin*," *Samlaren: Tidskrift för forskning om svensk och annan nordisk litteratur* 145 (2024): 355, 363.

Complete consensus about the stylistic virtue of the novel was not reached, however. Stridsberg's tendency to romanticize misery is problematized briefly in Annina Rabe's generally positive review in *Expressen*. In a scathing review in *Göteborgs-Posten*, Mikaela Blomqvist describes the tone of the novel as sentimental and the theme as macabre. She writes:

> But despite the fact that the reader resides in the mind of the novel's narrator, Stridsberg does not seem to be striving for a credible psychological portrayal of a young addict. The intense pain in Kristina's life is described but never finds an expression through the style of the prose. Her narrative voice is strikingly calm and neutral, thoughtful and omniscient, thanks to death. The few explanations given all have the character of cliché. [...] In short, it's all pretty cheap. What's worse is that throughout the novel, Kristina insists on narrating her murder in detail.[438]

This "cheapness" and "stupidity" is, according to Blomqvist, a probable result of the novel's attempt to convey a political message through a "worn-out" language.

In stark contrast to Blomqvist's view, Ingrid Elam's review in SVT praises Stridsberg for not falling back into the romanticization of marginalized social positions, something which, according to Elam, has been a tendency in Stridsberg's previous novels.[439]

The way in which the reception of the novel weighs between viewing *The Antarctica of Love* as either exploitative or true to its protagonist might be connected to how reviewers have interpreted Inni's position as protagonist and narrator. Some reviewers equated Inni's position as a dead narrator to that of an omniscient narrator.[440] Maria Ramnehill, however, points out that Inni's omniscience is in fact an illusion: "[b]y letting Kristina tell the story after her death, something resembling an omniscient narrator is created, without her actually being one."[441]

Whether the novel encourages readers to identify with the protagonist has also been interpreted differently. Elam's opinion is that *The Antarctica of Love* never feels speculative or aestheticizing because "this is a first-person narrative that invites identification, not distanced observation," while Therese Eriksson finds ethical virtue in the novel through an entirely opposite interpretation. According to her, when Inni testifies, restitution is delivered to the fetishized

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438 Mikaela Blomqvist, "Förenklat om kvinnomord," *Göteborgs-Posten*, September 14, 2018. My translation.

439 Ingrid Elam, "Recension: Kärlekens Antarktis är Stridsbergs hittills starkaste och mörkaste roman," *SVT Nyheter*, September 12, 2018.

440 See, for example: Annina Rabe, "Vackert, vackert om styckmord och kvinnohat," *Expressen*, September 14, 2018; Blomqvist, "Förenklat om kvinnomord."

441 Maria Ramnehill, "Kritik: Kärlekens Antarktis," *Ord&Bild*, April 15, 2019. My translation.

cultural figure of the dead woman. "When she becomes the one speaking, she steps into the center of the circle, forcing the secure ones—us—to stop and listen."[442]

The novel's extensive reflections on motherhood are not discussed in most of the reviews, but are the focus of Maria Ramnehill's review of the novel in the magazine *Ord & Bild*. An insight from Ramnehill's text is that motherhood is a relationship which never ends, and thus provides a way for Inni to defeat death.[443]

Analysis

Mythologies of rape and death

The Antarctica of Love revolves around and constantly returns to the murder and the rape which ended Inni's life. These events are pictured at the very first pages of the novel. The depiction is strongly focalized through Inni's point of view in a here-and-now manner. As she lies on the ground in a forest, she sees roots of trees pushing down into the lake water, insects crawling on the underside of flowers. From these observations, the narration abruptly changes: "[a]nd now it was cold, and urine and blood and faeces ran down my legs" (7–8). (*"…och det var kallt nu, urin och blod och avföring rann längs mina ben" [8].*)

Right before death, a conversation between Inni and the murderer is recounted: "[h]e said: 'I'm going to blindfold you now. It'll be easier that way,' he said. 'That's good,' I said, wondering which of us it would be easier for. 'Now I'm going to strangle you and you won't be able to say anything else.' 'Do it,' I said. 'I have nothing to say in any case'" (8). (*"'Jag kommer att binda för dina ögon nu. Det blir enklare så', sa han. 'Så bra', sa jag och undrade för vem av oss det skulle bli enklare. 'Nu kommer jag att strypa dig och sedan kommer du inte att kunna säga någonting mer.' 'Gör det', sa jag, 'jag har ändå ingenting att säga'" [8].*) Inni's powerlessness in the situation is underscored, evoking Judith Herman's notion that traumatic events involve a loss of control and power.[444]

The second retake of the murder scene depicts Inni's experience of being strangled, how "the laws of vision" are collapsed (*"[s]ynens alla lagar hade brutit samman […]"*), and later, her hearing. She sees the events as if "floating some distance above" (13). *("Jag hade den där lätta svirrande känslan av att betrakta allting ovanifrån" [14].)* On the following page, the brutal physicality of the murder is depicted:

[442] Elam, "Recension: Kärlekens Antarktis är Stridsbergs hittills starkaste och mörkaste roman"; Therese Eriksson, "Styckmördade kvinnan får upprättelse av Stridsberg," *Svenska Dagbladet*, September 14, 2018. My translation.

[443] Ramnehill, "Kritik: Kärlekens Antarktis."

[444] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

> And these lungs that had been mine were filled with black blood. A body existed, on top of mine, and it was so heavy it didn't feel human; but human it was, this was what humans did, and this body crushed me against the earth and soon I would be earth myself, dark and cold and full of writhing worms. I had wished for something that would pin me down to the earth, a weight, a rope pulled tight across my wrists and ankles, something that eventually would hold me down and stop me. But this was not what I had wished for. Not this forest, not this hunter. Or maybe this was exactly what I had been waiting for all the time. Perhaps I had always hoped for a way out of the world, the black hole suddenly opening to devour me (14–15).

> *Och dessa lungor som varit mina fylldes med svart blod. En kropp fanns, över mig, och den var så tung att den kändes omänsklig, men det var mänsklig den var, det var så här människorna var, och denna kropp pressade mig mot jorden och snart skulle jag också vara jord, mörk och kall och full av krälande maskar. Jag hade önskat att någonting skulle hålla mig nere mot jorden, en tyngd, ett hårt rep över handleder och anklar, att någonting äntligen skulle hålla mig fast och stoppa mig. Men det var inte det här jag hade önskat mig. Inte den här skogen och den här jägaren. Eller så var det precis vad jag alltid hade väntat på. Kanske hade jag alltid längtat efter en väg ut ur världen, den där svarta luckan som plötsligt öppnar sig och slukar en (16).*

In this scene, a naturalistic portrayal of the physical collapse of Inni's body is intermingled with an account for her reasoning surrounding the meaning of this event. This reasoning embodies a conflict between two possible interpretations: one in which the assault is unwanted by Inni, and another interpretation in which she wonders if this is only the natural consequence of some kind of death wish that she has harbored in life.

These conflicting interpretations return throughout the novel: "I hoped this wasn't the end, but it was," she states on page 26. (*"Jag hoppades att det här inte var slutet, men det var det" [29].*) With its continued return to the question of why the murder happened, the novel questions a view of victims of sexual violence according to which they agree to being victimized as a form of self-harm. However, Inni states that she went with the man

> the way I always went with people. Because I needed the money, because I had a mission that went on day and night and there was nothing outside that mission. 'To be free,' as Nanna would say. 'To punish myself,' as people who thought they knew a thing or two would say. What should I be punished for? They never said (23).

> *som jag brukade följa med folk. För att jag behövde pengarna, för att jag hade ett uppdrag, det pågick dag och natt, det fanns ingenting utanför det uppdraget. "För att bli fri", som Nanna skulle säga. "För att straffa mig själv", som de som trodde att de visste något sa. Vad skulle jag straffas för? Det sa de aldrig. (26)*

Inni's mission was to acquire heroin, not to die. However, aligning with the rape myth that "no can mean yes," the murderer is shown to insist that she secretly wants to die, and that he can grant her this wish (32–33).[445] His insistence on the violence being an act of love is discernible in his repeating of the sentence "I only want to be close to you" (26). (*"Jag vill ju bara vara nära dig" [29].*)

The perpetrator is portrayed as manufacturing consent for the murder by claiming that he can see that the victim "wants it" just by looking at her. This strategy echoes Marika's stepfather's lines in *Osalig ande*: "[m]ature for your age. [...] You don't have to answer, I can see it in you" (33). What the killer has seen is rather, perhaps, that even if Inni needed somebody, she had no social security net, which made her an easy target. He also seems to view Inni as a living ghost in Peeren's sense: he thinks that she is a person who lacks a dimension that exceeds the visible.[446] He considers her desires and inner life irrelevant, and instead sees his own desires mirrored back in the way he interprets her gaze.

Throughout the novel, the murderer is sometimes called the "huntsman," referring to the Grimm Brothers' story about Snow White, which Inni's mother is said to have read to her when she was little (122). This evokes literary scholar Elisabeth Bronfen's argument that the symbolism of this story renders Snow White's seemingly dead body an object of beauty, which attracts the prince's desire precisely because he thinks that she is dead. This, Bronfen notes, confirms to "one of the central positions ascribed to Woman in western culture; namely that the 'surveyed' feminine body is meant to confirm the power of the masculine gaze. In Lemoine-Luccioni's words, Woman doesn't look; she gives herself to be looked at [...]."[447]

By evoking this intertext together with the brutal, naturalistic depictions of "urine and blood and faeces," Stridsberg's narrative accentuates the terrible absurdity of this view of female death as beauty, and even love. It exposes how this represents the point of view of the perpetrator, but it also seeps into Inni's narration—her memories of this event are colored by his romanticizing of the violence he commits against her. However, as a ghost watching her parents grieving her, Inni hears her mother counter this interpretation: "[s]he's no Snow White" (122). (*"Hon är ju inte Snövit" [143].*)

Another kind of mythology, in which the meanings of rape, sex, death, and pleasure are collapsed into each other, is visible in the novel's depiction of Inni's addiction. Repeatedly, the novel returns to Inni's first injection. In hindsight, as

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[445] Bourke, *Rape*, 24.

[446] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 36.

[447] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 100–102; Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, *Partage des femmes* (Seuil, 1976). See also: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, A Pelican Original (British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin books, 1972).

she becomes addicted, her initial acceptance of Nanna's offer to try heroin will seem life-determining. Retelling this event to the reader, Inni concludes that it marks the end of her virginity as well as of the attachment of her soul to her physical body and to the material world: "[a]fter this I am a virgin no longer. An angel, fantastic, unknown, intoxicated, has raped me and dragged my soul out into the bitter cold of space, never to give it back" (42). (*"Efter det här är jag inte längre oskuld, en okänd fantastisk rusig ängel har våldtagit mig och dragit ut min själ i den kalla rymden för att sedan aldrig mer lämna tillbaka den" [49].*) Is it a literal rape or a metaphorical one? Is heroin the "fantastic angel" who has raped Inni, or did another intoxicated person rape her while she was high?

The metaphorical use of rape, as an event that robs Inni of her soul forever, echoes of the cultural tendency to call rape "soul murder," and brings to mind the rape myth identified by Sanyal: "rape is a fate worse than death."[448] But to Inni, narrating from the afterlife, it does not seem to really matter exactly what happened that night—it is the symbolic beginning of the story of her life as an addict, which contains recurrent sexual violence, intermingled with the ecstatic pleasure of substance intoxication.

When she walks home the next morning, the world seems different: "[a] lifeless world. No birds, no trees; there they stand, and yet they are not there. A silent blue sky, bottomless, faceless" (43). (*"Det är en död värld. Inga fåglar, inga träd, fast de står där är de ändå inte där, en stum blå himmel utan botten, utan ansikte" [49].*)

Inni's narration repeatedly traces her feeling of being a living dead back to the ambivalently metaphorical rape of her first injection. The same event is narrated first as follows: "I was so young when it began, no longer a child, but not yet a woman. I don't know if I ever did become a woman, but one day I couldn't stand normality anymore and that was when I crossed over to the other side" (41). (*"Jag var så ung när det började, jag var inte ett barn, men hade ännu inte blivit en kvinna. Jag vet inte om jag någonsin blev det, men en dag stod jag inte längre ut med det vanliga, det var då jag klev över på den andra sidan" [47].*) And then, later in the novel, it is repeated again in almost the exact same way: "One day I could stand normality no longer and that was when I crossed over to the other side. [...] Once it has been within reach, there is no way back. [...] The world outside has been emptied of meaning, and you begin to understand that it has always been that way, it is raw, ugly, unjust" (172). (*"En dag stod jag inte längre ut med det normala, det var då jag klev över på den andra sidan. [...] När man en gång varit nära då finns ingen väg tillbaka. [...] Världen utanför har blivit tömd på mening och man förstår att den alltid har varit det, den är rå och ful och orättvis" [204].*)

However, the way in which Inni retells the event to the reader, using repeated, clichéd phrasing each time, indicates that this is a model of explanation

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[448] Sanyal, *Rape*, 63–64.

to which she is clinging, a narrative which has grown stronger through repetition. The first injection functions in the story as a clear-cut reason for her isolated, spectral position on Earth—but read together alongside other fragmented memories presented in the novel, it appears as an afterthought, a simplification of her gradual shift into spectrality which takes place during the course of her life.

Inni's evoking of this singular event as the explanation for her spectral position in the world demonstrates the novel's interest in the workings of self-blame as a feature of trauma. By uniting the concept of a first injection of heroin and rape, *The Antarctica of Love* proposes that rape myths and myths about addiction similarly tend to blame the victim or the addict for their own misfortune.[449] Inni is shown to subscribe to these myths, resulting in internalized self-blame.

However, *The Antarctica of Love* does not subscribe in its entirety to this simplified explanation. Throughout the course of the novel, the potentially traumatic events of Inni's life are shown to be multiple—neglect in childhood, losing a sibling, losing her own children—and many of them are caused by or made more severe due to ongoing life circumstances. Criticism of the abstract idea of rape as a mere symbol of "doomed" womanhood can be discerned in the novel. Specifically, it can be seen in the tension Stridsberg creates between Inni's simplified narration of her first injection and the complicated reality of trauma which is gradually revealed through her flashbacks and memories.

The Antarctica of Love as a narrative of rape trauma

The critical reception of *The Antarctica of Love* generally identified sexual and gender-based violence as a main theme of the novel, and several reviews note that it explores the prevailing obsession with the topic of murdered women in contemporary culture.[450] The fact that the protagonist is narrating the story even though she is dead is generally noted in the reception, and is interpreted as a way of giving a marginalized and silenced woman a voice.[451]

Even though the reviews often mention that the narrative form of the novel is characterized by repetitive recollections of past events in Inni's life, trauma as a psychological, philosophical, and narrative phenomenon is not explicitly

[449] Regarding rape myths and victim-blaming, see: Bourke, *Rape*, 23–24; Adolfsson, *Blaming Victims of Rape*, 57. Sweden's zero-tolerance drug policy has often been criticized for having resulted in a decline in resources for treatment and in a high number of deadly overdoses. For an example of the criticism directed at Sweden's drug policy, see: Bengt Svensson and Arne Kristiansen, "En nedrustad narkomanvård ur brukarnas perspektiv," *Nordisk sosialt arbeid* 25, no. 3 (2005): 220–30.

[450] Elam, "Recension: Kärlekens Antarktis är Stridsbergs hittills starkaste och mörkaste roman"; Eriksson, "Styckmördade kvinnan får upprättelse av Stridsberg"; Ramnehill, "Kritik: Kärlekens Antarktis"; Freja Rudels, "Sara Stridsberg, Kärlekens Antarktis," *Lysmasken*, May 10, 2019.

[451] See, for example: Eriksson, "Styckmördade kvinnan får upprättelse av Stridsberg."

discussed by the majority of reviewers. However, trauma is in many ways a fundamental theme of the novel's plot, as well as an inspiration for its narrative structure.

The temporal disjointedness of Stridsberg's novel conforms to Whitehead's stylistic criteria of trauma fiction, and it does so to a greater extent than the other novels in this study. In Whitehead's framework, the repetition, disjointedness of time, and fragmented first-person voice might be read as a manifestation of Caruth's idea that literature may tell stories of traumatic events that resist narrative representation.[452]

More recent views of PTSD also resonate strongly in the novel. The narrative's repetitive return to Inni's death resembles one of the symptoms of PTSD, as currently described in the *DSM-5*: "fear-based reexperiencing" of the traumatic event.[453] These intrusive memories are depicted through what literary scholar Michelle Balaev calls "narrative dissociation," a way of depicting trauma in which the "literary representation of an altered state of consciousness [...] disrupts and reorients a character's perceptions."[454]

Balaev identifies five examples of narrative strategies to express dissociation: "the disjunction of time through the use of repetition and negation; imagistic scenes of violence that lack emotional description; syntactical subversion and rearrangement; atemporality; and a doubled consciousness and point of view."[455] *The Antarctica of Love* makes use of all of the strategies presented above when narrating Inni's death. This kind of narration also characterizes the way in which many other parts of her life are depicted, indicating that these moments might have been potentially traumatic, too—or that trauma has altered how she remembers the rest of her life.

The fact that Inni's story changes slightly with each retelling can be read as her trying out different explanations for why her life had to end and why it had to be so terrible. In these retellings, a number of events are evoked as destiny, death being the most striking one. Inni's repeated assessment of the rape and murder as the inevitable endpoint to her life reflects a sentiment of hopeless resignation typical of trauma as it is conceptualized in contemporary psychological research: clinical observations have shown that people who negatively appraise the meaning of a traumatic event have a higher risk of developing PTSD.

[452] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 5, 7.

[453] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 274.

[454] Balaev [Satterlee], *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, xvi.

[455] Balaev [Satterlee], *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, xvi.

This tends to result in self-blame and a view of the self as weak and deserving of the traumatic event.[456]

Furthermore, the narration returns over and over again to the fact that nobody came to Inni's rescue, something implied to be the result of the fact that she had no-one to call, no social security net left intact. This evokes Herman's emphasis on feelings of abandonment, which can arise in victims of violence when they realize that nobody will help them, as an important part of processes of traumatization.[457]

Living ghostliness and repeated traumatic events

For many years, the idea that trauma arises from a single clearly identifiable event was implicitly promoted by the *DSM*'s diagnostic criteria for PTSD, which required an event (singular), before the formulation "event(s)" was introduced into the *DSM-5* in 2013.[458] This idea is compatible with how rape trauma was depicted in *The Lovely Bones*, where Susie's life prior to her first and last sexual experiences was painted as innocent, happy, and secure, but whose life ends immediately after she is raped—although Susie makes sure to separate the rape from death in her narration (14).[459] However, understanding *The Antarctica of Love*'s depiction of trauma requires an understanding of the often cumulative effects of traumatic events, and the effects they may have on people who are continuously exposed to them.[460]

In addition to the murder scene, Stridsberg makes use of the narrative conventions of trauma fiction to include an array of different memories, which are all, to a varying degree, narrated with the kind of syntactical rearrangement that Balaev calls narrative dissociation.[461] Through these glimpses, the novel adds

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[456] Teresa L. Carper et al., "Early PTSD Symptom Sub-Clusters Predicting Chronic Posttraumatic Stress Following Sexual Assault," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 7, no. 5 (2015): 442–47; Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 26; Edna B. Foa et al., "The Posttraumatic Cognitions Inventory (PTCI): Development and Validation," *Psychological Assessment* 11, no. 3 (1999): 303–14; Kelly H. Koo et al., "Posttraumatic Cognitions, Somatization, and PTSD Severity among Asian American and White College Women with Sexual Trauma Histories," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014): 337–44; Carmen P. McLean et al., "Changes in Negative Cognitions Mediate PTSD Symptom Reductions during Client-Centered Therapy and Prolonged Exposure for Adolescents," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 68 (2015): 64–69.

[457] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 52–53.

[458] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5,* 271; Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 22.

[459] Sanyal, *Rape*, 63–64.

[460] See, for example: Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 22; Judith Lewis Herman, "Complex PTSD: A Syndrome in Survivors of Prolonged and Repeated Trauma," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 5, no. 3 (1992): 377–91.

[461] Balaev [Satterlee], *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, xvi.

context to Inni's life, countering the murder scene, in which she is portrayed as a quite anonymous victim. Furthermore, this kind of narration, in which the scene including the rape and murder is interwoven with other memories, also stresses the specific psychological consequences of being subjected to sexual violence *in addition to* several other potentially traumatic events. I will describe one of these in the following.

Through the glimpses we get of Inni's childhood, the immense impact of her brother Eskil's death is implied. In a scene detailing Eskil's drowning, Inni's initial inability to believe what has happened is evident: on the way to the hospital, she temporarily loses her hearing, and while she watches the hospital staff try to revive Eskil, Inni is shown to experience an internal battle between hope and hopelessness: "I think saying it had all been in vain was a kind of self-protection. I still believed it might turn out OK, nothing was certain, Jesus had risen from the dead; but I didn't want to expose my trust, my hope against hope" (103–104). (*"Jag tror att jag sa så för att skydda mig, jag visste att allt hade gått åt helvete. Fast jag tänkte att det fortfarande kunde gå bra, att ingenting var säkert och att Jesus hade blivit uppväckt från de döda, och jag ville inte blotta min förhoppning, mitt hopp" [120].*)

However, this hope is crushed. While watching the increasingly hopeless attempts made to revive her brother, Inni arrives at the conclusion that "this was what reality was; it had been underlying everything, all the time. A crack had been opened up that would never be closed; and through that crack there came no light, only total darkness" (104). (*"…ändå var det detta som var verkligheten, som hade funnits under allting hela tiden. En spricka hade öppnats som aldrig skulle gå att stänga igen, och genom den sprickan kom inget ljus, bara ett totalt mörker" [121].*) This depiction conforms to Herman's notion that traumatic events "undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience," violating the person's faith in a natural order.[462] In the context of reading *The Antarctica of Love* as a story about rape trauma, this scene becomes extremely significant because it presents an alternative temporal structure to this kind of story: rather than rape being the event from which trauma originates, it now becomes apparent that Inni lost her faith in a just world long before experiencing sexual violence.

When the death of her brother is mentioned for the first time in the novel, Inni literally states that it is the reason she resorted to heroin. She imagined, she states, that the heroin "was given to me because I had waited so long for Eskil. The water took him, and therefore it took Raksha too, and as compensation I was entitled to this feeling, unlike anything I had ever known before" (44). (*"…jag hade fått det för att jag hade väntat så länge på Eskil. Vattnet tog honom och sedan tog det Raksha också och som ersättning fick jag den här känslan som inte liknade någonting jag någonsin hade varit med om förut" [50–51].*) Her use is described as a way of

[462] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

dealing with the unbearable guilt, longing, and loneliness she has experienced ever since her brother drowned—even as a compensation for it.

Later, Inni states that after Eskil's death, she "was alone all the time" (112). (*"Efter Eskils död är jag alltid ensam" [130].*) This loneliness is expressed throughout the novel, sometimes through spectral metaphors. However, Stridsberg demonstrates how loneliness ties into social structures, rather than being merely a direct psychological consequence of trauma. Comparing her position in life and in death, the novel demonstrates how Inni's social class, addiction, and gender renders her dehumanized in the eyes of other people, leading them to commit violence against her. Her gradual disappearance and transformation into a ghost are depicted as beginning during her lifetime. Her position in society is implied to be constantly peripheral—she is the child of parents earning a precarious living and when she, as a young adult, becomes addicted to heroin, her status as an outsider is solidified. She survives on money earned through selling sex, and is, at times, homeless.

With the negative determinism which the *DSM-5* deems typical of people suffering from PTSD, the ghost Inni describes her past self to the reader as belonging to a doomed class of people.[463] To her, the fact that she ends up on Herkulesgatan, the street where johns come to pick up women, is not surprising—in the city in which she lives, she states, there are a number of predefined roles, and the role a person will take on is determined early in life: "[s]ome are doomed to failure, others destined to advance, a certain few will rise above the rest; and you can see the early signs, children defined from the start" (30). (*"Vissa är dömda att gå under, andra är tänkta att gå vidare, några få höjer sig över de andra, och man kan se det tidigt, barnen är märkta från början" [34].*) In this city, there are losers and winners, and these roles are distributed along the lines of class and gender: "the lifeblood of this city circulates along Herkulesgatan and from there to the banks [...]" (30). (*"stadens blodomlopp går genom Herkulesgatan och vidare in i bankerna [...]" [34].*) This dark view of the world mirrors the "crack," revealing the total darkness of reality opened by Eskil's death. However, it is also, at least in part, a correct assessment of existing social and class relations.

Throughout *The Antarctica of Love*, Inni's memories of past events, narrated non-chronologically, seem to be happening all at once. The merging of different layers of time can be interpreted as illustrating how her life is characterized by social stasis: looking back at moments of her life, she sees no change in her circumstances. According to the *DSM-5*, this way of thinking is typical of people who suffer from severe PTSD, but knowing about the multiple traumatic events, and the neglect and the lack of support in Inni's life, Stridsberg shows how this

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[463] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 275.

worldview cannot be viewed as a mere symptom of pathology—it also holds an aspect of realism.[464]

As an addict, Inni belongs to a group of people who are a visible feature of the streets of Stockholm, but without any power to affect society. This social position can be understood according to Peeren's idea of living ghosts: people who are ignored and considered expendable even while alive.[465] Living ghosts, Peeren writes, are people who "are not considered to have a dimension that exceeds the visible, the material; their desires are considered irrelevant, their secrets uninteresting, their looks unpenetrating."[466] Describing how she and her friends are seen by johns, Inni states that "[w]e expect nothing, we have nothing, we are simply there; and people can do with us what they will. [...] When they have discharged their effluent into us, they want us to vanish, to remove our murky crevices, our averted eyes, and so we do, we absent ourselves, are gone" (110). (*"Vi väntar oss ingenting, vi har ingenting, vi bara är där, man får göra vad man vill med oss. [...] När de har tömt sitt avfall i oss vill de att vi ska försvinna, våra kroppars mörka hålor, våra bortvända ögon, och då gör vi verkligen det, vi försvinner och är borta" [127–128].*) As exemplified by this statement, spectrality is used in the novel to depict psychological traumatization and dehumanization as concurrent processes, experienced by people who are considered expendable; due to addiction and homelessness, for example.

Moreover, *The Antarctica of Love* imagines Inni's living ghostliness as the result of loneliness. While the current state of psychotraumatological research shows that the presence or absence of social support greatly affects whether and how trauma is developed after a potentially traumatic event, Stridsberg's novel is interested in the kinds of life circumstances that render social support very difficult to attain in the first place.[467]

With Shane and Nanna, Inni experiences love as well as social support. Nanna's friendship is depicted as constructive and important, and the relationship with Shane evokes a similar kind of insight that is included in Rydberg's narrative: good sex and beautiful romantic relationships are possible, despite previous experiences of potentially traumatic sexual violence.

However, the novel implies that their addiction renders them fleeting, unreliable presences in each other's lives. Inni remembers the relief she has felt when Nanna turned up out of the blue, after disappearing and leaving her for a period

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[464] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 275.

[465] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 14.

[466] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 36.

[467] Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 305, 307, 320; Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 27.

of time: “I recalled all the times I had believed Nanna had gone forever and then suddenly she was back on Herkulesgatan, like a wonderful old ghost” (225). (*“Jag tänkte på alla gånger jag hade trott att Nanna hade gett sig av för alltid och så hade hon plötsligt stått där igen på Herkulesgatan som ett gammalt underbart spöke” [264].*) Shane has occasionally disappeared as well, and the following chapter opens with: “Shane was back. One day he was simply standing in front of us while we were walking along. He was pale and sunken” (227). (*“Shane var tillbaka. En dag hade han bara stått där framför oss när vi kom gående. Han var blek och ihålig” [265].*) Both of these passages underline how Nanna and Shane appear ghostly to Inni. Here, their ghostliness is connected to their unreliability as social support, as they are there one moment and gone the next.

The worse off Inni’s friends and acquaintances become over time, the more hopeless the possibility of them helping each other out of their spectral state of being appears. Remembering the period leading up to her death, Inni states that she was completely broken, and so were her friends: “I was already dead and had been for a long time; we wandered through Stockholm like a funeral cortège, my friends and I” (109). (*“Jag var redan död, det hade jag varit länge, som ett begravningssällskap vandrade vi genom Stockholm, jag och mina vänner” [126].*)

Later in the novel, she describes this as a time of ascent into a new realm of wretchedness, one that is populated by people who are barely alive, who live like ghosts: “[t]he price had dropped of late, and I had sunk deeper into the mire and slime that existed beneath the city, below the earth and asphalt where the filth gathered, in the underground sewers and metro bunkers where people lived like ghosts” (59). (*“Priset hade sjunkit den senaste tiden, och jag hade sjunkit längre ner i gyttjan och dyn som fanns under staden, under marken och asfalten där skiten samlades, i de underjordiska avloppssystemen och skyddsrummen i tunnelbanan där folk levde som spöken” [71].*)

This ascent into the realm of ghostliness is what the murderer later will claim that he has noticed, and it is the reason he gives for choosing Inni as his victim: “[y]ou can tell a mile away that you’re not afraid of anything. That you don’t need anyone at all in this world” (248). (*“På långt håll ser man att du inte fruktar något. Att du inte behöver någon enda människa i världen” [289].*) As discussed earlier in this chapter, Inni’s apparent social isolation is used by the perpetrator to rationalize his own actions. He implies that Inni’s lack of support is in fact a lack of *need*, her isolation a consequence of her own choices. He is shown to place the responsibility on her for the rape and murder he is about to commit.

The living as incompetent listeners

Above, I analyzed how spectral metaphors are used in *The Antarctica of Love* to depict Inni’s lack of support and agency in life. But, like the other protagonists

in this study, Inni's narration, even of past events, is that of a literal ghost. In her review of the novel in *Svenska Dagbladet*, Therese Eriksson suggests that Inni's spectral narration constitutes an act of testimony.[468] However, I want to present another reading, and argue that *The Antarctica of Love* makes a point of the fact that trauma testimony and witnessing, in the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic sense, is absent within the plot—a proper testimony requires that the witness knows that somebody is listening, but this is not the case in Stridsberg's novel.[469]

Indeed, Inni's ghostly position is far from the powerful Derridean specter, modeled on a literary sovereign patriarch, Shakespeare's King Hamlet, who demands living characters bear witness to past atrocities.[470] Rather, the point of Stridsberg's use of the ghost figure is to imagine a deceased narrator whose social standing in life was low, and who thus, based on previous experience, is convinced that nobody would pay attention to such a testimony.

In her review, Eriksson identifies with the listeners rather than with the protagonist: her use of "us" connotes the "secure" people who may bear witness to traumatic violence despite having no personal experience of the things Inni has gone through, who live their lives at a safe distance from people in Inni's social position. And she is not wrong: the reader of *The Antarctica of Love* can easily be imagined as respectably middle class based on Stridsberg's real-life literary awards and status as a former member of the Swedish academy.

However, through the ghost's first-person narration, the novel confronts this kind of readerly expectation: Inni repeatedly criticizes the living for being terrible listeners and points out the unequal relationship between the living and the dead. She notes that these relationships are defined by the fact that the person who is alive can create a "perfect friend" (*"den perfekta vännen" [81]*) out of the dead person, because the dead never argue back, and are never able to contest the stories which living people make up about them in order to feel good about themselves (66).

This might be read as a warning against the kind of self-aggrandizement dangerously close at hand for a psychiatrist or literary scholar working in the tradition of Dori Laub, for whom the interpretive role of the witness is essential for traumatized people to understand their trauma.[471] It also serves as a problematization of the Derridaean hauntological assumption—that living subjects are capable of listening to the imperatives of the dead without just hearing what they, themselves, want to hear.

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[468] Eriksson, "Styckmördade kvinnan får upprättelse av Stridsberg."

[469] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57.

[470] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 14–15.

[471] Bond and Craps, *Trauma*, 69; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 58.

In a paragraph towards the end of the novel, Inni claims not to care whether the reader or anybody else is listening to her story. Her indifference reflects her experiences in the past, when she was still alive: "[i]n my experience most people are so self-absorbed they find it hard to hear anything other than their own thoughts. You see impatience squirming through them like a snake when it isn't their turn to speak, and then you want to come to their rescue and let them carry on" (194). (*"Min erfarenhet är att de flesta är så självupptagna att de har svårt att höra något annat än sina egna tankar. Man ser rastlösheten krypa som en orm genom dem när de inte får prata själva, och man vill rädda dem då, och låta dem prata vidare om sitt" [228].*) Here, Inni is shown to be unwilling to hope for a decent witness to the story of her life. She notes that her act of narration involves the painful risk of not being heard, or perhaps even worse: being heard insufficiently, impatiently, by a person who does not care.

In light of this comment, *The Antarctica of Love* constructs Inni's haunting not as an attempt at public testimony—an act that would require Inni to believe that she has agency, that somebody hears her story and takes it seriously—but as the result of a longing to be acknowledged by her living family: just like Rydberg's Marika and Sebold's Susie were shown to do when they lingered in the proximity of their loved ones after death. Inni returns to watch her family members, hoping against hope that they will survive the horror and loneliness of their isolated lives (53, 125, 128), and that they will acknowledge her existence out loud (162). However, she remains an observer and does not dare to try and contact them.

Playing with the thought of what would happen if she succeeded in showing herself to the living, Inni concludes that it would result in a reenactment of how things were before, in life: "[t]hey miss you and want you to come back, but nobody considers what would happen if you actually did [...]" (39–40). (*"De längtar efter att du ska komma tillbaka, men ingen tänker på vad som skulle hända om du verkligen gjorde det [...]" [45].*)

In her imagination she appears on her mother's couch, and they proceed to have an awkward, short conversation, which, when it ends, leaves them with the same dysfunctional relationship that they had before she died. "And then [Raksha] would look around, puzzled and slightly embarrassed, and we would sit there, and all the difficulty between us, everything that had been temporarily erased by death, would be back: that she wasn't the mother I had needed and I wasn't the daughter she had wished for" (40). (*"Och sedan skulle [Raksha] se sig omkring villrådigt och lite generat och vi skulle sitta där och allt det svåra mellan oss, allt det som döden tillfälligt suddat ut, skulle vara tillbaka, som att hon inte var den mamma som jag hade behövt och att jag inte var den dotter hon önskat sig" [46].*) If Inni decided to haunt in this way, she thinks that she would find herself in exactly the same social position as when she was alive. I read Inni's reluctance to

attempt a haunting as her trying to protect herself from the disappointment of not being heard and supported.

Instead, listening becomes the only way in which Inni can remain in social contact with the world. In her spectral state, she cannot bear to be completely isolated, and thus seeks social support by resorting to the passive role of listener and observer: "[y]ou get slightly better at listening when you are dead, because you hear everything then. When you have time to replay all your conversations, you hear the nuances in what was once said and you miss nothing, which is awful too, as it is too late by far" (194). (*"Man blir lite bättre på att lyssna när man är död, för då hör man allting, när man har tid att spela upp alla samtal, man hör alla nyanser i det som en gång sas, och man missar ingenting, vilket också är fruktansvärt, eftersom allting för länge sedan är för sent" [228–229].*)

However, adopting a one-sided social role of listener while never herself being heard actually seems to facilitate Inni's experience of trauma. Since people on Earth do not try to speak to her after her death, her listening becomes focused instead on painful memories. Having no other way of passing her time, her mind is always painfully occupied with reviewing past events, an activity which she perceives as "listening." Instead of actively connecting with her family, Inni is haunted by traumatic events and unsuccessful past conversations, and she has no choice but to listen.[472] Following this interpretation, Inni's spectral return to Earth does not serve any healing or ethical function but is depicted as involuntary, almost compulsory—almost like an intrusive memory in and of itself.

Stridsberg's ambiguous use of spectrality paints trauma as an experience of being utterly stuck in a situation that continues to hurt you. It implies that there is no clear difference between Inni's experience of being a living ghost and a dead ghost, and within the narrative, this confusion blurs the line between different times, places, and dimensions. One of Inni's recollections of her childhood can serve as an example. The scene begins with Inni narrating in past tense how her parents used to stay up all night drinking when she was a child, confined to their own world and oblivious to their children. In the middle of Inni's recollection of this memory, time dissolves, which is marked by a change in tempus: suddenly she narrates in present tense, she is there, now, watching her parents dance. When Inni says "Mamma?" (*"Mamma?" [91]?*) both the adult ghost Inni and the child Inni speak. Raksha, drunk, turns around for only a moment, after which she continues dancing as if Inni is not there (76).

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[472] Being "haunted" by trauma is a common metaphor used in contemporary discourse to describe the frightening and persistent qualities of traumatic memories—you do not want them to return, but they intrude into your life repeatedly. See, for example: Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4, 6, 20; Lipman, "Haunted by History"; Young, "Haunted by Trauma"; Ricketts, "Hemsökt av historien"; Rippl et al., eds., *Haunted Narratives*.

In the novel, Inni's identical ghostly positions create the kind of temporal disarrangement which, according to Whitehead, is a feature of trauma fiction; and according to Balaev, a feature of the literary technique of narrative dissociation.[473] However, this scene illustrates another kind of recollection aside from the flashbacks to the rape and murder. Instead of a violent event, it depicts Inni's parents dancing.

The identical, invisible position of the two versions of Inni calls attention to a foundational quality of Inni's traumatic return as a ghost: she is thrown back in time because, as a child in that very moment, she was as much of a ghost as she became after her death. This confusion of the level of diegesis is instructive for how the ghostly narrator is used in *The Antarctica of Love*: as an intradiegetic narrator that functions as an extradiegetic narrator merely because the other characters in the novel will not listen to her. A similar dynamic was displayed in *Osalig ande*, when Marika's mother, after hearing about the sexual abuse of her daughter, puts her hands to her face and ignores Marika, making her "as invisible as I am now [as a ghost]" (64).

Time is not linear—all that exists is the present moment—because Inni's social position in the world has never changed, never been anything but ghostly. It illustrates how Inni's life trajectory has not followed the kind of temporal model implied by the Yale School's view of trauma, and to some extent also the *DSM*'s PTSD diagnosis: a pre-traumatic healthy life existed before it was shattered by a traumatic event. Instead, Stridsberg's novel depicts no pre-traumatic time in Inni's life. The experience of always being lonely and stuck in dysfunctional relationships plays a fundamental role in the novel's depiction of trauma, as it keeps Inni on Earth in a spectral state in which she, seemingly, has always lacked and will always lack agency—a state in which her fate appears already fixed.

Herein lies an important contribution of the novel to contemporary psychotraumatology, as well as to cultural trauma theory. Through the ghost narrator, Stridsberg depicts a scene of neglect within the structure of a trauma narrative, demonstrating how the sense of invisibility stemming from a long period of parental neglect is potentially traumatic, even if it cannot be conceptualized as a single event. Within psychology, there is agreement that prolonged child abuse can result in complex trauma, and in psychiatry, the multifaceted responses to such abuse might fall under the diagnosis of complex PTSD, which currently exists in the ICD-11 but not in the *DSM-5*.[474] However, Stridsberg's

[473] Balaev [Satterlee], *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, xvi; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.

[474] Bondjers, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—Assessment of Current Diagnostic Definitions*, 13; Herman, "Complex PTSD"; Nicholas M. Morelli and Miguel T. Villodas, "A Systematic Review of the Validity, Reliability, and Clinical Utility of Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD) Symptom Criteria," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 25, no. 2 (2022): 376–94; Joseph Spinazzola et al., "When Nowhere Is Safe: Interpersonal Trauma and Attachment Adversity as Antecedents

fictional scene can point us to the constant lack of agency experienced by people whose neglect is not in the past, but part of an ongoing social situation. This situation cannot be captured or changed by the complex PTSD diagnosis, which still requires exposure to an identifiable potentially traumatic event which lies in the past.[475]

Depicting dissociative flashbacks through media imagery

As I have already mentioned, the narrative form of *The Antarctica of Love* mimics the fear-based reexperiencing and negative cognitions that are listed in the *DSM-5* as symptoms of PTSD.[476] However, instead of depicting these symptoms as mere biological stimuli, the novel, following one of the conventions for trauma fiction pointed out by Whitehead—intertextuality—constantly points to how Inni's involuntary reliving of the rape and murder is mediated by the stories and images of her that are produced by other people.[477]

Victims of rape whose stories become public through the media often find that control of the narrative has been wrestled out of their hands. The scholars Tanya Horeck, Tanya Serisier, and Sabine Silke have noted the importance of thinking about not only the silencing of rape narratives which takes place in culture, but of the consequences of the intense publicity often accompanying personal stories about sexual violence.[478] In this context, one of the greatest contributions of *The Antarctica of Love* is the way in which it explores the consequences of intense media publicity on its traumatized protagonist's sense of self.

Stories about Inni's murder make their rounds in the media after her death. Inni tells the reader about the sensationalized articles about her case: "I was the sort of news that drew a circle of light around the reader and inside that circle there was warmth and sharing, where you were safe. Outside the circle was where we were, the shadows" (52). (*"Jag var den sortens nyheter som drog en cirkel av ljus kring läsaren, inom denna cirkel fanns värmen och gemenskapen, där var man trygg. Utanför cirkeln fanns vi som var skuggorna" [61–62].*) As a victim of rape and murder who is also a heroin addict and sells sex, Inni is depicted in the news as distinct from the audience. The reader can feel more respectable in comparison

of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Developmental Trauma Disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 31, no. 5 (2018): 631–42; Eden Thain et al., "Complex Trauma from Child Abuse and Neglect: 'I'm Not Sure We're Even All Talking about the Same Thing and We're Probably Not'," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 17, no. 4 (2024): 1151–68.

[475] Bondjers, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—Assessment of Current Diagnostic Definitions*, 13.

[476] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5,* 274.

[477] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 84.

[478] Horeck, *Public Rape*; Serisier, *Speaking Out*; Sielke, "The Politics of the Strong Trope."

to the depiction of Inni, the novel implies, and therefore feel less likely to be subject to the kind of sexual violence that she has endured.

Inni states that she is aware of the resemblance between the media coverage and fictional depictions, and draws a parallel to the frequently used television trope of the murdered woman:

> Everything on television is about murder now. I don't know why, but people seem to love it. It is no different on there: the police officers and criminologists each acting as some kind of hero, sitting in immaculate rooms, with sleek hairdos, discussing the killer. And meanwhile my world is conjured up, and ever so subtly beside their glossy world a dangerous underworld emerges. Full of junkies, whores, crooks and other desperados. It tends to be the extras who play those parts. But really the only person of interest to them is the murderer, and of course the dead woman doesn't feature. [...] What can the dead woman offer? Nothing. And anyway, she has nothing to say (163).
>
> *Allt på tv handlar om mord nu. Jag vet inte varför det är så, men folk verkar älska det. Det är samma sak där, poliser och kriminologer som spelar någon sorts hjältar och sitter i olika välstädade rum i sina blanka frisyrer och pratar om mördaren. Och samtidigt målas min värld upp, liksom lite diskret stiger en farlig underjord upp intill deras ljusa värld. Fylld med narkomaner och horor och brottslingar och andra desperados. Det brukar vara statister som spelar de rollerna. Men egentligen är det bara mördaren som intresserar dem, den döda finns ju ändå inte. [...] Vad har den döda att komma med? Ingenting. Hon har i alla fall ingenting att säga (192–193).*

The dead woman in the murder series has nothing to offer or say, Inni concludes. Unlike Inni and the other ghosts included in my study, she is not the protagonist but an extra. Her only function in these narratives is as a catalyst for the power struggle between the police and the killer, and as a contrast to the "glossy" protagonists: she is part of a "dangerous underworld": a "junkie," a "whore," a "crook," or a "desperado." Inni imagines the audience of the television series as people with sleek hairdos in immaculate rooms, and not as women like herself. This observation evokes the novel's previous portrayal of how she and her friends were viewed by sex-buyers in life: as disposable people who lack interiority. And indeed, the murderer is insinuated to be a man with a refined, middle-class appearance, perhaps an architect or judge (67).

Through her narration, Inni suggests that she is aware that her tragedy is charged with narrative convention, with genre patterns traveling back and forth between fictional popular culture and non-fictional media reports.[479] In line with this, she suggests that this transference of meaning might make other people think of herself in terms of fiction. In the media narratives covering the murder, the novel implies, Inni is neither the focalizer nor even a central character,

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[479] See: Frow, *Genre*, 150.

but rather part of a narrative strategy. She is made into the standardized victim of a singular, important event.[480]

Along with the news stories, Inni is represented through the medium of photography. The photographic image which returns most frequently in Inni's narration is not the one depicted in the newspapers, but a type of photograph known mainly through cinematic crime fiction—her raped corpse at the site of the murder. An abrupt shift in perception occurs when Inni dies and is separated from her body: she suddenly sees her corpse being transformed into a photograph. "In an instant my body transforms into a photograph that has been tossed out onto the landscape [...]" (120). (*"På ett ögonblick förvandlas min kropp till ett fotografi som ligger utslängt i landskapet" [141].*) As a specter reviewing the traumatic moment, Inni not only sees her body from outside, but through the mediation of an outsider looking at a photograph of her.

Inni's gaze being mediated by photography does not only apply to how she views herself, but extends to how she is shown to experience the rest of the world post-traumatically through PTSD-like flashbacks. In one scene, Inni's corpse is, again, likened to a photograph, but with an additional link: Inni mentions that after the traumatic moment, she starts seeing the entire world as a series of photographs. "Every image is frozen, like my body, rigid, fixed, a photograph. Like the pictures of me that will appear later in the newspapers" (138). (*"Alla bilder är frusna, som min kropp, den är stelnad, och orörlig som ett fotografi. Som bilden som kommer att finnas av mig i alla tidningar sedan" [163].*) The traumatic event is depicted as having shattered her world: "[t]he world was broken now, seven fragments of mirror lying on the grass [...]. That is why it is so hard to remember; because all experience comes piecemeal. It has always been this way. There is never a complete picture of the world, never a single picture" (138). (*"Världen var sönder nu, sju spegelskärvor låg i gräset. [...] Det är därför det är så svårt att minnas för att all erfarenhet kommer uppstyckad i bitar. Så har det alltid varit. Det blir aldrig en hel bild av världen, aldrig en enda bild" [163–164].*)

On one level, Inni's memories of the traumatic event are depicted in accordance with the Yale School's understanding of trauma as "a deathlike break" that

[480] Considering conventions for media reporting of gendered violence, sociologist Annette Burfoot and film and media studies scholar Susan Lord ask: "[i]s the representation of violence drawn so heavily from genre and gender codes that even the most horrific realities are destined to become 'stories'—normalized and folded into the everyday racist and sexist ideologies that form our senses of belonging to a nation, a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a class?" In the historical and social context depicted in *The Antarctica of Love*, the answer is yes. Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord, *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), xii.

eludes narrative representation, but is relived over and over again.[481] However, Inni's memories return as photographs in which she herself features. If photography is viewed as directly mediated truth, Inni's flashbacks could indeed be interpreted as the absolutely true representations of trauma. But the mechanical, supposedly unmediated reproduction of reality which photography provides can be questioned, and has been. Literary theorist Roland Barthes, for example, famously notes that "[n]ot only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory [...], but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory."[482]

There is thus another way of understanding Inni's fragmented, photographic memories: they are not really her memories at all, but counter-memories built on conventions of focalization from media reporting and crime fiction. A young woman who is raped and murdered by a stranger is a cinematic and visual cliché, even more so than the traumatic events that Inni has previously lived through.

When Inni is subject to this narratively formalized crime, her traumatic reaction is shown to mirror the way in which such an event is visually represented in popular culture. Inni generalizes the way in which she is objectified, sexualized, and perceived out of context by the media into a more all-encompassing way of seeing the world and herself from the outside, in contextless picture frames. This confusion of focalization, I would argue, plays a major role in producing the traumatic symptoms that the novel depicts. By imagining a scenario in which other people's points of view intrusively shape the victim's perspective, Stridsberg provides nuance on Bal's insight that narratives of sexual violence can take on completely different meanings depending on whether they are focalized through the perpetrator's or the victim's point of view.[483]

Internalizing the points of view of the crime narratives, Inni adapts a narrative of herself as other. I here use the term "other" in accordance with Barthes when he suggests that, in the process of posing for a photograph, the subject constitutes himself as other by transforming himself "in advance to an image."[484] *The Antarctica of Love* incorporates Barthes' idea of posing for a photograph into its depiction of rape trauma: when Inni is subject to a traumatic event which is strongly associated with and anticipated as a photographic image, she is

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[481] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 87, 90; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 79, 85; Hanna Meretoja, "Philosophies of Trauma," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, ed. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (Routledge, 2020), 24.

[482] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, new ed. (Vintage, 2000), 91. Barthes is writing about photography, but it should be noted that contemporary cognitive psychology and neuroscience view memories as plastic and in themselves subject to change—and that memories are not sources of unmediated truth. See: Jonathan L. C. Lee, "Reconsolidation: Maintaining Memory Relevance," *Trends in Neurosciences* 32, no. 8 (2009): 413–20.

[483] Bal, *Narratology*, 159.

[484] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10.

represented as posing: transferring herself, in her own mind, into someone else's image of her.

A different way of haunting? Motherhood as a non-traumatic return

As underscored previously in this chapter, conventional representations of murdered women play a significant role in how Inni's trauma is shown to operate in the novel. She suggests at one point that all the speculations about who killed her—a "distant hubbub from professors and criminologists and private investigators and journalists" (11), (*"avlägset babbel från professorer och kriminologer och privatspanare och journalister" [11]*)—are what essentially forces her to be a ghost after her death. "They say you die three times," she tells the reader. "The third time will be the last time my name is spoken on earth" (11). (*"Det sägs att man dör tre gånger. [...] Den tredje gången blir den sista gången någon säger mitt namn på jorden" [11–12].*) In line with this, Inni is forced to continue her ghostly existence as long as she can still hear the public rehashing of the rape and murder.

Every time someone mentions her, it is as if a new, spectral version of her is conjured up, matching the narrative into which they insert her. This is a violent and unpleasant process, which makes her cringe and prevents her from moving on from the traumatic events which she has suffered. "I wish all the voices would hush soon," Inni states. "I don't like hearing my name. It crawls like insects in the place where my heart once was" (11). (*"Jag önskar att rösterna ska tystna snart. Jag tycker inte om att höra mitt namn, det kryper som insekter där mitt hjärta satt en gång" [12].*)

When forced to look at her own dead body arranged on the ground like in a photograph, she realizes that she does not want people to view her that way. "My thought was that I didn't want Raksha to see me like this, I didn't want anyone to see me, I never had" (253).[485] (*"Jag hann tänka att jag inte ville att Raksha skulle se mig så, jag ville inte att någon skulle se mig, det hade jag aldrig velat" [294].*) The repulsion which Inni is described to feel towards this involuntary haunting awakens in her a longing to be acknowledged differently, not by the media or the killer, but by the people who love her.

There is a slight hint of hope throughout the novel that she might be remembered by people who actually knew her and thus can view her with more nuance and respect. Comparing the media coverage of her murder to her family's failure to utter her name, Inni states that "no-one who loves me mentions me anymore. It is others who prattle on, people who write in the newspapers, folk who know

[485] This resembles the shame expressed by Marika in *Osalig ande*, when she, viewing her corpse from above, states that "I didn't want anybody to see me like this" (7).

all about everything" (162). (*"Det är ändå ingen som älskar mig som pratar om mig längre. Det är de andra som babblar på, de där människorna som skriver i tidningen, folk som vet allting om allting" [192].*)

Here, a different dynamic of silence around rape is on display than in *The Lovely Bones*. In the latter novel, the language used to talk about potentially traumatic violence was completely lacking, but the loss of a child functioned as a recognizable event which Susie's family members were able to talk about, to some extent. However, in *The Antarctica of Love*, sexualized media narratives of the murder are everywhere, but among Inni's family there are no words to talk about her at all. However, Inni "can't help hoping that someone will utter my name, that Valle will suddenly say 'Mamma' and mean me" (162). (*"Men sedan kan jag inte låta bli att hoppas på att någon ska säga mitt namn, att Valle ska säga mamma och mena mig" [192].*)

This hope is partly fulfilled: in *The Antarctica of Love*, the haunting relationship between Inni and her children is depicted as more open to connection than the relationship between Inni and her parents. As I have argued, as a ghost, Inni's focalization is heavily shaped by the perspectives of living people, and they affect her own sense of agency. Her visits to her mother Raksha thus throw her back into the feeling of invisibility and living death she experienced in childhood (40, 76). Her haunting of her children, on the other hand, contains a small hope for narrative progression instead of a repetition of destructive patterns. The closest Inni is shown to come to healing from trauma is when she haunts her children, who, by acknowledging her existence, grant her some of the agency which she has always thought that she lacked in the world.

When Inni visits Solveig and Valle after her death, she is not sure exactly how much power she has—if she is only watching them or if she is, in some small way, affecting them. This is a source of ambivalent feelings, because on the one hand, reaching her children is her deepest wish, while on the other hand she is afraid of passing trauma on to them. On a conscious level, she thinks that it is best not to disturb them: "[t]here have been so many times I have thought I should stay away, not disturb anyone, leave Valle and Solveig to become the people they will become without me" (196). (*"Så många gånger som jag har tänkt att jag ska hålla mig borta, att jag inte ska störa någon, att jag ska låta Valle och Solveig bli dem de ska bli utan mig" [230].*)

Reflected here is an anxiety regarding one's own power over one's children. This is an anxiety which is lacking in *The Lovely Bones*, in which Susie's adoption of her father's point of view is depicted as fairly unproblematic. While the paternal authority of Jack Salmon, sometimes channeled through the ghost Susie, can be read in the light of the powerful ethical imperative which Derrida

attributes to the ghost of Hamlet's father, the maternal anxiety which Stridsberg depicts is more akin to Peeren's theory of living ghosts.

Peeren identifies a major difference between the ghost of King Hamlet, whom Derrida repeatedly uses as an example and who famously orders his son to avenge his death, and the living ghosts that she examines: the latter of which have never had power. She argues that in contrast to the demands made by specters who used to be powerful people in life, the already-dispossessed living ghosts lack authority: "[i]f living-on is possible only for those perceived as living, present beings in the first place, the ghostliness produced by the exclusions that occur within the realm of life, among the living, can be seen to pre-empt haunting instead of facilitating it."[486]

Peeren points to the paternal tradition which Derrida passes on in his conception of spectrality as a scenario in which father visits son: "[w]hen Derrida argues that 'the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not,' he takes the perspective of the heir [...]. What this focalization obscures is that 'our' being also equals legacy, as each person is a potential ancestor." Peeren shows that alongside the expected debt to one's ancestors, one might consider a less obvious debt to future generations.[487] These ideas about the role of parenthood and generational communication in the workings of spectrality constitute a central part of *The Antarctica of Love*.

Despite her anxiety and fear of hurting her children, the novel also depicts Inni's strong impulse to interfere in her children's lives by passing on her post-traumatic worldview to them: "I would say to Valle and Solveig that if you don't see any point to all of this, to all the hurt that always hurts, [...] it is because there isn't any point" (148). (*"Jag skulle vilja säga till Valle och Solveig att om de inte ser någon mening med allt det här, med allt det som gör ont och som fortsätter att göra ont, [...] så är det för att det inte finns någon mening" [175].*) When Inni sees her children hurting, her impulse is to teach them to cope in the same way that she coped: by viewing the world as meaningless, to protect oneself from hope that will inevitably be crushed. This impulse is an act of love, but one which she fears will cause her children harm, were she to successfully assert some kind of Derridaean spectral authority over them.

One occasion when Inni haunts successfully is when her son Valle, already a grown-up, attempts suicide. Here, Inni's spectral power is put to the test. During one of her visits to Valle, she notices him standing on a chair about to hang himself. She panics and wants to stop him, but is convinced that she does not have the power to interfere (197). As Maria Ramnehill pointed out in her review,

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[486] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 14–15.

[487] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 54 (emphasis in text); Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 165–166.

Inni is not an omniscient narrator.[488] Her inability to interfere is thus her own interpretation of her spectral place in the world. This interpretation is challenged by what happens next: Valle says the word "Mamma," (*"Mamma"*) and raises his feet, but does not kick the chair away. Inni shouts, "but my voice made no sound. I tried to pull him down, but I had no hands. [...] I had no earthly power, nor power of any other kind" (197). (*"...men det kom inget ljud. Jag försökte slita ner honom, men jag hade inga händer. [...] [J]ag hade ingen makt på jorden, och ingen makt någon annanstans heller" [231–232].*)

The immediacy of the situation demands a desperate attempt at interfering with other people's actions in the world, something Inni has been reluctant to do in the past out of a fear of proving true that she indeed has no power. And she is right—she has no power to stop Valle from taking his own life, if that is what he wants. What she potentially manages to do instead is get her voice through to her son and being heard by him:

> I imagined him coming to me, although I know it doesn't work like that. The word "peace" passed through my thoughts. And I remembered he loved flying. So, I whispered to him, told him he should fly away, fly out of time. I don't know if that was why he suddenly managed to wrench off the rope and he fell to the floor (198).
>
> *Jag tänkte tanken att han skulle komma till mig, fast jag vet att det inte fungerar så. Ordet frid for igenom mig. Och jag kom ihåg att han älskade att flyga. Så jag viskade till honom att han skulle flyga sin väg, flyga ut ur tiden. Jag vet inte om det var därför han plötsligt lyckades slita av sig repet och föll ner på golvet (232).*

Inni, in an attempt at helping her son, whispers to Valle to fly out of time. This is something that she, herself, earlier believed would help her feel at peace in death. But her son, potentially hearing this, interprets flying out of time as staying alive—or decides to stay alive despite his mother's haunting imperative. This scene is significant because it suggests that Inni, though she might have "no earthly power, nor power of any other kind" still has the capacity to interfere in the world in small but significant ways. Not by commanding her children, but by communicating her love to them and then watching them decide for themselves. The fact that she has no way of exercising power over her children—especially Solveig, whom Inni gave up at birth—breaks the cycle of living ghostliness and trauma which Inni has inherited from her parents and feared that she would pass on.

In another of the novel's chapters, Inni visits her sleeping daughter and causes Solveig to dream about her (143). Here, Solveig is still a child and does

[488] Ramnehill, "Kritik: Kärlekens Antarktis."

not know who her mother is, which perhaps is what allows Inni to communicate with her directly. Through the dream, Inni is able to communicate her loneliness to Solveig, who acknowledges this by waking up and asking her foster mother questions about Inni (144). As opposed to Sebold's depiction of Susie's haunting, Inni's haunting entails no imperative: she is not trying to make her daughter do anything. Instead, the haunting successfully grants Inni a little bit of agency because she is seen, however briefly, by a person whom she loves.

This reading suggests that Inni's children might intuitively understand her haunting as a sign of love and an attempt to connect—but not as something that necessarily should be followed as an absolute ethical imperative. She is not depicted as an equivalent to the Derridaean specter, because what Stridsberg is trying to imagine is a haunting that works through unconditional love, rather than through demands.

When things miraculously turn out well in Solveig's life, it suggests to Inni that the person whom she has created is not destined for unhappiness. Good things are proven to be happening randomly, without her explicit interference. This line of thinking suggests that the traumatic events that happened to Inni might also have been out of her control, perhaps making it easier for Inni to finally let go.

Indeed, throughout the novel, Inni's narration of the traumatic events change slightly and gradually. For example, in one of the novel's earlier accounts of the scene leading up to the murder, Inni states that she told herself that she had always been heading towards this moment, and that she felt free knowing that she did not care what happened to her (65). But in a later narration, her resistance is revealed: "[a]nd didn't I tell you that I tried to run? I hurled myself out of the telephone box when he came back, I ran into the forest and he came after me and threw me down on the ground and took me like an animal in the mud before he dragged me back to the car" (217–218). (*"Och visst sa jag att jag försökte springa, jag kastade mig ut från telefonkiosken när han kom tillbaka, att jag sprang in i skogen och han kom efter och slet ner mig på marken och tog mig som ett djur i gyttjan innan han släpade mig till bilen" [255].*) These changes mark a shift in how Inni is shown to view her own agency in the situation, and consequently, a gradual decrease in self-blame. Clinically, this could be interpreted as Stridsberg's depiction of a character who has not healed from trauma, but taken the first step towards healing from trauma.

Watching Solveig grow up to be happy and undamaged also shows Inni a model of return which does not operate through the logic of traumatic loneliness. As Ramnehill suggests, by imagining motherhood as an intersocial bond which remains after death, the novel allows Inni to live on through her

daughter.[489] The ending of *The Antarctica of Love* suggests a shift in which she is shown to recognize at least some spectral agency in herself: suddenly the narratee shifts and Inni is not talking into the void anymore, but addresses Solveig directly, in second person, as if her daughter can, in fact, hear her (268). Inni does not have to address the novel's reader anymore, because she now is shown to feel like she can address someone she actually cares about.

In this way, Stridsberg's novel combines the genres of trauma fiction and first-person narratives of sexual violence, to ultimately question the power of public testimony and witnessing often presupposed within both genres. Instead, *The Antarctica of Love* presents Inni's spectral focalization as a successful example of a traumatized woman reaching a less painful outlook of the world, even as her voice remains unheard by the public. What is implied to be healing is connecting with others, rather than performing a testimony for them.

At the end of the novel, Solveig has grown up and has a successful career in academia. Inni tells her daughter that what has finally made it easier for her to let go of the past is listening to Solveig's lectures about the origin of the universe: "the thought that we are part of the same state of perpetual motion" soothes Inni (269). (*"…tanken på att vi är en del av en och samma oändliga rörelse" [314].*)[490] *The Antarctica of Love* never settles on what kind of afterlife is in store for Inni when she no longer haunts Earth, but Inni's preferred interpretation is atheist, and influenced by the natural sciences: she wants to be a small part of the movement and change taking place within the universe.

Throughout most of Inni's telling of her story, she has expressed a firm attachment to the belief that her fate was inescapable. "Why put off the inevitable?" she asks rhetorically. "All stories end with death, and this is no exception" (108). (*"Det är meningslöst att skjuta upp det som ändå ska hända. Alla berättelser slutar med döden, också den här" [126].*) But the narrative of *The Antarctica of Love* does not end with death. On the contrary, every time the ghostly Inni has returned to narrate the death scene, it is as if the story has started over again, trapping her in yet another loop of spectral trauma limbo. When she finally manages to end the narrative is when her point of view is shown to expand beyond the temporal and narrative restrictions of her own time on Earth. The ending of the novel suggests a possible new way of thinking in which death is not necessarily the end, but only one point within a collective narrative—in which other, better futures are possible. In this way, *The Antarctica of Love* suggests a

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[489] Ramnehill, "Kritik: Kärlekens Antarktis."

[490] This portrayal can be contrasted to the loss of agency described in *Osalig ande* when Marika is about to be reborn: "I imagine one spark of my consciousness wandering around in the room while another circles around in the universe; confused, aimless. I don't want to die that way. I don't want to be erased" (159).

way out of the loneliness and hopelessness that has characterized Inni's individual story of trauma.

Concluding remarks

By paying attention to the intertextuality of *The Antarctica of Love*, this chapter has demonstrated that the novel continues Stridsberg's characteristic literary project of depicting the inner lives of publicly mythologized women, whose suffering had been previously turned into staple myths of popular culture.

Like Sandbæk and Skjeringstad note about her previous novel *Valerie*, the protagonist's dialogue with mythologies from media discourses and popular culture serve to expand the trauma story beyond the individual experience.[491] Moreover, by recognizing *The Antarctica of Love* as trauma fiction that specifically depicts the gendered power dynamics of sexual violence, the chapter called attention to how these mythologies function as strong symbols which partly override other potential memories and meanings of Inni's life.

In *The Antarctica of Love*, rape and murder stand out as defining traumatic events due to the cultural symbolism they carry, but they are presented alongside several other potentially traumatic events in the life of the protagonist. Depicting a protagonist who has lived a precarious life marked by many potentially traumatic incidents and a lack of agency, I have argued that *The Antarctica of Love* depicts Inni's ghostliness as a continuous state, beginning during her lifetime—not with rape, but with her brother's death.

The complex and contradictory narration suggests several ways in which a reader can understand how trauma works in the novel. The flashbacks to the scene of the murder resembles contemporary psychotraumatological understandings of PTSD—especially, perhaps, psychologist Chris Brewin and his colleagues' dual representation theory, according to which two kinds of memories of traumatic events exist: flashbacks that cannot be willfully accessed, and distressing memories of the events that can be deliberately recalled.[492] However, the fictional mode allows the novel to suggest that these flashbacks are shaped by more than just the event itself: they incorporate the strong visual tropes of murder and rape that saturate popular culture, in which women's sexualized corpses are often displayed.

The novel also furthers an understanding of trauma which stresses the cumulative effect of multiple traumatic events on a person's existential outlook on

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[491] Sandbæk and Skjeringstad, "Om møte mellom det litterære og kliniske i Sara Stridsbergs *Drömfakulteten—tillägg till sexualteorin*," 355, 363.

[492] Brewin et al., "A Dual Representation Theory of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder."

the world, and other people.[493] In *The Antarctica of Love*, self-blame and guilt are heavily-featured emotions, as Inni ruminates over her own failure to escape addiction. She harshly blames herself both for being unable to take care of her children, and for ending up in such a bad state that she thinks that she somehow asked to be murdered.

Inni's state of trauma is also shown to be affected strongly by how she views herself in relation to the surrounding world: in the aftermath of traumatic events, the ways in which she thinks that she is seen by the public, by her parents, and by her children affect how she thinks of herself as either alive or dead, as either an active agent in the world or a passive spectator.

In this way, *The Antarctica of Love* can be read in light of psychotraumatological findings showing that social support facilitates the recovery process.[494] Stridsberg makes use of the mode of trauma fiction to elaborate on what social support, or the lack thereof, might look like in scenarios when people who suffer from trauma are isolated from the people they care about.

The spectral narration moreover suggests that its non-linear depiction of post-traumatic temporality is not necessarily the result of internal psychological processes, but might also be due to Inni's literal entrapment in poverty, homelessness, and addiction. Inni is shown to experience her social position in the world as completely static and pre-determined: nothing ever gets better. The eternal present moment of the traumatic event might be a result of this.

Dominant fictional intertexts related to sexual violence are challenged to a much greater extent than in the two previous novels. The emphasis placed on Inni's gradual passing into ghostliness even while still alive due to poverty and addiction challenges the mythological murder mystery narrative which has dominated the main intertext of the novel: the massive media attention, debates and theories, ongoing for decades in Sweden, related to the murder of Catrine da Costa.

The flashback-like sequences of the murder scene in *The Antarctica of Love* merge a currently established symptom of PTSD with narrative and visual conventions of crime fiction, photography, and sensationalist media reporting. Stridsberg uses these intertextual references to convey the dissociative quality of PTSD flashbacks, but at the same time raises questions about the relationship between traumatic memories and cultural conventions for the visual representation of violence. The ghost's PTSD-like, involuntary haunting is shown to be mediated by other narratives—narratives that distort Inni's memory and force her to relive the traumatic rape and murder through the media and crime conventions evoked to tell her story. In this way, the novel unsettles established

[493] See: Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

[494] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 27.

modes of stories about rape and murder by questioning the kinds of focalization often reproduced in crime fiction.

Furthermore, the novel questions assumptions voiced in literary trauma theory about the similarity between bearing witness to verbal testimonies and reading trauma fiction.[495] As the previous chapter argued, *The Lovely Bones* subtly pointed out the inadequacy of its literary trauma testimony both as a deliverer of justice and as a way of creating healing social relationships between characters—but it still did not fully let go of its optimistic attachment to this practice. *The Antarctica of Love*, on the other hand, lets its protagonist speak directly to the reader about the futility of the novel's own premise: a dead woman testifying to an audience of strangers, who are used to viewing women in her social position through the objectifying scripts of crime fiction and media. What good does it do? Inni is already dead—why address a Swedish middle-class readership with the details of the murder?

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, in relation to the novel's critical reception, a fascinating tension can be discerned between two opposing readings of the novel as either a testimony by a character perceived as "other," with a reader who bears witness to an atrocity while never identifying with the victim; or as "a first-person story which invites identification, rather than distanced spectatorship."[496] I would argue that this tension is present within the novel itself, in its attempts to, on the one hand, paint Inni's life and death as both taking place outside of the reader's world, while on the other hand, still trying to make the reader identify with her.

Essentially, this corresponds to two different ways of conceptualizing trauma. First, the prominent view within the Yale Schools' intersection of literary, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist trauma studies: trauma is an experience essentially impossible to grasp or communicate, but the right ethical decision is to pay witness to the trauma of others.[497] The other view, favored by Herman, is that trauma as a result of sexual violence is common, but that traumatic experiences endured by people who are socially marginalized become invisible to society at large.[498] By including this kind of sociopolitical perspective in its rape trauma narrative, *The Antarctica of Love* develops a critique of the kinds of societies in which the points-of-view and lives of some people are considered

[495] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 8.

[496] Elam, "Recension: Kärlekens Antarktis är Stridsbergs hittills starkaste och mörkaste roman"; Eriksson, "Styckmördade kvinnan får upprättelse av Stridsberg."

[497] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.

[498] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

expendable and uninteresting—but the mystery of their deaths immensely interesting.[499]

In *Osalig ande*, the ghost's focalization and view of the living was framed as an act of defiance towards the people who abused her: she was shown to be determined to keep watching and taking note of their behavior. In *The Antarctica of Love*, listening and observing are instead portrayed as an act in which a character with very little agency is forced to partake. A horrible aspect of being a constant listener is depicted here: Inni's flashbacks to the scenes of trauma and her memories of not being supported throughout her life come flooding in without her being able to close her eyes and ears. However, watching loved ones can also be a form of positive social connection, as my readings of Rydberg's, Sebold's and Stridsberg's novels have shown—and as I will explore further in the next chapter about Carter's *I Stop Somewhere*.

By including genre elements from low fantasy ghost stories, *The Antarctica of Love* presents motherhood as a potentially liberating kind of afterlife. Inni's relationship with her children—which mainly consists of her watching them—is shown to contain an element of surprise, as well as a dimension of unknown future, which opens a small crack of hope into the trauma narrative: that change is possible and that goodness exists.

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[499] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 13–14.

6. The ghost in solidarity with living victims: TE Carter's *I Stop Somewhere* (2018)

In the works investigated in the previous chapters, the ghosts were mostly depicted as singular victims, alone in their ghosthood. Statistically, however, victims are far from alone: rape is a common crime. The focus of this chapter is the American Young Adult (YA) novel *I Stop Somewhere* (2018), by TE Carter. Published during the height of #MeToo, and depicting a 2010s setting, it centers its depiction of rape trauma around a much more collective vision than that of the other stories featured in this study.

Ellie is a protagonist who, at first glance, is very similar to Susie in *The Lovely Bones*. She, too, is a teenage resident of a suburban small town in the northeastern United States, who turns into a ghost narrator in the aftermath of rape and murder. Both novels focus on sexual violence experienced by girls with loving fathers and absent mothers, and both stories center their teenage ghost protagonists' lost opportunities of growing up to become women. They are both about the suburban home-owning class, and they both imagine suburban houses as sites of haunting.

However, they depict different moods. While *The Lovely Bones* is set at a point in time in which dominant discourses about American homeownership were still predominantly optimistic, *I Stop Somewhere* provides the antithesis of twentieth-century dreams of nuclear families, suburban development, and economic growth.

Set in the small post-industrial town Hollow Oaks after the 2008 financial crisis and the collapse of the 2000s United States housing bubble, *I Stop Somewhere*'s hauntings take place in the architectural testimony to a hopelessly failed American dream: one of the town's many abandoned houses. The tone of this novel is far from the sweetness of *The Lovely Bones*, where Sebold tried to stylistically mimic the gloss of newly developed identical family homes—while letting elements of horror seep out between the lines, hinting that there is darkness suppressed and buried underneath the too-idyllic setting. In *I Stop Somewhere*, however, horror and gloom are right at the surface level of the story. Ellie cannot remember a time in her life when she, or the town in general, had reason to have a bright outlook on life: "[t]his whole town is full of ghosts," she contends in the prologue.

Although YA novels are seldom included in overview works about rape fiction and trauma fiction, both rape and trauma are common themes in contemporary YA. This is perhaps not surprising, taking into account the fact that most American women's first experiences of rape take place before the age of twenty-five, and in almost half the cases, before the age of eighteen.[500] A significant number of YA novels depict cases of rape where the victim knows the perpetrator, which also mirrors contemporary statistics about sexual violence.[501] The social dynamics of this kind of rape are relevant to examine in relation to my study's broader aim to investigate the ways in which the traumatized subject is constructed in the four novels in relation to other, living characters. In many aspects, there is a great formal similarity between *I Stop Somewhere* and the other novels in this study, which has encouraged me to conclude the analysis of this book by looking beyond the kinds of works which, since Whitehead's influential theorization of the concept, have most often been read as trauma fiction: novels that are perceived as literary fiction and are written in a modernist or postmodernist style.

I Stop Somewhere (2018)

In the opening paragraph of Chapter One of this novel, the reader is thrown directly into a rape scene. Right away we are made aware that we see the events through the eyes of a high school girl: the narrator recognizes the victim as a freshman in her school, a year younger than herself (1). We are given the information that this scene is not the first of its kind witnessed by the narrator: "'Please,' she begs, but he doesn't stop hurting her. It never stops." A few sentences later the reader is informed that this is the seventh girl who is raped in the same location since the protagonist was herself taken to this room (1). The narrator expresses a wish to be more emotionally invested in the process of witnessing: "I wish I felt more for her. I almost wish I could feel it the way I used to. Could suffer her fear alongside her, but I can't anymore. I can't let myself feel it" (1). After witnessing so much violence, she feels numb.

Ellie, the protagonist and narrator, has already been murdered when the narrative begins. As a ghost she dwells in the abandoned house in which she was raped and murdered by her ex-boyfriend Caleb and his brother Noah—and in her invisible state she proceeds to bear witness to the systematic rapes to which he and his brother subject seven other girls. In between her accounts of the horrible rapes which keep happening on the intradiegetic level, Ellie tells the story

[500] Basile et al., *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, 25.

[501] Basile et al., *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, 21–22.

of her past life in the town Hollow Oaks. She is the daughter of parents who moved to Hollow Oaks to pursue their artistic dreams, but end up with low-paying and insecure jobs due to the economic recession. Ellie's mother leaves the family, but Ellie and her father proceed to have a loving and close relationship.

However, Ellie has no friends growing up, something which the novel implies is partly because of her father's poverty and general social isolation, and partly due to her past experiences of being bullied by her classmates. The sexualized aspect of this bullying is described as follows: "I stood in the bathroom outside my fifth-grade class and cried, because the boys thought it was funny to snap the back of my bra. The girls said I was a whore because I couldn't stop myself from growing up. [...] I was a slut. I was poor. I was dirty" (7).

The actual bullying only lasts around a year but is said to permanently alter Ellie's perception of herself. She feels defined by her schoolmates—they are "the world" which she perceives herself to reside outside or on the edges of. Like in Rydberg's and Stridsberg's novels, here, too, the protagonist's life before the murder can be understood as that of a living ghost. The space in which Ellie resided while she was alive is described with the same word used in *The Lovely Bones* to name the limbo in which Susie resides after death: "I saw [Caleb] from the periphery. From the in-between [...]" (49). As the past bullying is evoked, the novel indicates the existence of more than one potentially traumatic event in Ellie's life. In this, the novel aligns with the story structures of *Osalig ande* and *The Antarctica of Love*.

When she is romantically approached by the son of the wealthiest and most influential family in the town, Caleb Breward, she is excited. Ellie ends up falling in love with Caleb, although he treats her in an inconsistent way, sometimes being sweet to her and other times ignoring her. A mean streak in Caleb's character is discernible throughout Ellie's narrative, from the way in which he repeatedly pressures her into engaging in sexual activities with him before she wants to do so herself, to the way in which Caleb's friend group films and harasses people of low social status, including Ellie's father.

Like Susie, Ellie is a teenage girl who has disappeared. And like Susie, Ellie's spectral presence on Earth is affected by her uncertain status as living or dead, and by the ways in which her disappearance is interpreted among the living—if, and how, they choose to advocate for her. But if Susie was constructed as the ideal victim—white and middle class, a young teenager, taken away by a man she did not know—Ellie's position in the world is different.[502] She is poor, with no social support system apart from her father, and has had a romantic relationship

[502] For discussions about the cultural dynamics that tend to render the disappearances of certain people more urgent than those of others, see: Morgado, "A Loss beyond Imagining," 244, 253; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145.

with one of the rapists. Unlike Susie, she is not actively sought after and missed in the wider community—her haunting force is minimal. The police initially deem her to be a runaway, and thus do not begin to look for her body until another victim, Gretchen, reports the rape she endured by the Breward brothers and starts a visibility campaign for Ellie, demanding to know where she is (71).

Unlike the other novels in this study, the second half of *I Stop Somewhere* includes a depiction of the police investigation and the court process which follow Ellie's disappearance and some of the other victims' rape cases. The perpetrators are eventually put on trial for murder and rape.

Style, structure, and genre

Just like in the novels investigated in the previous chapters, in *I Stop Somewhere* the protagonist's narration alternates between depicting present events taking place on Earth, and remembering events that took place in the past when she was alive. The style is characterized by short sentences and repetition of key statements with slight alterations: for example, the novel repeatedly tries on different meanings of a nursery rhyme asking what girls are made of (6, 21, 29, 81, 106, 216, 231). Like *The Antarctica of Love*, the style of narrating past events shifts between being scattered and being cohesive: Ellie's feelings of terror and shock in the rape scenes is reflected in a more scattered narration than the scenes detailing other memories from Ellie's life.

The plot itself contains a large number of gruesome details about rape and other kinds of abuse. Ellie's narration of these events is often marked by anguish, and in this sense, the novel's tone resembles the mood of *The Antarctica of Love*. Occasionally, Ellie's narration becomes sarcastic in a way that evokes Marika's displays of dissent in *Osalig ande*: "[g]uards stand by [Caleb and Noah], not just to make sure they don't run, but to protect them. From being harassed. Because they deserve to be protected, I guess" (244).

In Carter's novel, the ghost is said to be free to go wherever she wants, yet she initially remains at the scene of the traumatic rape and murder. For all of "Part One," which takes up the first third of the novel, she leaves the crime scene only figuratively, to narrate events from the past. While the first half of the novel narrates these memories of past events, and Ellie's witnessing of other rapes that take place in the house where she died, a plotline following the trial of the perpetrators is introduced in the second half of the novel.

The novel is situated within the 2000s trend of stories which imagine teenage perpetrators of sexual violence who have a high standing in a small community—through wealth, popularity, or sports success. Some examples of narratives embodying this plot structure include Laurie Halse Anderson's YA novel *Speak*

(1999), American television series *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007), Jay Asher's YA novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) and the television series adaptation *13 Reasons Why* (2017–2020), Courtney Summers' YA novel *All the Rage* (2015), and Fredrik Backman's novel *Björnstad* (2016) and its Swedish television series adaptation *Björnstad* (2020). The video game *Life is Strange* (2015), which Carter has named as one of her inspirations, also belongs to this category.[503]

As Elisabeth Saxton points out, *I Stop Somewhere* alludes to *The Lovely Bones* in several ways.[504] Carter's references mostly seem aimed at placing her own narrative in opposition to that of Sebold's. For example, Carter makes a point out of Ellie's estranged mother never returning—which Susie's mother does against all odds in *The Lovely Bones*. While *The Lovely Bones* experiments with wish fulfillment, Carter opposes Sebold's preference for conventional happy endings: "[y]ou know what I wish?" Ellie tells the reader by the end of the novel. "I wish my dad called my mom after they found me and that she flew back and they fell in love again. […] That didn't happen. […] The things we wish for don't happen. This is how things really go" (293–294). This should be read as a testament to Carter's favoring of a ghost story dedicated to realism, rather than to Sebold's fairytale magic.

In contrast to *The Lovely Bones*, *I Stop Somewhere* is a clear-cut YA novel: it is categorized as such by its publisher and reviewers as well as by literary scholars.[505] The included paratexts add an important perspective to how rape trauma is represented in the published novel. The main text is framed by a dedication to readers who have experienced sexual violence, an author's note that mentions the writer's personal connection to the subject matter, a list of resources for victims of sexual and domestic violence, and a discussion guide. These types of paratexts are sometimes featured in children's and YA fiction, including in American YA acquaintance rape novels, and are important as they point to certain interpretations of both the novel and of sexual violence in the world outside of fiction.[506]

In 2018, the year following the peak of the #MeToo-movement, sexual violence as a commonplace occurrence was at the top of many people's minds. As opposed to the other novels in this study, *I Stop Somewhere* also represents other victims—living victims—of the murdered protagonist's perpetrator, although the story is still narrated in first person by Ellie.

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[503] TE Carter, "TE Carter: Top Five Works That Centre the Female Perspective," *Culturefly*, April 16, 2018.

[504] Elizabeth Saxton, "I Stop Somewhere," *School Library Journal* 64, no. 2 (2018): 98–99.

[505] Harde, "Acquaintance Rape Book Database"; "I Stop Somewhere," Macmillan Publishers, accessed December 3, 2025; Sarah Hunter, "I Stop Somewhere," *Booklist* 114, no. 9–10 (2018).

[506] Harde, "No Accident, No Mistake," 184.

Critical reception and previous research

No comprehensive academic research on this novel has yet been published, although it has been mentioned and briefly discussed in an overview article and a database. *I Stop Somewhere* is discussed in Karen Coats' article "From 'Death Be Not Proud' to Death Be Not Permanent: Shifting Attitudes Towards Death in Contemporary Young Adult Literature." Here, Coats situates *I Stop Somewhere* in what she perceives to be a contemporary trend in YA, in which death's inevitability and permanence is challenged in different ways, and more specifically, in a subsection of YA that features ghost characters, and in which, according to Coats, the deceased characters "stick around until they have achieved some level of satisfaction or redemption."[507]

I Stop Somewhere is included in the book database created as a part of Roxanne Harde's research project "'Sexuality as the Culture Defines it': Acquaintance Rape in Recent YA novels."[508] The reviews of the novel found through academic search engines are published in journals for librarians.

Many of the reviewers express ambivalence regarding the realism of the novel. It is praised for its realistic depiction of Ellie's emotions and subjectivity, reviewers drawing parallels to low self-esteem among real teenagers (Karen Coats, Peter Hollindale).[509] The realistic depiction of the social processes which make communities fail in their support of rape victims is also praised (Sarah Hunter, Elisabeth Saxton).[510] However, the novel is critiqued on the grounds that Ellie's voice as a ghost is too mature concerning her age and apparent naiveté at her time of death (Saxton), and on the grounds of the story's characterization of the brutal perpetrators, who are critiqued for not being representative of real teenage boys (Hollindale).

The quality of Carter's novel is measured against other works of YA fiction which depict rape. Mainly, it is compared to the arguably most well-known American YA rape novel, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. While one of the reviewers, Hunter, suggests that librarians should hand Carter's novel to readers who loved *Speak*, another reviewer, Saxton, deems *I Stop Somewhere* to be a weaker novel and "a non-essential purchase for libraries." A third reviewer, Coats, is of the opinion that the novel does not provide an equally complex

[507] Karen Coats, "From 'Death Be Not Proud' to Death Be Not Permanent: Shifting Attitudes Towards Death in Contemporary Young Adult Literature," *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1, 8.

[508] Harde, "Acquaintance Rape Book Database."

[509] Karen Coats, "I Stop Somewhere by TE Carter (Review)," *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 71, no. 6 (2018): 241–241; Peter Hollindale, "I Stop Somewhere," sec. 16 to 19, *The School Librarian* 66, no. 2 (2018): 130.

[510] Hunter, "I Stop Somewhere"; Saxton, "I Stop Somewhere."

examination of rape culture as another recent novel, *The Female of the Species* (2016) by Mindy McGinnis. Although *The Lovely Bones* is not a YA novel in the proper sense, Saxton also compares it to *I Stop Somewhere*, stressing that the latter is much bleaker than the former.

The bleakness and negative emotional register of *I Stop Somewhere* are also criticized. Coats finds that there are almost "no positive or even functional characters in the novel," and that most characters are "either depressed, defeated, or predatory [...]." There is not much positivity in Ellie's own musings about girlhood either, Coats notes, "couched as they are in her sense of disappointment at her lot both before and after her brutal rape and murder."[511] Hollindale mentions the novel's "angry" tone twice, both times in connection to the novel's apparent appeal to a readership of girls, not boys. He ends his review by stating that it is "a pity that this angry book will be mainly read by girls. This is a harrowing cautionary tale for teenagers of either sex."[512] As these reviews demonstrate, the critical reception evaluated *I Stop Somewhere* mainly on the basis of the adult reviewers' conception of its suitability for young readers.

Many researchers are in general agreement about the fact that YA differs from other literature in that YA novels are written by adults primarily—but not necessarily only—for young people, about the experiences of young people.[513] Modern YA is usually characterized by an ambition to write with, rather than about, teenagers, which can take various forms.[514] This ambition clashes with long-established didactic expectations within the reception, according to which YA and children's literature should also support, guide, and shape younger generations.[515] The negotiation of power between young people and adults is often called attention to as a central theme in YA.[516]

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[511] Coats, "I Stop Somewhere by TE Carter (Review)."

[512] Hollindale, "I Stop Somewhere."

[513] See, for example: Antero Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres* (Brill, 2013), 5; Vilma-Irén Mihály, "Trends in Young Adult Literature. A Glance at American and British Fantasy with an Eye on the Transylvanian Variant," *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Philologica* 14, no. 1 (2022): 59; Deborah Lindsay Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, The Literary Agenda (OUP Oxford, 2023), 2–3.

[514] Eva Söderberg, "Ungdomsromanen sedd genom en ungdomsroman," in *Samtida svensk ungdomslitteratur: analyser*, ed. Åsa Warnqvist, Skrifter utgivna av Svenska barnboksinstitutet, no. 140 (Studentlitteratur, 2017), 23–24.

[515] See, for example: Malin Alkestrand, *Magiska möjligheter: Harry Potter, Artemis Fowl och Cirkeln i skolans värdegrundsarbete* (Makadam Förlag, 2021), 69; Clémentine Beauvais, *Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 3; Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 3.

[516] See: Malin Alkestrand, *Mothers and Murderers: Adults' Oppression of Children and Adolescents in Young Adult Dystopian Literature*, Studies Published by the Swedish Institute for Children's Books 155 (Makadam, 2021); Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and*

YA may play significant roles in adult society due to several factors—two of them being the increasing adult readership of YA and the many film and television adaptations of YA works.[517] Moreover, the negotiation of power between young people and adults often attributed to YA is also played out in political discussions about what kinds of stories teenagers should have access to. An example of this is the current American political movement demanding the removal of novels depicting sex and sexual violence from school libraries.[518]

The international field of YA research is large, and the works of fiction that make use of the YA genre are very diverse, especially if we look beyond the United States. Stories about rape and its emotional aftermath from the victim's perspective have been extensively published within American YA, and in the following, I will summarize the prominent views of the smaller pool of researchers investigating American YA narratives about rape from the 2000s. [519]

Since the turn of the millennium, the theme of rape in American YA fiction has been the subject of substantial research, Halse Anderson's *Speak* being among the most common objects of study.[520] In *Speak*, the teenage protagonist is raped at a party, after which she calls the police but never tells anyone why. The tension of the novel is derived by the protagonist's inability to verbalize what has happened to her, before finally telling one of her teachers about the rape at the end of the novel.

The fact that many subsequent American YA novels about rape also include a similar dynamic of a protagonist whose silence is finally broken by the end of the narrative has been noted in the previous research. Aiyana Altrows calls the narrative structure in which a raped YA protagonist moves from muteness to disclosure of the traumatic event "the silent victim script." In this script

> the victim is unable to disclose her rape and spends the novel agonizing over this, while contending with punishments inflicted by those who do not (and cannot) understand that her behaviour is a result of trauma rather than so-called ordinary teenage girl angst. When she finally confesses that the rape occurred, the

Repression in Adolescent Literature (University of Iowa Press, 2000); Williams, *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, 3.

[517] Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature*, 3.

[518] "Top 10 Most Challenged Books of 2024," American Library Association, accessed April 28, 2025.

[519] Roxanne Harde, "Acquaintance Rape Book Database," with Kelly Keus et al., University of Alberta, Augustana Campus, accessed October 6, 2023.

[520] See: Arsto N. Ahmed and Rebwar Z. Mohammed, "Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*: The Effects of Rape Trauma and the Construction of the Recovery Narrative," *Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2020): 81–87; Roxanne Harde, "Girls and Rape Culture," *Girlhood Studies* 14, no. 1 (2021): vii–xi; Angela E. Hubler, "It Is Not Enough to Speak: Toward a Coalitional Consciousness in the Young Adult Rape Novel," *Children's Literature* 45, no. 1 (2017): 114–137; Chris McGee, "Why Won't Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? Speak and the Confessional Voice," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2009): 172–87.

> narrative concludes quickly, leaving the victim's psychological struggle to be wholly representative of the rape story.[521]

The frequency with which this script appears in YA rape fiction indicates a trend in the genre, she suggests, which repeatedly produces narratives that represent rape, and rape trauma, as individual, pathological problems, which are to be managed on an individual basis—rather than presenting rape as an act of violence which can be viewed as a part of the larger, structural problem of misogyny. The contradiction within the novels between an inconsistent use of feminist rhetoric and neoliberal individualism is, Altrows argues, typical of the postfeminist sentiments of forced optimism and regulated anger permeating popular culture from the 1990s onwards.[522]

Other researchers also note a tendency among many American YA authors to disengage from feminism—in Angela Hubler's words, most YA rape novels "eschew a theoretical explanation of rape along with any remedy for it."[523] Both Altrows and Hubler suggest that YA rape plots that position trauma as the main conflict are incapable of focusing on the reasons for rape, and that the plots therefore indirectly place the blame on the victim.[524]

A different picture emerges from the results of Roxanne Harde's research about the theme of acquaintance rape in YA fiction. Harde notes that YA novels about acquaintance rape do not necessarily promote dominant discourses about sexuality, but "engage" with them: many works consider "the ways in which [dominant discourses of sexuality construct] teenagers who rape and a society that rarely holds them accountable." The plots, Harde suggests, "offer readers alternate discourses about culpability and shame, detail options for survivors, and give readers access to voices too often silenced, helping them toward understanding the social codes that lead to and the circumstances that arise from acquaintance rape."[525] Through an assembled database of around a hundred YA rape novels, Harde and her research group demonstrate that acquaintance rape is a common theme in contemporary American YA.

While the reviews of *I Stop Somewhere* outlined above compare the novel to well-known examples of YA fiction about rape, it is also possible to read it as a

[521] Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger," 2–3.

[522] Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger," 4. Here, Altrows' idea of the postfeminist rape narrative as a mode which favors the passivity of victims instead of anger echoes Sarah Whitney's characterization of *The Lovely Bones*. Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 351, 359.

[523] Hubler, "It Is Not Enough to Speak," 116, 121.

[524] Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger," 3; Hubler, "It Is Not Enough to Speak," 116, 125.

[525] Harde, "No Accident, No Mistake," 172.

part of a body of YA works that depict mental illness.[526] In the following, I will combine these approaches and investigate the novel's specific pattern of rape trauma and haunting alongside the other novels in this study.

Analysis

I Stop Somewhere as a narrative of rape trauma

As detailed above, previous readings of *I Stop Somewhere* have analyzed its themes mainly in respect to the novel's shared traits with other YA novels. This chapter argues that the novel also, due to its form and content, should be read as trauma fiction. Like *The Antarctica of Love*, and in accordance with some of Whitehead's identified characteristics of fictional trauma narration—repetition, omission and discrepancies—Ellie's narrative returns to her memories of the rape and murder over and over again, altering which details of the event are included and excluded.[527]

The novel's structure, where repeated narration of rape connotes both trauma flashbacks and haunting, departs from a tendency of many American YA acquaintance rape novels, in which, according to Roxanne Harde, the rape itself tends to take up very little space. In these novels, according to Harde, a majority of the plot focuses on the aftermath: "coping with the trauma, learning how to live with a drastically changed worldview, rebuilding the ability to trust, and testing the connections with family and friends [...]."[528]

Indeed, Carter's ghost story tells a story of the aftermath of rape. But the combined narration of Ellie's intrusive traumatic memories of rape and the literal cases of rape she also bears witness to as a ghost form a trauma narrative in which the violence of rape is acutely present, even as the literal event is over for Ellie. In this, *I Stop Somewhere* also departs from a psychoanalytical view of trauma, according to which the event is ungraspable or impossible to remember. Instead, it can be read as the kind of realist trauma fiction identified by Joshua

[526] An example of reading YA novels about girls suffering from the aftermath of rape with specific attention paid to trauma can be found in Kia Jane Richmond's book *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature* (2018), in which Richmond reads YA novels about teenage girls suffering following rapes alongside YA novels about young war veterans, and views both these plotlines as examples of how contemporary YA fiction depicts the psychiatric diagnosis of PTSD. Kia Jane Richmond, *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Exploring Real Struggles Through Fictional Characters* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018), 128.

[527] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 155; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 84. See also Field's description of common narrative techniques in American rape fiction of the "long 1990s." Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 150.

[528] Harde, "No Accident, No Mistake," 172.

Pederson that depicts traumatic events in detail, instead of purposefully omitting them.[529]

Carter's novel makes a distinction between fictional and legal narrative conventions for truthfully representing traumatic events. At one point, Ellie self-consciously comments:

> You get to relive these moments on a loop. I know there are probably details that contradict each other. Ones that maybe came from another part of the night or from pieces of things acquired in my life. I've moved them in where they don't fit to fill out the story. But I know what happened. I know it because it plays in my mind for every second I don't focus on something else (114).

Here, the novel points out that even the more linear parts of the narrative are constructed from jumbled sensory impressions that have been rearranged in order for Ellie's memory to become comprehensive to readers—a statement which evokes narratologist David Herman's insight that communicating memories usually demands that we shape them into different kinds of narratives.[530] The overwhelming terror makes it harder to remember details and the order of events, but the fundamentals of what happened are said to be firmly lodged within Ellie's mind.

In a plot that also includes the court process that ensues when living rape victims come forward, Ellie's statement becomes especially relevant. As she denies that her trauma narrative should account for the events in exactly the same order as they happened, Carter's version of trauma fiction provides her reader with an alternative to the impossible narrative expectations placed on living victims who go through a judicial process: that the memory of rape must be directly accounted for in a detailed narrative, the truthfulness of which is to be scrutinized by police officers, judges, juries, and the general public.[531]

The ghost narrator in *I Stop Somewhere* serves an important function in the novel's conceptualization of rape trauma. Where *The Antarctica of Love* used the ghost to depict Inni's pain as a response to multiple traumatic events and continuously traumatizing life circumstances, *I Stop Somewhere* uses the ghost to depict how a victim's awareness of a wider context of violence against girls and women affects her own, individual experience of rape trauma.

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[529] Pederson, "Speak, Trauma," 338–339.

[530] Herman, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, 3.

[531] In discussions about legal processes, the term "secondary victimization" has often been used to refer to the negative effects of a victim of sexual violence being forced to reexperience the event again due to the demand that she give a detailed account of what happened during the trial. Rebecca Campbell and Sheela Raja, "Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims: Insights From Mental Health Professionals Who Treat Survivors of Violence," *Violence and Victims* 14, no. 3 (1999): 149.

Ellie's flashbacks are intermingled with other scenes that she bears witness to as a ghost. While her own memories of rape are played on repeat, the novel demonstrates how similar rapes are reenacted in the physical world, as the Breward brothers continue to assault other girls: "[t]here have been seven girls since the night I came here," Ellie states in the opening chapter (1). In this way, the novel uses supernatural focalization to frame rape as an atrocity committed against many teenage girls simultaneously and repeatedly, instead of as a singular, personal event.

The collective, literally repetitive aspect of these scenes is shown to be one of the most painful aspects of Ellie's ghostly existence. In the beginning of the novel, her narration is marked by a forceful unwillingness to look at and hear the sounds of what is happening:

> Keep looking at the gum.
>
> I don't want to look up. I don't want my eyes to travel to the top of her shoes, to her blue-and-white socks, up her pale legs. I don't want to see it. I've seen it so many times now.
>
> […] Don't want to remember how his hands felt. […] The way he touched me. The same way he's touching her. That invasion of something you don't know how to hold on to. I force myself to forget those things (2).

Ellie's witnessing of the other girls' suffering is described as almost unbearable triggers, resulting in flashes of memories of how she herself was hurt, and in subsequent attempts to suppress these memories. Thus, she is shown to try to distract herself from the scene and digresses into narrating other things: memories, thoughts, things she sees in the room, like the bubblegum stuck to the girl's shoe.

However, the girls' cries resemble the kinds of intrusive, distressing memories and fear-based reexperiencing listed as parts of the current PTSD diagnosis in the *DSM-5*.[532] They force Ellie to think about her own memories of rape, even though she desperately wants to avoid doing so. The same dynamic is depicted again in a later scene: "[a]s always, I close my eyes, but it's never enough. The sound gets through. The memories get through" (40). The novel's use of ghostly focalization serves as a means for Carter's narrative to explore an extreme form of intrusive thought about the traumatic event that is simultaneously a memory for Ellie and an ongoing reality for other girls. In this way, the novel explores how rape trauma is experienced under the kinds of circumstances that #MeToo gave rise to: when experiences of sexual violence were efficiently conceptualized as collective, rather than individual disasters.[533]

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[532] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 271–74.

[533] Mendes and Ringrose, "Digital Feminist Activism," 49.

Carter alludes to the important fact that even if Ellie is dead, and the terrible rape she herself suffered is over, for her, the traumatic event is not truly over until the perpetrators stop repeating it systematically with other victims. When the assaults on the other girls stop, Ellie finally feels ready to return home to her father: "[n]ow that Caleb and Noah are done with me, with all the girls, with what happened in that place, I go home. It's time" (91). When they stop, this brings relief, and Ellie is no longer tied to the ongoing horror in the building. In this way, the novel implies that some kind of healing can begin when the traumatic event is no longer ongoing.

Many contemporary psychotherapies for PTSD have a goal of reorganizing the victim's memory functions and encourage them to create a coherent trauma narrative.[534] *I Stop Somewhere* shows a similar development, but underscores that this is a hard task, which requires that some kind of safety has been established.[535] With the events finally in the past, Ellie is shown to begin to remember, with self-compassion, her *own* experience of rape. Hints and sudden details of this horrible violence have come up earlier in Ellie's narrative, but now, for the first time, she does not try to suppress them but narrates a longer, more complete version of the event:

> At first, I tried to be good. I heard those voices in my mind. *Ellie, be agreeable.* [...]
>
> It was just motion. Hands. Arms and mouths. Places on my body that I thought of when it was quiet. [...] But they were secret places. And now they weren't. All these places were opened and discovered and colonized.
>
> They were an army of monsters, giant claws and teeth. There was no kindness in their touch or their words or their lips on mine (105).

This narration is still not a chronological account for what exactly happened, and in what order. Instead, it details Ellie's memory of her own thought process during the rape, as well as her perception of the violence: as "just motion," "hands," "giant claws and teeth." The memory of physical transgression is underlined, as is the memory of how the perpetrators displayed no signs of kindness.[536] Ellie finally being able to arrange her traumatic experience into a narrative coincides with an important turning point in the novel: she stops blaming herself for what happened, and starts thinking of herself as a person deserving of respect:

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[534] Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD," 8.

[535] See: Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 155.

[536] Compared to the rape scene in *The Lovely Bones* ("a powerful knowledge took hold. He had done this thing to me and I had lived" [14]), Carter's narrative challenges the kind of neat separation between rape and murder which is displayed in Sebold's novel. As Ellie's narration of rape demonstrates, the experience is marked by a loss of control, and of brutal violence that she might have survived, but did not. The messy borders between violent rape and murder are underlined—Ellie is killed accidentally, as a result of the violence of the rape.

> Brutality. That's what it was. A control that extended beyond me, beyond us, beyond this place. It filled the room that night, and I could have cried or begged or fought, but nothing could dispel it. It was something in us, something in the way we were, the way we all are. I was a sacrifice, a testament to it, but I could have been anyone (106).

This quote is both a testament to how Ellie absolves herself of the blame she has previously been shown to place on herself, and an example of a new belief system—to speak in Herman's terms—in which a new, horrible side of the world has been revealed.[537] In *I Stop Somewhere*, I would argue, these two things are linked, and happen as a direct result of Ellie bearing witness to the other rapes in the beginning of the novel. In this way, the novel's positioning of the ghost as witness to other instances of violence provides an opening towards healing for the protagonist, in a scenario where trauma therapy is unavailable.

Outside of fiction, victims of rape are often discredited, and face the risk of their stories not being believed.[538] This fact is indirectly addressed in the beginning of the book, when the author dedicates the story to a range of girls outside of the fictional world of the novel:

> To the girls who survive,
> To the girls who are found too late,
> To the girls who are never found…
> You are beautiful.
> You are loved.
> You are **believed** (Carter 2018, I, emphasis in text).

Before the story even begins, we are encouraged to read it as a story centering the practice of believing rape victims. The dedication encourages victims to feel that they are supported by the author, even though they do not know each other in person.

The story about Ellie's pain and loneliness is thus put into a frame of authorial sympathy instead of having to stand completely alone: Carter shows that she wants to be on Ellie's side as well as advocate for the rights of girls and women who suffer sexual abuse. An important part of Ellie's healing is shown to happen when she reevaluates her ghostly position as a focalizer as having an ethical purpose similar to that expressed in the author's dedication: to believe and care for other victims. This is in line with many contemporary trauma therapies, which stress the importance of changing the threatening meanings one applies to the

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[537] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

[538] Leigh Gilmore, "Introduction," in *Tainted Witness* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

traumatic event (as well as trauma-generated beliefs about self and others) into other meanings.[539]

When Ellie returns to the crime scene after having finally narrated her memories of rape, this is no longer framed as an intrusive flashback, but as a deliberate ethical act: she returns because "someone should. Because somebody should watch over where I am. Someone should remember me" (104). At this point in the plot, Ellie's body has not yet been found, and when she states that someone "should remember me," it is in line with how bearing witness to atrocities befallen by others is often emphasized as an ethical obligation in psychoanalytically influenced trauma theory, poststructurally influenced ideas about spectrality, as well as the genre of American rape novels initially established in the 1970s.[540]

However, I would argue that in Carter's novel, the ghost's focalization presents an alternative point-of-view from the ones implied by cultural trauma theory's idea of witnessing, as well as Derridaean hauntology, where the suffering of others is viewed through the gaze of someone who is, at least in that situation, an outsider, a non-victim, or even, in the context of therapy, inhabits the role of an expert. In Carter's novel, it is instead the ghost who bears witness to the traumatic events suffered by the living, including her own past self.

Ellie is a completely lonely victim—for a long time, nobody except herself and the perpetrators knows what happened to her—which was also the case for the protagonists in *The Lovely Bones* and in *The Antarctica of Love*. However, when Ellie decides to haunt the abandoned house to "watch over" herself, to remember the traumatic event with increasing empathy with her own past self, *I Stop Somewhere*, to a greater extent than the other novels, imagines the possibility for a victim to grant herself spectral agency through the act of observation and self-acknowledgement. In this, the novel presents an alternative to the model of speaking and being heard as the means of achieving agency, healing, and partaking in feminist anti-rape politics: listening and watching.[541]

Even if few living people care about what happened to her, as a ghost Ellie is eventually able to believe and care for herself. She states that "[w]hether or not anyone likes me—whether or not I like me—I don't want to blame myself anymore. [...] I did exist. I *do* exist. [...] I was real then, too. Even when nobody noticed" (107). In this way, *I Stop Somewhere* introduces the idea that girls who are made invisible—living, as well as dead—may serve as their own witnesses,

[539] Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD."

[540] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 27, 51; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*; Field, *Writing the Survivor,* 108; Foley, *Haunting Modernisms*, 15; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 95.

[541] See: Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger in Young Adult Rape Fiction"; Hubler, "It Is Not Enough to Speak"; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 24; Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 4.

encouraging victims to trust their own memories of the experience, even as other people may distrust it.[542]

Acquiring painful knowledge

In *I Stop Somewhere*, spectral focalization is used to explore how experiences of rape trauma are shaped by more than the rape itself. Throughout the novel, Ellie remembers the events leading up to her death, but as a ghost she also sees and hears things she was not aware of when she was alive. In this section, I argue that in Carter's novel, new information about what the perpetrators have done to others, as well as new insight into the perpetrators' motives and thought process, is presented as potentially traumatic.

As Ellie returns to memories of other events from her life leading up to the rape and murder, and tries to grapple with what happened, how it could happen, and how it relates to what she thought she knew about her ex-boyfriend Caleb, love, sex and girlhood, the narrative of her life and death evolves and changes. An important function of this changing narrative is, I argue, to reflect the protagonist's gradually developing understanding of what happened to her. The development of her understanding comes through noticing how the community reacts to her disappearance, through witnessing other girls go through the same thing that she did, and finally, through learning more about the perpetrators' motives during the police investigation and trial.

While in the previous section, I showed how this new knowledge was implied to lead to healing and some amount of empowerment; for example, through the notion that it can result in developing self-compassion, *I Stop Somewhere*'s use of the ghost protagonist's extended focalization also shows Ellie acquiring painful knowledge. As they begin, the police investigation and court proceedings weaken Ellie's narrative control over the novel's plot. Simultaneously to the reader, Ellie now finds out new information about the course of events from other victims, witnesses, and from the legal team of the perpetrators.

As the press tries to get statements from the Breward family, Ellie reflects that the "words they're saying should not be in my vocabulary. Murder. Sexual assault. Premeditation. That's the worst one. Premeditation. Planning. Deliberate." A term used in court introduces a whole new painful narrative about Ellie's past relationship with Caleb: "[e]very conversation. Every afternoon. Every time he kissed me. Which ones were true? Which ones were deliberate? Which were part of the premeditation?" (244).

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[542] This counteracts Dori Laub's insistence on the complete necessity of another person serving as a witness to trauma in order for the traumatized subject to comprehend it. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 58.

Moreover, new, terrible information about Caleb also emerges. While listening to a conversation between Caleb and his lawyer, Ellie finds out that he raped another girl, Kailey Howe, during the same time period during which Ellie and Caleb were involved in a romantic relationship. Trying to grapple with this fact, Ellie reflects: "[t]his whole time, even after what happened, I still held on to hope. This belief that somehow Caleb was two people. That I'd loved him and something in him had gone wrong between that first time we'd met and the last time we were together. [...] All that is gone now. [...] This was a part of him the whole time" (112–113).

As Mieke Bal notes, the word "rape" connotes a story with several agents, who may experience the event completely differently—whether an event is interpreted as rape or just sex is dependent on whose point-of-view is favored.[543] Through the scene in which Ellie is introduced to the words used in a legal context to describe Caleb's role in what happened, we can consider the different possible points-of-view from which the victim herself may come to understand a sexually violent event. The introduction of new words is shown to force Ellie to re-focalize the story of her relationship with Caleb, and this complete reorientation of a narrative of love into a narrative of deliberate, and potentially planned causing of pain, is shown to be almost unbearable. In this way, ghost focalization is used to demonstrate how trauma can be made worse when a previous narrative is reframed.

The new information taints Ellie's previous memories of her time with Caleb, memories which used to consist of a narrative of developing love. Ellie states that it is "hard to remember him. It's hard to isolate those feelings, to recall him in those days. Caleb before. All my memories of him come through the screen of something else. I know I felt things about him then." Now that she knows "what came after," she "can't remember loving him without knowing what he did, and that makes me hate myself" (122). The difficulty of incorporating new information about a loved one's violence against oneself and others is, I want to argue, one of the main features of *I Stop Somewhere*'s understanding of trauma specifically related to acquaintance rape. It expands Herman's understanding of a traumatic event as a loss of "control, connection, and meaning," and shows how this can also happen long after the event itself, as new information is revealed.[544]

Another form of painful knowledge depicted in Carter's novel is Ellie's awareness of her own resemblance to other victims. In the beginning, when the invisible Ellie bears witness to the other rapes, the novel portrays an emotion which is currently not a part of the PTSD diagnosis, but which has been

[543] Bal, *Narratology*, 160.

[544] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

connected to experiences of PTSD symptoms: disgust.[545] In the following, I argue that disgust, shame, and guilt—three common emotional reactions to sexual violence—are depicted in the novel as playing decisive roles in how victims choose to interpret their own position in relation to other victims. This choice is, in turn, portrayed as effecting characters' overall experience of rape trauma.

In the beginning of the novel, forced to listen to the cries of the other girls, Ellie thinks: "*[s]hut up*" (4, emphasis in novel). In a later rape scene, with another victim, the hostile aspect of Ellie's focalization returns again: as the victim, Gretchen, refuses to cry, Ellie notes that under other circumstances, she would have admired her and wanted to be her friend, but now she hates her instead. "I hate her, because I should have been strong, too" (30). These hostile reactions are implied to be the result of the unbearability of the situation: "[t]here has to be a limit to how many times I can hear the word *no*," Ellie states (5, emphasis in novel). Here, in the beginning of the novel, the painful reality of rape is shown to result in Ellie's forceful need to place distance between the violent event and herself.

Disgust is an emotional response that has been shown to commonly occur in relation to sexual but also to moral phenomena (e.g., norm violations).[546] Psychological research has shown that disgust affects processes of social rejection and avoidance of others. Based on a review of the current research, the psychologists John Terrizzi and Natalie Shook suggest that the influence of disgust on people's behavior is indicative of social conservatism. This emotion seems to often cause an "in-group/out-group bias," which encourages prejudice and avoidance of the people considered to belong to the out-group. Moreover, shame has been conceptualized as disgust that is directed towards the self—and there is also some preliminary evidence of an association between these two emotions.[547]

When Carter's novel depicts Ellie's relationship to the other victims, it is first portrayed as mediated by disgust, which causes Ellie to want to avoid them. However, a major quality of the ghost narrator is reflexiveness. Ellie's position as a ghost stuck in limbo leads her to think back on other events from her life, and she is shown to self-critically analyze previous instances in her life when she participated in the forming of "in-group/out-group biases" and the rejection of people she considered disgusting.

For example, we get to know that during her relationship with Caleb, she participated in his friend group's cruel and repeated harassment and filming of strangers who they perceive as inferior due to poverty and racialization. "I should have said something then," the ghost Ellie states with regret. "Should've pointed it out that day, but I thought I was part of them. I was happy to be part

[545] Hathaway et al., "PTSD Symptoms and Dominant Emotional Response to a Traumatic Event."
[546] Terrizzi and Shook, "On the Origin of Shame"; Tybur et al., "Microbes, Mating, and Morality," 110.
[547] Terrizzi and Shook, "On the Origin of Shame," 3–4.

of an us, and so I kept my mouth shut" (67). As a ghost analyzing the situation in hindsight, Ellie shows remorse and tries to understand why she went along with the harassment. Her explanation is the teenagers' inability or unwillingness to conceive of the suffering of others as real: "[i]t's easy not to feel anything because it's not you. It's not your experience, and sure, it was mean, but the fiction of others is just that—it's fiction" (66).

These scenes demonstrate how the sexual violence suffered by Ellie takes place in a social setting in which teenagers partake in several culturally linked practices of dehumanization: misogyny, racism, and the hatred of poor people. In line with Peeren's suggestion that "one may be the ghost one moment and ghosted or haunted the next—or both at the same time," I want to suggest that as a result of the painful reevaluation of past events that Ellie is forced to go through, *I Stop Somewhere* depicts its protagonist's posthumous process of coming to an elementary intersectional feminist understanding, according to which misogyny is only one out of several different practices of social division aimed to consolidate power in one group by dehumanizing those with less power.[548]

As Ellie is poor, her position in this group is ambivalent—a fact which Ellie is forced to confront when her own father becomes the target of the group's filming (68–69). After having narrated it to the reader, Elli's conclusion is saturated by intense guilt and shame: "[m]aybe it's better I'm gone" (70). Here, like in Rydberg's *Osalig ande*, shame is depicted in Sara Ahmed's sense—as the desire to turn away from oneself, the most extreme case of which is a wish to die.[549] But *I Stop Somewhere* also depicts Ellie's mixture of shame and guilt in accordance with the broad psychological consensus that both these emotions involve self-reflection and evaluation.[550] Her spectral recollections of these scenes are characterized by critical reflection and remorse.

Ellie is shown to realize that despite her participation in the rituals of Caleb's friend group, the logic of these rituals can just as easily compromise her own position as someone who is considered a valuable person. And indeed, the novel indicates that this has been the case: only "certain kinds of girls" are brought to

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[548] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 27. I use Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's general definition of intersectionality, which is "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves." Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Polity Press, 2016), 11.

[549] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.

[550] Terrizzi and Shook, "On the Origin of Shame."

the abandoned building and raped. Others, like the character Gina Lynn—whose whiteness and wealth are repeatedly implied, along with her dominant in-group position—are not (11).

While in the beginning of the novel, seeing other girls suffer in ways similar to how she suffered makes Ellie feel disgust and a desire to place distance between them and herself, her feelings are shown to change during the novel. By remaining in the abandoned building as a witness, instead of acting on her impulse of disgust and leaving, Ellie is shown to work through her feelings of shame and guilt, finally arriving at the conclusion, equally painful as freeing, that she and the other girls belong to the same out-group of dehumanized teenage girls. Later, Ellie muses:

> I found blame in me, because I had to make sense of it all. I had to have a reason, because a reason was the closest thing there was to being special. A reason, even if it was blame, was something I owned, and ownership was better than just being.
>
> Being anyone. Being a girl was all that landed me here. Having all the parts they wanted, but being nothing more than that (106).

The above quote marks a shift in perspective on the behalf of the narrator. Her reasoning for why she was raped shifts from self-blame to an analysis promoted by many feminists: one which explains the rape by the dehumanizing of girls within a rape culture, rather than by any fault within herself. These reflections lead Ellie to finally arrive at the statement that she did not deserve what happened, and that she does not want to blame herself anymore (107).

I Stop Somewhere's vision of shared victimhood ultimately suggests that a victim's compassion for herself and compassion for other victims cannot be fully separated, but are intrinsically linked: "I saw myself in the other girls' eyes," Ellie finally states about the rape scenes she witnessed (212). Identification is ultimately shown to provide some kind of relief in the complete absence of any kind of therapy or direct, supportive social interactions. Thus, compared to all the other works of fiction examined in this study, Carter envisions a much more collective understanding of the process of suffering and healing from trauma. In the setting of *I Stop Somewhere*, recognizing the similarity between one's own experience and that of other abused people is pictured as a psychological process of trauma processing, but is also framed as essential to developing a feminist analysis of rape as a collective problem.

Gina Lynn, who becomes Caleb's new girlfriend after Ellie's death, is, interestingly enough, shown to go through a similar process as she learns of the allegations of murder and rape placed against him. In contrast to Marika's mother in *Osalig ande*, who closed herself off to the painful possibility of having to reevaluate what she knew about her husband, Gina Lynn is shown to eventually believe

that Caleb is guilty. Coming into this belief is depicted as a painful ordeal, characterized by a mixture of disgust and fear:

> "I can't stand the thought of him touching me." Gina Lynn still doesn't cry. She doesn't have her purse with her and she can't cry; her mascara will run. "I'm so afraid he'll get out. Every night, I want to be sick. I can't stop wondering. What happened that night? I let him in. I kissed him. He was in my bed. Was she…?" (241)

Here, disgust is shown to be contagious: it spreads between the victim and girlfriend of the same boy. Gina Lynn, who previously, through the filming and harassment, was shown to carefully distance herself from people she deemed disgusting, suddenly finds herself at the center of horrific events that she had previously thought affected others, but never herself. Furthermore, the shame and guilt involved in this process of belief are indicated by her statement to a police officer: "[w]hat can I say? I feel guilty because I slept with a guy the same night he raped and murdered his ex-girlfriend? Poor me for feeling dirty?" (250)

Like Ellie, Gina Lynn's perception of the world and of herself is shown to be altered by learning new facts about Caleb's abuse. By depicting Gina Lynn as going through a similar development arc as Ellie, Carter's novel imagines solidarity between girls in very different social positions—living and dead, victims of rape and girls dating rapists—to be possible. It rises from accepting the vulnerability of others, and recognizing the same vulnerability within oneself.

Challenging previous narratives of death, insanity, and teenage girlhood

In the following, I argue that Carter uses the ghost as a way of granting her teenage protagonist feminist authority as a narrator. Ellie's position as a ghost is used to critique mythologies that may negatively affect teenage girls suffering from trauma after experiencing sexual violence. Intertextual references are used in *I Stop Somewhere* to evoke certain literary and artistic narratives about death, and problematize how they inform people's ways of thinking about violence against girls and women.

For example, the ways in which Hollow Oaks is constructed through media narratives as an exceptional, evil place are compared by Ellie to how the event of murder is framed in the crime genre. She visualizes how people "all over the country sit in their homes and imagine Hollow Oaks. They talk about the kind of place it is. The kind of people who live here. The kinds of secrets we must all have." Ellie's hometown, the reader is told, has become a site onto which people

project the conventional narrative structure of crime fiction. Indeed, the front of the police station now looks “like a studio set” to Ellie (207).

Another example is how in *I Stop Somewhere*, the monstrous, exceptional perpetrator—an isolated, weird older man—from *The Lovely Bones* is discarded in favor of the acquaintance rape narrative. This positioning in contrast to Sebold’s narrative is discernible in Ellie’s comment that the Breward brothers “don’t look like monsters. […] They look like a sitcom” (84), and by the fact that Carter also inserts a similar character to Mr. Harvey in her story, mentioned by Ellie only in passing. All the kids on her street have stories about Tom, a neighbor who does not socialize much. This is a character which resembles the murderer in *The Lovely Bones*, but Ellie goes on to state that it “was easy to make him something he wasn’t, but in the end, Tom was just an old guy who was too tired to cut his lawn.” After this, the story moves on and leaves the old man be (169). Like Inni’s narration in *The Antarctica of Love*, Ellie’s position as a ghost narrator is used as a correction of the kinds of crime narratives that construct murder as an event that creates an aesthetic sense of mystery, monstrosity, and exceptionality.

Moreover, Inni’s spectral position challenges previous cultural ideas of how and why teenage girls disappear or die. Initially, Ellie’s disappearance is not taken seriously as a possible case of murder—instead, she is deemed to be a runaway, and the police neglect to look for her. As Esther Peeren notes, people who go missing have to be perceived in a certain way in order to garner the sympathy and attention that is needed for them to “live on, as missing,” in the public sphere.[551]

Instead of being perceived in her community as the kind of innocent “ideal citizen” who is thought to have been taken away by an unknown person, through no fault of her own, Ellie, who is poor and known to have previously dated Caleb, is neglected—in line with Peeren’s notion that people who are, for example, lower-class or whose innocence is questioned, are forgotten more quickly—which pre-empts their “living on” as ghosts in their communities. Peeren suggests that those who are thought to have “merely” run away are excluded from the urgent category of missing persons—which is exactly what is shown to happen to Ellie.[552] The assumed narrative, that Ellie is just a troubled teenage girl who ran away due to being dumped by Caleb, is only challenged when Gretchen starts her campaign, demanding to know where Ellie is. Only through the actions of a living girl is Ellie’s disappearance noticed as an event that demands some kind of public response.

[551] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145.

[552] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 145–146.

However, when the police finally start looking for Ellie, the novel alerts the reader to the possibility of fictional conventions about dead girls leaking into the assumptions of professionals, leading them to the wrong conclusions:

> They started searching for me by the river. It's like an unspoken assumption that girls who disappear end up in the river, I guess. Some kind of Ophelia complex. I didn't sing myself a lullaby and fall from a branch. It wasn't romantic. I was torn apart and thrown in the ground, wrapped in plastic. They don't paint pictures of girls in tarps, though, so maybe people can't shake that idea. A girl floating peacefully to her death in a wreath of flowers. Maybe we're all Victorian paintings or living poems (216).

Alluding to Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais' famous painting of a drowning Ophelia, a character from William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, covered in flowers, the novel joins the existing feminist critique of the artistic tradition of romanticizing female corpses.[553] It also emphasizes its own affiliation with a category of murder narratives (exemplified in this study by *The Lovely Bones* and *The Antarctica of Love*), rather than suicide narratives (exemplified by *Osalig ande*).

Feminist literary scholar Elaine Showalter notes that the iconography of Ophelia can be traced in art as well as psychiatry, and argues that in these representations, an assumed bond between adolescent female insanity and sexuality is detectable.[554] As Showalter notes:

> superintendents of Victorian lunatic asylums were also enthusiasts of Shakespeare, who turned to his dramas for models of mental aberration that could be applied to their clinical practice. The case study of Ophelia was one that seemed particularly useful as an account of hysteria or mental breakdown in adolescence, a period of sexual instability which the Victorians regarded as risky for women's mental health.[555]

The assumption that teenage girls are extraordinarily vulnerable to mental breakdowns is also discernible in the clinical psychologist Mary Pipher's bestselling self-help book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994) in which Pipher argued (to parents, rather than teenagers) that American society places immense pressure on teenage girls through sexist assumptions and

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[553] See, for example: Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*.

[554] Sander L. Gilman, *Seeing the Insane* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 118, 126; Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Patricia Parker (Taylor & Francis Group, 1985), 79, 85.

[555] Showalter, "Representing Ophelia," 85.

violence.[556] While the feminist movement had focused on empowering adult women, she argued, the specific situation of adolescent girls, vulnerable due to her undeveloped maturity, had largely been ignored.[557] She wrote that as she "looked at the culture that girls enter as they come of age, I was struck by what a girl-poisoning culture it was. […] America today limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized."[558] Genevieve Valentine notes that this book has had a large impact on American white audiences since the mid-1990s.[559]

Pipher's feminist psychology partly subverts the Ophelia image when she assumes that it is misogynist culture, not sexual instability, that causes teenage girls to be "traumatized," and thus, metaphorically dead: "pathology comes from failure to realize all one's possibilities. Ophelia died because she could not grow."[560]

However, Carter rejects this use of the Ophelia image altogether. Indeed, cultural norms about girlhood have hindered Ellie's development into a confident adult, but what kills her is not a bad self-image or a descent into madness after Caleb's humiliating treatment of her during their on–off relationship, but brutal, physical violence. Attempting a focalization which, in Peeren's words, acknowledges "the ghost's own vision," the novel challenges previous narratives that confuse the violence committed against girls and women with disorders originating inside of a vulnerable psyche—a view that corresponds to how traumatized people were regarded in psychiatry before the introduction of PTSD, with its event criterion, into the *DSM–III*.[561]

By engaging in feminist critiques of mythologies of gendered insanity, Carter's novel questions how teenage girls have previously been imagined in culture: they are not considered strong ethical authorities, but as mentally fragile creatures. Calling *Specters of Marx* a "how-to-mourn-your-father book," literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that there are no takers for Gertrude

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[556] Pipher's reading of Ophelia as an image of contemporary teenage girlhood is as follows: "[t]he story of Ophelia, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, shows the destructive forces that affect young women. As a girl, Ophelia is happy and free, but with adolescence she loses herself. When she falls in love with Hamlet, she lives only for his approval. She has no inner direction; rather she struggles to meet the demands of Hamlet and her father. Her value is determined utterly by their approval. Ophelia is torn apart by her efforts to please. When Hamlet spurns her because she is an obedient daughter, she goes mad with grief. Dressed in elegant clothes that weigh her down, she drowns in a stream filled with flowers." Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia. Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Riverhead Books, 2005), 20.

[557] Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 12.

[558] Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 12.

[559] Genevieve Valentine, "'Reviving Ophelia,' Cultural Touchstone On Teen Girls, Updates After 25 Years," Book Reviews, *NPR*, June 19, 2019.

[560] Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 292.

[561] Dalenberg et al., "Defining Trauma," 18; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 27.

or Ophelia in Derrida's vision of haunting, in which a powerful patriarch visits his son.[562] By imagining the teenage girl as a ghost, Carter subverts the intertextual use of *Hamlet* in Derrida's influential hauntology—just like Stridsberg did when she imagined the ghost as a mother. In this, the novel makes visible the ethical violation and gendered violence involved in Ellie's death.

At the same time, the novel counteracts the view of teenage girls that is showcased in the critical reception, namely that depictions of a teenage girl's pain and low self-esteem are realistic features of a YA narrative, while the possibility of her acquiring wisdom and narrative authority through suffering rape is considered unrealistic.[563] For example, Hollindale's assertion that Ellie "suffers the low or fragile self-esteem which most adolescent girls [...] undergo," and his notion that "[i]n Ellie we see on the dissection table the tragic potential of female adolescence," is anticipated, and strongly challenged by the novel itself.[564]

As I demonstrated above, the ghost's expanded focalization leads to new knowledge and the reframing of previous narratives that guided Ellie's perception of the world when she was alive. Spectral focalization is used by Carter to grant the deceased protagonist the ability to change, even after death—an opposite approach than Sebold took when she imagined the narrative voice of a teenage girl turned ghost. While Sebold's Susie engaged in an intentionally naive narration based on only the knowledge she had when she was fourteen years old, Ellie's ghost voice may, like Saxton notes in her review, be interpreted as unrealistically mature and self-aware compared to the actions and motives of Ellie when she was alive. For example, in Ellie's memories from before the murder, she is represented as having cared more about being accepted and loved than about thinking critically about the people whose acceptance she craved—whereas as a ghost, her narration is more analytical.

The aesthetic ideal expressed by Saxton favors YA that adapts teenagers' points of view without talking down to them from a position of adult authority. But Carter's use of the ghost figure, I would argue, breaks with the assumption that a realistic depiction of a teenage girl's point of view is characterized by a lack of self-awareness and maturity. Instead, Carter's merging of the author's and teenager's feminist voices in Ellie's ghost narration can be read as an expression of the kind of transformation of perspective that Ellie has gone through as a consequence of suffering a traumatic rape and murder, which, to use Herman's

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[562] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "From Ghostwriting," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 318.

[563] Coats, "I Stop Somewhere by TE Carter (Review)"; Hollindale, "I Stop Somewhere"; Saxton, "I Stop Somewhere."

[564] Peter Hollindale, "I Stop Somewhere."

words, have called "into question basic human relationships" and caused an existential crisis.[565]

As a ghost, suffering from trauma in isolation, Ellie has an abundance of time to think about the events that took place before her death, ultimately leading to a widened understanding of the world: "[w]isdom is a privilege of the dying and the dead alone," as she states at one point (78). This wisdom is bestowed to Ellie specifically through abilities she has as a ghost: her invisibility, freedom of movement, and capacity for listening. Despite her uncertainty about how to use her newfound invisibility, it is said to give her a certain "freedom," allowing her to "move from place to place, trying to get a sense of what's happening" (132). It grants her a significant amount of privacy, peace, quiet, time, and information, which throughout the novel are shown to help her process the traumatic experience she has endured, understanding other people and herself in new ways. "I don't know," she states, "I notice so many things now" (165). Ellie's ghostly state allows her to observe the world carefully, which ultimately leads to her developing ways of understanding how misogyny has affected her own, as well as other girls' positions in the world.

Challenging rape myths and sexual scripts

On a level above the narrative, through its paratexts, Carter's novel frames feminist solidarity and consciousness-raising as important tools to combat sexual violence.[566] Ellie's narrative is contextualized within a non-fictional reality where sexual violence is deemed an urgent problem—alluded to in the section at the end of the book titled "Resources," listing eight websites containing information about sexual violence; for example, the National Sexual Assault Hotline and the Victim Rights Law Center. Furthermore, Carter and her publisher frame her as sympathetic to teenage girls' struggles in the aftermath of rape through an afterword in which Carter alludes to her own experiences of sexual violence, and her anger at seeing the ways in which these kinds of stories were represented in the news (299).

A discussion guide is also included at the end of the book. Here, the reader is encouraged to think analytically and critically about the novel and its themes through 16 discussion questions. These include: "How does social media impact Ellie's life, as well as her case? Why do you think people act this way in the face of the tragedy and pain of others?"; "What role does status and wealth play in

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[565] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

[566] Paratexts are all aspects of how a novel is framed, such as the book cover and introductory remarks about the author. Writers and publishers make their intentions known through these paratexts, which partly shape the reception of the novel. Gérard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 261–264.

Ellie's story?"; and "What other aspects of the novel address our social attitudes and assumptions about sexual assault? In what ways can we change these attitudes?" The inclusion of these questions, directed at readers, is a form of feminist contextualizing of the story, placing Ellie's first-person narrative of sexual violence into a conversation about gender and class relations in culture at large. The questions also encourage readers to think about how the context depicted in the novel can be changed.

When read through the theoretical lens of YA scholarship that focuses on the power relations between adults and children, these kinds of paratexts may be interpreted as an expression of an adult authority in the book.[567] This might easily result in an interpretation similar to Saxton's, where the tone of Ellie's ghost narration is perceived to align with this adult authority too much. However, as a result of watching the living, Ellie is shown to come into a position of narrative authority that is not necessarily adult, but feminist.

I Stop Somewhere, more than the other novels, uses the ghost's narration to explicitly engage with feminist ideas of rape as part of the plot. Although they can all be read as part of a feminist tradition of making visible victims' points of view, Rydberg's and Stridsberg's plots do not contain explicit feminist calls to end rape. When feminism is evoked in *The Lovely Bones*, it is as the private and secret worldview of the side character Ruth, carrying her feminist books with the titles facing her body so nobody can see them. Feminism in *The Lovely Bones* is neither a perspective taken up by the protagonist, nor is it depicted as a transformative force. However, both these things operate in *I Stop Somewhere*.

The novel shows how Gretchen is encouraged by her feminist conviction to start a politically symbolic campaign to find Ellie, and by including Ellie's witnessing of several other rapes, Carter' novel presents rape as a common violation that concerns many people, rather than as the individual problem of its protagonist. As these events are seen by Ellie, they are shown to grant her a perspective on the world which she lacked when she was alive—also resulting in her narration engaging in explicit criticisms of rape culture, rape myths, and even of the narrative baggage of the word "rape" itself. The following section from the novel includes a narratological insight, much akin to Bal's statement that the word "rape" itself functions as a narrative, strongly focalized in many different ways simultaneously.[568]

> I hate that word. I hate it being a part of what I was.
> Rape.

[567] Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 55.

[568] Bal, *Narratology*, 160.

> It brings with it connotations, assumptions, a whole steamer trunk full of other people's ideas about it, because other people only know it as a word. A concept that's discussed, argued, demonized. If you actually know what it is, if you live it and experience it and know what it is beyond a word, you have to carry that word with you. You're now a "rape victim," "rape survivor." Your identity is permanently attached to a word you hate.
>
> I'm also a murder victim, but murder carries with it what it is. People don't debate what defines murder. Politicians don't argue the body's ability to fight off being killed. There's no talk of a "murder culture." No one says that you asked for murder. What you wear doesn't excuse being killed (119).

Here, the text stresses how the intense public controversy, questioning, and hatred attached to the word rape (and to the question of what kind of narrative should be derived from this word) affects Ellie's relationship to a wider community, and even to herself, in a negative way: against her own will, her identity has now become attached to narratives and rape myths which are likely to render her, in the eyes of other people, a liar or someone who "asked for it."[569]

Yet, when a newspaper headline appears—"Sons of Local Politician and Real Estate Mogul Accused of Sexual Misconduct"—Ellie comments that she wishes that the reporters would "call it what it is. Misconduct sounds like something you do to earn yourself a time-out as a toddler" (136). While Ellie is repulsed by the idea of her identity becoming attached to the word rape with the catastrophic connotations it entails, the word "misconduct" instead implies a narrative that minimizes the harm Ellie suffered.[570]

Importantly, the novel also demonstrates how prevailing American norms about *consensual* heterosexual teenage sexuality shape Ellie's self-image before and after the rape. The novel's narrative structure as a ghost story, due to which Ellie's perspective is shifted, allows for the protagonist to recognize coercive aspects of "normal" sex scenes. In order to investigate one of the most interesting features of this trauma novel—namely, the way in which Carter centers Ellie's shame and confusion about having been attracted to the boy who later raped her—I will bring it into dialogue with previous research about sexual scripts and consent.

"Sexual scripts" refer to normative ideas of how a sexual encounter should progress.[571] Kristen Jozkowski and her colleagues note that in the United States, traditional sexual scripts "create a situation in which men are expected to ask women for their consent, women are expected to refuse sex, at least initially, and men are expected to ignore such refusals and continue to pursue a sexual

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[569] Bourke, *Rape*, 23–24.

[570] Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 408.

[571] John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Routledge, 2017), 13.

encounter."[572] Consent is often communicated through subtle, indirect cues rather than verbally.[573]

Carter's depiction of "consensual" sexual interactions between Ellie and Caleb during their relationship—before the rape—resemble this kind of traditional sexual script. Caleb never asks Ellie if she would like to sleep with him: "[a]sking implies communication," Ellie comments to the reader. "We hadn't talked about it. Not exactly. He'd pushed further each time [...]. He simply tested the line and pushed just past it. Far enough to move us closer, but not far enough that I stopped him" (99–100). These encounters are marked by Ellie's ambivalent feelings of shame and desire. "Caleb put his hand on my arm and I hated how easy it was," she states. "I hated how he made me feel. I hated that I didn't want him to stop" (50).

This dynamic is supported by a formalized narrative of virginity loss, which is expressed later by Ellie's older friend Kate cautions her: "'[y]ou know what comes next,' she said. 'How long have you been together? A few months? That's not very long. If you tell him you love him, you must know what comes next. You have to know what he's going to think you're saying'" (78). Ellie replies that she indeed knows "what's next" in the master narrative of teenage sexuality prevailing in the small-town setting of the novel: a teenage girl who tells her older, popular boyfriend that she loves him should expect to submit to his demand for sex—which is an act desired by him, not her, and which for her, not him, is a dangerous act that can result in harm.

Later, when imagining consenting to sex with Caleb, Ellie tries to "feel the word yes on my lips," reflecting that next time, all she needs to do is to say one word (125). Here, the novel problematizes what historian Joanna Bourke calls liberal notions of consent, which define rape based on a presumption of "a male-who-acts and a female-who-reacts (through uttering a 'no' or 'yes')."[574] When Ellie imagines the word "yes" placed on her lips like a kiss from Caleb, the novel

[572] Kristen N. Jozkowski et al., "Gender Differences in Heterosexual College Students' Conceptualizations and Indicators of Sexual Consent: Implications for Contemporary Sexual Assault Prevention Education," *The Journal of Sex Research* 51, no. 8 (2014): 905. See also: James V. Check and Neil M. Malamuth, "Sex Role Stereotyping and Reactions to Depictions of Stranger versus Acquaintance Rape," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (1983): 344–56; Gagnon and Simon, *Sexual Conduct*.

[573] Melanie A. Beres, "'Spontaneous' Sexual Consent: An Analysis of Sexual Consent Literature," *Feminism & Psychology* 17, no. 1 (2007): 93–108; Timothy Edgar and Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, "Expectations for Sexual Interaction: A Cognitive Test of the Sequencing of Sexual Communication Behaviors," *Health Communication* 5, no. 4 (1993): 239–61; Jozkowski et al., "Gender Differences in Heterosexual College Students' Conceptualizations and Indicators of Sexual Consent," 905.

[574] Bourke, *Rape*, 11.

implies a dynamic where he acts, while she can simply react.[575] Within this sexual script, Ellie's own desire becomes unmentionable: "[t]here was more, too. More I couldn't say. Saying it aloud made me feel weird. Wrong or something. [...] It was the realization of this sexual part of me" (102).

Through scenes that depict Ellie's simultaneous discomfort and desire, Carter problematizes the expectation, prominent in American culture, that a man's or a boy's sexual pursuit of a girl or woman should be carried out through the coercive pushing of boundaries which the girl or woman is supposed to resist.[576] These scenes are not written as rape scenes, but as "normal" romantic scenes, which invite readers to consider the uneven power dynamic between the two parties—especially, since the novel has already established that Caleb will later rape Ellie. However, the novel does not pose sexuality in and of itself as the problem—Ellie is not blamed for her desire for Caleb. In fact, when Ellie is cautioned by Kate, who tries to impose on her what a big deal sex is, Ellie is represented as pushing back on the notion: "[w]ell, I mean, it's a big deal for my church. And my dad might be mad. But it's not like people don't do it all the time" (100). In the setting of the novel, dominant discourses about the sexuality of teenage girls declare that the loss of virginity is a serious matter that should only happen if the girl is completely sure that she loves the boy. It is supposed to be a "special" event, an idea which is expressed multiple times (2, 101–103, 107).

However, its meaning is subverted later in the novel, where Ellie's understanding of rape shifts from an individual perspective to a collective one. What hurts most of all, she finally admits here, is that "*I could have been anyone.* [...] It wasn't something I'd said, some way I'd looked. I wasn't special" (106, emphasis in text). Here, again, a reorientation of Ellie's point of view of the rape is shown to take place: from an individual, exceptional event to a systemic view of rape as a hate crime, targeting women and girls as a social group.

As Isabell Shuster and her research group note, a large body of research has demonstrated that cognitive scripts for consensual sexual encounters also affect how people engage in non-consensual sexual interactions.[577] While psychologist Kathryn M. Ryan's hypothesis is that rape myths and sexual scripts "may work in conjunction to support rape," the plot of *I Stop Somewhere* suggests that the conjunction of rape myths and sexual scripts might also play a significant role in inducing feelings of shame in the victim of acquaintance rape—and in turn,

[575] See also: Jozkowski et al., "Gender Differences in Heterosexual College Students' Conceptualizations and Indicators of Sexual Consent."

[576] See: RaeAnn E. Anderson et al., "Words Can Hurt: A Taxonomy of Verbally Pressured Sexual Exploitation in the SES-V," *The Journal of Sex Research* 61, no. 6 (2024).

[577] Isabell Schuster et al., "Changing Cognitive Risk Factors for Sexual Aggression: Risky Sexual Scripts, Low Sexual Self-Esteem, Perception of Pornography, and Acceptance of Sexual Coercion," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 3–4 (2022).

increase the probability of the victim developing PTSD.[578] By thinking critically about the traditional sexual scripts guiding her sexual encounters before the rape, Ellie is able to absolve herself of guilt when remembering the rape. In this way, a function of the novel's feminist narrative of rape trauma seems to be to absolve readers of any potential similar self-blame they might harbor.

As the analysis has demonstrated, *I Stop Somewhere* is not the kind of YA rape novel criticized by Altrows, Hubler, and Lenise Prater, which depict rape through a postfeminist, rather than a feminist, lens, and which abandons a believable depiction of social structures for a limited focus on the protagonist's internal life.[579] Rather, in line with the results of Harde's research of YA acquaintance rape narratives, Carter's novel portrays Ellie's far-reaching spectral observations of her community as leading her to a widened understanding of the ways in which dominant discourses of sexuality construct, in Harde's words, "teenagers who rape" and "a society that rarely holds them accountable."[580]

An unfinished future

As this chapter has shown, *I Stop Somewhere* is deeply concerned with how a victim of sexual violence makes sense of the world after experiencing a traumatic event that involved a loss of control, connection, and meaning.[581] The ghost story is used to imagine an opportunity for a deceased victim's narrative processing of rape trauma, in a scenario where the person's struggle with social disconnection, loss of power, and lack of social support cannot be fully resolved within a lifetime—a scenario which is also the reality for many living victims.

In the following, I argue that Carter uses the ghost story as an example of a genre through which Ellie can make sense of what happened to her, without guilt. Having rejected the narratives of the romantic death of a teenage girl gone mad and the ungraspable evil of a small-town murder, Ellie settles on the ghost story as the narrative structure most capable of holding her experience of rape trauma. Trying to understand why she cannot move on from Earth and from her painful memories, she states that she prefers the genre of ghost stories over the Christian narrative about heaven that her church taught her when she was alive: "I cling to the idea that I'm still here because of something unfinished," she muses. "Believing in those ghost stories I read as a kid. Because otherwise it

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[578] Kathryn M. Ryan, "The Relationship between Rape Myths and Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Rape," *Sex Roles* 65, no. 11–12 (2011): 774.

[579] Altrows, "Silence and the Regulation of Feminist Anger," 1–2; Hubler, "It Is Not Enough to Speak," 114; Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave."

[580] Harde, "No Accident, No Mistake," 172.

[581] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

means this is it. This constant reminder, the regret and what-ifs just spreading into forever" (86, 134).

What sets *I Stop Somewhere*'s depiction of rape trauma apart from many post-feminist narratives and much of the storytelling employed by the #MeToo-movement is its distinctive lack of optimistic closure.[582] Instead of ending the novel with the protagonist finally disclosing the rape, or with the successful prosecution of the rapists, Carter's novel depicts a trial in which victims have to sacrifice their privacy and mental health for the benefit of each other's chance at justice—only for most of them to lose the case. The Breward brothers are convicted of murder, but not of rape.

As Carter's novel connects ghostliness with "something unfinished," the genre of ghost story is shown to provide hope. Justice is yet unachieved: bigoted abuse and gender-based violence continue to happen after Ellie's death. However, Ellie is implied to reject the notion that the world will always be this way.

What is left unfinished is the political problem of rape, which can only be addressed by those who come after Ellie—the heirs to this political struggle, to speak with Derridaean hauntology.[583] The title of Carter's novel, *I Stop Somewhere*, refers to the poem "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman (1855), a slightly longer part of which is quoted in the opening of the book. Here, the sentence is given in full: "I stop somewhere waiting for you." Based on this, Ellie's position at the end of the novel can be read as one of anticipation. Believing in change and in the unexpected actions of others is necessary, because the alternative, Carter implies, is the terrible idea of an afterlife of eternal trauma: "the regret and what-ifs just spreading into forever" (134).

Although Carter's ghost story can be read as low fantasy, the plot still remains realistic in all aspects save the fact that Ellie still can see and hear the living from beyond the grave. Ellie does not defy laws of nature by enacting possessions or showing herself to the living, as Susie did in *The Lovely Bones*. In fact, Carter's novel makes a point of its resistance to the wish-fulfillment of *The Lovely Bones*, when Ellie states that the "things we wish for don't happen. This is how things really go" (294). While the novel harbors little hope for justice through legal procedures as they exist in their present state, or through the magical powers of narrative, the hope present in the novel can be discerned in Carter's insertion of acts of unexpected solidarity.

In the beginning of the novel, as Ellie bore witness to the Breward brothers' systematic rapes of other girls, she stated that "I tell myself that the way this

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[582] See: Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave."

[583] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 165–166.

happens, that it *can* happen, is because people prefer not to know [...]" (40).[584] This bleak post-traumatic worldview is, however, challenged when some people actually start inquiring about her disappearance. When Gretchen asks about Ellie for the first time, Ellie is shown to feel hope against hope: "I try not to let it happen. The sparks, those last dying embers, kindle" (57). And the novel shows that this hope is not in vain—Gretchen cares about what happened to Ellie. This care amounts to a kind of spectral agency, which according to Peeren, is the ability to act on one's own initiative and be taken seriously by others while doing it: "I almost think she's looking right at me. But that's impossible" (57).[585] Here, Ellie's act of watching is potentially noticed and taken seriously by Gretchen, who appears to be meeting her gaze.

Gretchen starts a flyer campaign to make Ellie's case visible, as well as a hashtag, #whereiselliefrias, which evokes the collective and strategic narrative building of the #MeToo-movement. It gives an example of another kind of public story of sexual violence than the speculative media reporting depicted in Stridsberg's *The Antarctica of Love*. And while Ellie criticizes the dehumanization involved in other kinds of media communication about the murder—for example, her father is shown reading a massive number of cruel comments about her online (89–90)—she feels differently about the form into which Gretchen places her story: "Gretchen turned me into a hashtag. I like that. They don't" (71). This, along with her and other victims' reporting their rapes, makes the police finally start to review Ellie's case (113). As a result of the actions of other victims, some of the things Ellie wishes for do, in fact, happen.

Later, as police officers search the crime scene, Ellie desperately and unsuccessfully tries to communicate the location of her body. "*Yes. Look closer*. I could scream it but nobody would hear [...]" (214, emphasis in text). Yet, one of the officers approaches the paper boxes stacked to hide the door to the room in which the crimes took place. Ellie pushes one of the boxes, "hoping it will fall. It works in movies. But in real life, the box doesn't do anything. My hands go through it. Still, something happens. I know it wasn't me. After six months, I don't believe in luck. It wasn't a coincidence. She was just looking. Someone was finally looking" (214). In a novel that does not, like *The Lovely Bones*, rely on moments of supernatural magic to make the protagonist's wishes come true, Carter instead depicts spectral agency as the kind of magic that happens when someone else makes an effort to recognize the ghost's wish, even when she has no voice to communicate it.

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[584] This statement can be compared to Herman's assertion that the realization that nobody came to your rescue during a violent event facilitates traumatization. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 52–53.

[585] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 15.

Magic is also connected to instances in which characters unexpectedly change and expand their views of the world, and as the emergence of solidarity between girls. This is discernible in Ellie's narration of Gina Lynn's surprising choice to collaborate with the police, against her boyfriend:

> I always wondered about magic. About coincidence. I wondered if there were forces that controlled how life unfolds [...]. But after Caleb, after that night, after everything that happened, I believed a lot less in magical forces and the power of time. I started to see it all as a hopeless and out-of-control disaster.
>
> When she comes into the station, though, when she breaks the silence, I don't know what else to call it. It's the closest thing to magic there is in real life (172–173).

When *another* person "breaks the silence"—uses the feminist tactic that is unavailable to Ellie—this is defined as a magical event that transforms Ellie's post-traumatic outlook.[586] The fact that Gina Lynn is capable of changing her mind and acting ethically holds a possibility for Ellie to reevaluate her view of the world as a "hopeless and out-of-control disaster."

Carter's use of the words "luck," "coincidence," and "magic" (214, 172–173) invites us to consider the elements of realism and the supernatural in the novels investigated in this study. Despite their dark themes of rape, murder, and trauma, all novels to some extent engage with motifs of future-oriented optimism or hope. In the earlier two novels, *Osalig ande* and *The Lovely Bones*, the horrors of rape and trauma are partly compensated for in the afterlife. However, these kinds of compensation—for Marika, being reborn as a boy into the same family, and for Susie, living out her dreams of suburban romance through living girls—evoke Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," a relation that exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[587] In these two novels, what is desired is the fantasy of being able to repeat the same kind of life again, but this time without experiencing sexual violence. The ending in *Osalig ande* is non-realistic—or at least needs to be interpreted metaphorically—because according to a secularized worldview, one cannot be reborn in another body. Susie's experiences of sex and romance in *The Lovely Bones* are non-realistic for much the same reason—dead people cannot inhabit another person's body.

However, the restoration that takes place in *I Stop Somewhere* is realistic, and potentially more achievable from a feminist perspective. Both *The Antarctica of Love* and *I Stop Somewhere* embody a narrative style of pessimism and utterly dark worldviews. But when Inni and Ellie watch other, living, characters from

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[586] See: Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 4.

[587] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

their limbo, they sometimes notice unexpected instances when other people seem to see them and act in their interests. They are able to pick up new kinds of stories, new ways of imagining the world and their own place within it. Here, hope lies not in victims acquiring agency through supernatural magic, but in other people's realistically available actions of solidarity.

Within the earthly plot of the novel, a support group for the Breward brothers' many victims is depicted as a concrete space in which feminist solidarity can lead to a kind of post-traumatic growth. Just like in the other novels included in this study, nothing in *I Stop Somewhere* suggests the existence of any professional trauma therapy in the novel's setting. But unlike *The Lovely Bones*, which seemed to hold a vaguely positive attitude towards support groups but ultimately did not explore the theme except in passing, Carter's plot lingers longer on the dynamics of the group.

This group is shown to become an important social space for the town's many victims of sexual violence—victims of the Breward brothers, but also of other men. Together they are shown trying to make sense of the traumatic experiences they endured. It is not a professional therapeutic setting, which one of the adult facilitators points out nervously as one of the participants mentions suicide: "[w]e're not qualified [...]." However, the facilitator's statement is countered by the participants: this group is the only support available in the impoverished Hollow Oaks, and the suicidal girl confirms that she did not know who else to talk to. When the lack of professional steering is mentioned again by one of the adult group leaders, it is forcefully dismissed: "'[s]eriously, shut the fuck up, Beth,' Gretchen says" (262). The novel seems to agree with her—this space is what they have, and difficult feelings should be discussed here, even without a professional therapist present.[588]

Several of the girls try to convince the suicidal participant that suicide is not the answer to anybody's pain, and the facilitator states that no matter what she thinks she has done, "[s]omeone wants you to be alive." Ellie agrees:

> *I do*, I think. I want every single one of these girls to be alive. [...] Because I want to come here, too, and feel like I belong somewhere. I want to remember living—in all the beautiful parts, but also in the pain. I want them to live because I want Caleb and Noah to fail. They can't have everything (261, emphasis in text).

In this way, the novel uses the spectral protagonist to imagine a scenario in which the dead are looking out for living victims. The novel also suggests that by staying alive and visiting this support group, living victims are in fact

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[588] Here, the church—in the basement of which the group is held—takes on the meaning of a physical space where the sharing of pain can take place, without the official narratives that have been promoted by Ellie's priest previously in the novel. No religious figure is present.

helping the dead. The group serves as an example of the kind of spaces for social support that victims of sexual violence can organize amongst themselves, even in environments where more recent forms of evidence-based trauma therapy are unavailable.[589]

After some time has passed, the novel ends in the room where the group of girls still meet: "[a] room full of girls holding on to each other's stories. They're not the same story, but that's okay. Because all the things that make us different are also what we need to believe when they try to break us" (294). As Serisier notes, the solidarity between survivors, which is often presumed in discourses of sexual violence that have been developed after second wave feminism, "can only function if survivors see themselves as having an experience in common."[590] The support group provides a space for a simultaneous sense of commonality and difference to take form.

The novel emphasizes suspension of disbelief as a necessary antidote to general cultural practices of dehumanization, exemplified by the harassment which Ellie took part in when she was alive: really believing that experiences different from your own are true and human is what is shown to lead to solidarity. Thus, in *I Stop Somewhere*, sexual trauma is politicized: healing together and believing each other's stories is framed as a necessary first step towards fighting the culture in which rape is made possible: the kind of culture in which people conceive of the pain of others as "fiction," rather than as a reality that demands an ethical response (66).

As findings by psychology scholars Susan Borja, Jennifer Callahan, and Patricia Long suggest, positively experienced social interactions, even though they do not decrease the risk of developing PTSD, tend to contribute to measures of post-traumatic growth, examples of which include "appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength, or spiritual development."[591] *I Stop Somewhere* ultimately depicts this kind of growth as being made possible through the social support that victims of different kinds of sexual violence may grant each other, even in contexts where resources for trauma therapy are insufficient or nonexistent. In Carter's narrative, post-traumatic growth includes an increased ability to believe in things that are as of yet unknown: the experiences of others, as well as a future that is unfinished. In the framework of contemporary psychotraumatology, this development might be considered to be of a spiritual

[589] For an overview of contemporary evidence-based treatments, see: Schnyder et al., "Psychotherapies for PTSD."

[590] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 37.

[591] Borja et al., "Positive and Negative Adjustment and Social Support of Sexual Assault Survivors"; Charuvastra and Cloitre, "Social Bonds and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 307.

nature. However, in Carter's use of the ghost figure, post-traumatic growth involves coming into a specifically feminist politics of belief.

Concluding remarks

As we have seen, *I Stop Somewhere* follows Anne Whitehead's conception of trauma fiction quite closely, in the sense that it departs from a linear temporality and uses characteristics of the ghost figure to depict dissociative flashbacks to the rape. It narrates the protagonist's scattered memories of the event, and her attempts to make sense of it through, among other things, intertextual references.[592] While Whitehead's selection mainly included works of literary fiction, Roger Luckhurst has suggested that this kind of trauma narration also features in works that make use of other genres.[593] This chapter has demonstrated that it is also present in conjunction with narrative structures from YA novels about acquaintance rape.

A result of this chapter's analysis is that this YA depiction of spectral rape trauma is in many ways similar to the other novels of this study, directed at adults. In its depiction of rape trauma as a socially isolating experience, it resembles all of the other novels previously investigated in this book. It portrays the protagonist's vulnerability as starting in life, with the lack of support from others, and thus bears resemblance to the depictions in *Osalig ande* and *The Antarctica of Love*. Ellie's comments on the inadequacy of common cultural narratives about rape follows the form of the other novels—although here, this critique is posed more directly. And finally, the experience of rape is narrated here in the same devastating detail as in the narratives written within the mode of literary fiction.

The extent to which *I Stop Somewhere* explores the interpersonal relationships between different victims sets it apart from the other novels in this study. The novel's inclusion of an array of living victims in addition to its murdered protagonist invites the reader to compare their situations. In Carter's representation, Ellie's post-traumatic flashbacks of the rape she suffered become indistinguishable from witnessing other people's similar traumatic experiences, making the novel's vision of trauma more collective than the other novels examined in this study. Bearing witness to other girls suffering rape is framed like an involuntary, almost compulsory, act, but it is also, simultaneously, imbued with ethical purpose. Identification and solidarity between victims are shown to be crucial catalysts for Ellie's case being taken seriously within the community.

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[592] See: Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 6, 84.

[593] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 97, 105.

The critical reception of *I Stop Somewhere* largely evaluated the novel according to a standard of its presumed didactic value for teenagers. However, read alongside the other narratives of rape trauma included in my study, the potential didactic value of Carter's novel is not as a "cautionary tale," which was Hollindale's interpretation.[594] Rather, its pronounced feminist message should be read as a continuation of the genre of feminist first-person narratives identified by Serisier which "speak out" against rape with the intention of furthering a political movement against sexual violence.[595] In this chapter, I have therefore argued that this YA novel centers the protagonist's personal experience of rape trauma, while simultaneously engaging with theoretical explanations and remedies for rape.

The protagonist, being a ghost, is unable to ever disclose what happened to the living. This shifts the focus away from the American YA norm, established by Halse Anderson's *Speak*, in which a girl heals through disclosing to another character that she has been raped. The ghost protagonist indeed holds no hope of fully "recovering" from the rape, as she is dead, which contradicts narratives of individual survivor empowerment. Another important function of the ghost in Carter's novel is to resist the kind of yearning for a satisfying narrative closure that largely structured the spectral narration in *The Lovely Bones*. Ellie, like Stridsberg's Inni, continues to reside in limbo, instead of ending up in heaven or some other kind of defined afterlife.

The chapter has underscored how the ghost narrator in *I Stop Somewhere* is used as a feminist figure whose widened powers of focalization allow for both a depiction of psychological trauma and a feminist portrayal of rape culture. The impact of the #MeToo movement, still ongoing at the time the novel was published, is discernible in the novel's strong emphasis on the unexceptionalness of the rape suffered by the protagonist. As in many dominant narratives of the #MeToo movement, the novel's rapists are boys who inhabit an economically and socially powerful position. They assault systematically and target many victims.

The analysis in this chapter argued that the protagonist's repeated hauntings of the scene of the rape and murder function as a kind of trauma processing, during which the meaning that Ellie assigns to the traumatic event and to her own personhood gradually changes. As she bears witness to other girls being raped by the same perpetrators, this newly acquired knowledge of a systemic dimension to rape is gradually developed into a feminist analysis of rape as a cultural praxis of dehumanization and domination. Throughout Ellie's narration of previous events from her life, the novel repeatedly underlines how gendered sexual scripts and rape myths originating in different parts of American popular

[594] Hollindale, "I Stop Somewhere."

[595] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 4, 44.

culture, religion, and literature all shaped her own desire and lack of sexual agency—even before the rape and murder took place.

Carter's novel approaches the teenage ghost from a different angle than Sebold: although in the beginning of the novel, Ellie is shown to be haunting because of the traumatic rape and murder she has suffered, what she sees and learns through these hauntings transforms her. As a ghost, Ellie manages to see, at least in part, beyond the restrictions of her individual point of view, and unlike the other ghosts in this study, ultimately develops a feminist consciousness.

I Stop Somewhere imagines sexual harassment and rape in a similar way to *Osalig ande*: it results in the victim feeling too visible, and voiceless—judged for her supposedly inherent flaws, and overtaken by shame. Focusing on a specific experience of acquaintance rape, Carter's novel emphasizes the impact of guilt and shame in Ellie's post-traumatic struggle to reconcile her past sexual attraction to a boy she used to date with the horror when he later brutally rapes her. Like many YA novels about rape, Carter's story offers readers what literary scholar Roxanne Harde has called "alternate discourses of culpability and shame"—through a process of gradual identification with other victims, Ellie is shown to let go of her initial belief that her personal qualities and choices were the reason she was targeted.[596]

As we have seen, in *I Stop Somewhere*, the characters' worldviews are oriented by an array of myths and generic scripts. Rape myths exist alongside sexual scripts, fictional narratives, and news reporting. All of these narrative formulas (with the exception of the hashtag post—still only a decade old at the time of the novel's publication), are criticized for facilitating stereotypes that Ellie has to fight against internalizing as a part of her self-understanding.[597] "We find so much comfort in the ideas of us that we don't even notice when we become those ideas," Ellie states at one point (224). Although the novel sometimes balances on the line of "becoming" the clichés it criticizes, it still ultimately manages to use the ghost to expose and critique common myths and stereotypical scripts about teenage heterosexuality, rape, and the presumed extraordinary mental vulnerability of teenage girls.[598]

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[596] Harde, "No Accident, No Mistake," 172.

[597] Frow, *Genre*, 153; Ben Panko, "A Decade Ago, the Hashtag Reshaped the Internet," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 23, 2017.

[598] From time to time, Carter's critical depiction of the teenage in-group could, indeed, be said to exemplify Antero Garcia's notion that often, American "[YA fiction] depicts the culture and life choices of America's affluent even in controversial texts that are seen as challenging, provocative, difficult. What's more, in depicting a specific set of cultural practices, YA—in general—defines and reinforces these practices over time." Garcia, *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature*, 5.

In Carter's novel, witnessing terrible things expands the ghost's worldview, and Ellie does not engage in wishful thinking and yearning for the kind of cruelly optimistic narrative closure that Susie is shown to indulge in *The Lovely Bones*. The fact that *I Stop Somewhere* fully engages in Ellie's post-traumatic view that reality is terrible allows the novel to envision the things that destabilize this terrible reality as a kind of realistic magic. Instead of fulfilling Ellie's wishes through supernatural means, like *The Lovely Bones* does, *I Stop Somewhere* portrays Ellie's wishes as fulfilled through the agency that others grant her by actively looking for her (Gretchen and the female police officer), and by unexpectedly acting in solidarity with her (Gina Lynn).

As a character, Ellie is rendered more than just a first-person narrator of her own trauma—she is also an otherworldly presence who performs an important function for other, living victims. She believes them, even as she is unable to tell them this directly. Here, one can discern a parallel between Ellie's belief and the novel's ethos—Carter's initial dedication of the novel to victims of sexual violence reads: "you are **believed**." Ultimately, *I Stop Somewhere* is a novel deeply invested in paying respect to living victims, just as much as to the dead. The novel's use of a ghost as a narrator creates a fictional cosmology in which living victims are remembered and believed by the dead—and in which living people can act on the behalf of dead victims, helping them achieve justice.

Through the ghost figure, Carter shows how a broadened focalization and willingness to take other people's similarities *and* differences to oneself seriously results in a feminist insight about the importance of solidarity with victims of sexual violence rooted in the belief that other people's stories can change your own perspective of what happened to you. By learning about other girls' experiences of sexual violence, Ellie stops blaming herself, and sees beyond her own private pain.

7. Conclusion and further discussion

This study has situated fictional narratives about victims' experiences in the aftermath of sexual violence within broader cultural and discursive frameworks of rape and trauma. The readings have led to four overarching conclusions: first, the emphasis on the social mechanisms involved in trauma was found throughout the entire material. Second, the analysis has shown that literary studies have much to gain in developing Anne Whitehead's understanding of trauma fiction and a continued expansion of it beyond psychoanalytical definitions of trauma. Third, by depicting experiences of trauma through ghostly focalization, the material was shown to challenge literary, as well as commonplace, mythologies of rape. Fourth, all four novels use ghost narration to stress the importance of ethical responses to stories of rape trauma, and urge readers to think critically about what these ethical responses should be. These conclusions will be presented in the following sections.

Trauma beyond the frameworks of disorder and aporia

Overall, the four novels were shown to portray trauma as something that exists beyond psychiatric diagnosis, and beyond psychoanalytical and poststructuralist ideas of trauma as inherently aporetic. The literary ghosts brought about trauma narratives in which the categories of illness and health were destabilized—the protagonists are all deceased, and thus neither healthy nor ill, as we would normally define these terms.

More specifically, the novels' portrayals of trauma tended to align with the kinds of intrusive memories recognized by contemporary psychotraumatology, which may appear as flashbacks, but also as more conventional distressing recollections.[599] However, the inability to remember important aspects of traumatic events, listed as part of the *DSM-5*'s PTSD diagnosis, was not activated in the novels to any great extent.

[599] Brewin et al., "A Dual Representation Theory of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder."

From psychoanalytically influenced poststructural trauma theory, the idea of traumatic events as existing intrinsically beyond understanding or representation through language did not resonate. Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as the "often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" after disastrous events is not activated to any great degree, except for the intrusive flashbacks pictured in *The Antarctica of Love*.[600] Significantly, in the material, the rapes and murders are presented as painful to recall—but they are indeed represented through narrative, embedded with meaning, and shaped by context.

The emotional effects of the depicted violence were not mainly fear—which has been the emotion most strongly associated with the PTSD diagnosis—but the fundamentally social emotions of shame, guilt, and loneliness. Shame was shown to be a prominent emotion in all narratives except *The Lovely Bones*. In some of the stories, feelings of shame are connected simultaneously to the breach of physical boundaries, to being seen in ways one has not approved of, as well as to narratives of victim-blaming. These findings are significant, since they provide specific examples of situations in which these emotions arise during and after sexual violence—and shows how these different situations together amplify feelings of shame in ways that worsen the protagonists' experiences of rape trauma.

In all novels, ghosthood and spectral metaphors were used to depict a state of extreme loneliness. This is in line with Judith Herman's notion that a loss of a sense of connection to other people is in fact a core feature of trauma, as well as with the feelings of detachment or estrangement from others listed as a symptom of PTSD in the *DSM-5*.[601] The material points to some of the ways in which experiences of specifically the aftermath of sexual violence—and of course death—promote this kind of isolation. These results align with Herman's envisioning of disempowerment and disconnection from other people as two intertwined phenomena which greatly affect traumatic experiences.

An effect of the narratives' use of ghost protagonists was that this loneliness is framed as an inescapable and unwanted situation, rather than as the effect of self-isolation. The ghosts do not exhibit the "markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities" listed in the *DSM-5*. In fact, all four ghosts are shown to take immense interest in participating in life on Earth, although they are largely unable to do so, as they are generally not seen or heard by the living. In this way, the material points to the fact that loneliness is not just a feeling, but often a correct observation of real isolation. In line with these results, when envisioning helpful responses to people suffering from trauma,

[600] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

[601] American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, 272; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

psychotraumatology needs to take into account the fact that the difficulties traumatized people may have in forming relationships with others might not necessarily be pathological, but the result of other people's inability to listen—which, in the case of sexual violence, is shown by the novels to be made harder by a general lack of understanding of, and belief in, sexual violence in societies.

It might be tempting to interpret the novels' use of spectral narrators as a way of imagining how post-traumatic loneliness can be resolved through the power of literature, where the testimonies of traumatized people reach a community of sympathetic readers. Such an interpretation would align with Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's psychoanalytical ideas about testimony and witnessing. However, crucially, the narratives emphasize that readers of novels are very different from the kinds of listeners that actually have supportive, trusting relationships with a victim. The ghosts constantly crave the company of their loved ones, while showing little interest (with the exception of *I Stop Somewhere*) in the reader as a potential source of support.

The study found that the repetition of violence in the material is explained by social and structural conditions, rather than as an internal psychological compulsive mechanism. The material challenges the Freudian concept of the repetition compulsion, which has previously been adapted within literary trauma studies, for example by Caruth—but also in previous research about Carina Rydberg's fiction.[602] In the novels, traumatic events and dynamics are shown to be repeated, not because of any compulsion on behalf of the victims, but because of the lack of other life options depicted in the plots, and on another level, due to characters' attachment to certain narrative structures, implied by the novels' metacommentary. Moreover, when potentially traumatic events happen several times within the narratives, as they do in all of the novels, this was implied to be the result of the fact that interpersonal violence is common. The perpetrators in *The Lovely Bones* and *I Stop Somewhere* are shown to commit sexual violence against many different women, and the protagonists of *Osalig ande* and *The Antarctica of Love* are shown to be subjected to sexual violence by several different men.

All the novels, except *The Lovely Bones*, depict protagonists who have experienced more than one potentially traumatic event. These portrayals should be read as a revisal of the singularity and past location of traumatic experience which underpins much of cultural trauma theory as well as in the *DSM-5* PTSD diagnosis. Although the latter currently admits the possibility of more than one traumatic event, it does not address the effects of living under continuously traumatizing conditions.

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[602] Andersson, *Den ensamma sjöjungfrun*, 104–107; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 63; Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 9.

The multiple traumatic events present in Rydberg's, Stridsberg's and Carter's portrayals to some extent evoke Herman's notion of complex PTSD, which incorporates experiences of prolonged exposure to trauma; for example, in cases of domestic violence and child abuse.[603] The results of this study point to the immense importance of considering how multiple traumatic events affect victims in specific ways—and demonstrate the urgency of further investigating how ongoing and potentially traumatizing life situations can be prevented. The results point to the necessity of considering past events and present social conditions at the same time, and call for further psychotraumatological research about the current life situations of people who suffer from PTSD. Moreover, investigating how fictional depictions of sexual violence enter into dialogue with understandings of complex PTSD might be a productive future direction of research in literary studies.

Finally, a conclusion is that future research will benefit from reading rape trauma fiction in dialogue with both psychotraumatological studies and feminist analyses of power, as they often provide complementary perspectives that can be used to attain a deeper understanding of the simultaneously emotional and social nature of victims' experiences.

New perspectives on trauma fiction

In this study, I have demonstrated that much can be gained by reading the four novels as trauma fiction, as the literary tendency conceptualized by Whitehead, Roger Luckhurst, and Michelle Balaev. A general conclusion is that the material uses the mode of trauma fiction in ways that depart from Whitehead's conceptualization.

The first example of this is that traumatic instances of sexual violence are depicted in realistic ways, instead of being purposefully omitted to mimic the Freudian notion that the repression of traumatic memories results in amnesia.[604]

Second, the ghost narration results in a shift within trauma fiction where attention is turned to victims' own voices and experiences rather than centering the witness position of those around them, the latter of which has often been the focus of trauma scholars in the humanities since the 1990s. Whitehead's conceptualization of trauma fiction builds on Caruth's idea of trauma as a kind of psychological possession, in which past memories haunt the present.[605] This has resulted in a tendency to view trauma fiction as stories in which the subject of

[603] Herman, "Complex PTSD."

[604] See: Pederson, "Speak, Trauma," 337–339.

[605] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 6–7.

the present takes on the role of the witness to atrocities that happened in the past, often to other people.

The first-person narratives investigated in this study instead depict victims as active agents who are themselves haunting the present. Rather than telling stories that conceptualize the shock and grief experienced by a community following a high profile femicide as a kind of collective trauma (a story structure exemplified by the culturally influential American television series *Twin Peaks*), these stories depict the deceased victim's individual experience of psychological trauma—a very different thing. The subject with whom readers are supposed to identify is the ghost, instead of a living character. In this way, the supposed dichotomy between victim and "witness" is destabilized, and the reader is reminded that sexual violence is not just a past atrocity that needs to be remembered, but an ongoing problem.

The novels' ghosts embody the feelings of intense loneliness among people whose trauma is *not* widely recognized as a collective disaster.[606] Making these experiences visible, the literary form of spectral trauma fiction resulted in stories that resemble the feminist narrative practice of speaking out, which aimed to transform what was often understood as personal problems into a narrative of rape as a collective, politically solvable atrocity.[607]

The analysis underscored how the popularization of dead narrators in contemporary literature has made possible representations of the points of view of deceased victims of sexual violence. Through the ghost protagonists in the investigated material, personal stories of rape trauma are told from a point of view that is neither that of an empowered survivor, nor that of an outsider telling the story about a victim of murder who cannot contribute her own version. There is an inevitable contradiction here, however: the authors of these novels are, although writing in first-person, still telling stories on the behalf of dead women. However, emphasizing the humanity and interiority of survivors, the novels largely resisted the tendency within contemporary culture to mythologize and sensationalize the figure of the female murder victim.[608]

Moreover, the ghostly position provides a location for murdered women's focalization which is not restricted by the static and potentially claustrophobic immobility of their corpse, or the finality of death.[609] On the contrary, the

[606] It thus conceptualizes trauma as an individual, psychological experience, rather than conflating it with historical experiences of large groups of people, which previous trauma theorists in the humanities has sometimes done, including Whitehead. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 10. See also: Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 7.

[607] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 8–10; 95–96.

[608] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 10; Berit Åström et al., *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

[609] See: Norman, *Dead Women Talking*.

ghost's freedom to roam around, eavesdrop on, and watch her loved ones' activities on Earth provides access to information about other people not necessarily granted even to living characters in fiction about rape trauma.

A third conclusion that provides a reorientation of Whitehead's concept of trauma fiction is that intertextuality in these works does not primarily function as an aesthetic technique to mimic psychoanalytic ideas of trauma symptoms (the repetition compulsion and the resurfacing of repressed memories being the main examples used by Whitehead), but as a means of depicting how previous stories of violence shape how people experience trauma in the first place.[610]

These results reflect Luckhurst's suggestion that cultural narratives play a vital role in forming popular notions of trauma.[611] But more specifically, the novels examined in this study depict scenarios in which cultural narratives directly affect victims' experiences. The intertexts play such important roles in the plots because they are used by the protagonists in their struggle to incorporate their experiences of sexual violence into previously held beliefs about the world and about rape.

The study has demonstrated that literature provides a productive medium to explore a post-traumatic dynamic in which protagonists are not only haunted by past traumatic memories, but also by past stories about similar traumatic events. Read together, the intertextual engagements in the material reflect how genres, contexts, and media formats through which popular narratives of rape, trauma, and murder are told change over time—and demonstrates that these changes affect how rape trauma is experienced by victims.[612]

An example of this is how the horror of the unexceptional—the terrible familiarity of sexualized violence done to women's bodies—contributes to the suffering of the novels' characters. For all the protagonists except for Susie, there is nothing mystical, or even completely unexpected, about rape. And although the violence described is brutal, the act of rape is not represented as exceptional (even Susie learns later, in her heaven, how common it is). Women are never allowed to forget about it: it happens often to women in novels and films, as well as in the world outside of fiction. What the ghostly protagonists can show us is how dreary and horrible an event can be when it is both shocking and overly familiar at the same time.

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[610] Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, 85.

[611] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 14–15.

[612] John Frow suggests that all complex genres are "built out of allusions to and stylizations of other genres," and construct their authority and credibility on this basis. Indeed, the novels in this study were shown to engage in this kind of intertextual citation on several narrative levels. Frow, *Genre*, 48.

The novels explicitly comment on and critique some of the narrative conventions which they by necessity inherit from previous fiction. Metafictional reflections in the material constitute a machinery which both reproduces the same stories over and over again, but simultaneously questions them and produces new ways of representing the aftermath of rape.

For example, as the novels evoke media narratives, the lost child-narrative, the Ophelia motif, and depictions of murder victims in crime fiction, American and British cultural ideas of white girl- and womanhood feature heavily in the novels. However, these narrative inheritances are often directly criticized, and always, through the unnatural and eerie qualities of spectrality, denaturalized. By using first-person narration and strategies from trauma fiction, the novels reveal the dehumanization, the production of living ghosts, involved in the mythologies of purity, disgrace, madness, and beauty at play in many popular cultural intertexts.

The geographical origin of the intertexts is an interesting finding in and of itself. American narratives of sexual violence and trauma haunt the Swedish novels, whereas perhaps predictably, the reverse does not happen. This demonstrates how North American understandings of trauma directly affect the "trauma knot" in Sweden in multiple ways through popular culture, in addition to the definitions provided by the widely used American diagnostic manual, the *DSM*.

Taken together, the analyses point towards an expanded understanding of trauma fiction, where trauma is shown to be historically and culturally contingent rather than a fixed psychological state. I have challenged essentializing trauma theories by demonstrating how tensions between different cultural meanings of the phenomenon become significant in fictional texts. Paying attention to the contexts depicted in the novels, the study also found that temporally and geographically specific attitudes about rape, murder and the mental health of women and teenage girls strongly shaped characters' responses to sexual violence and affected victims' access to validation of the reality of their experiences.

Moreover, some of the ghost stories in the material combine first-person accounts of sexual violence with a longer temporal perspective than is customary, for example, in autobiographical narratives. Fictional ghost stories, with their temporal possibilities of simultaneously depicting past and present times, have the potential to portray how evolving historical contexts affect how suffering in the aftermath of sexual violence is communicated and experienced in different historical times.

Lastly, what genres we unconsciously or consciously affiliate a text with influences how we interpret these texts and affects which types of meanings are

considered relevant and appropriate in a specific given context.[613] As Tanya Serisier has noted, some narratives of rape remain unrecognized as acts of speaking out due to their failure to conform to readers' expectations.[614] This was, for example, largely the case with the critical reception of *Osalig ande*, in which many reviewers recognized generic traces from melodrama, but not from feminist rape narratives or trauma fiction.[615] In the cases of the later novels, where rape as a theme was generally recognized, the novels' uses of trauma were not explored to any great extent. Based on a selection of book reviews, we cannot draw conclusions about how novels are received in society at large, but they can indicate general tendencies of interpretation among a group of aesthetic gatekeepers in the literary world. The analysis demonstrates that an expanded understanding of trauma fiction enables readings that can identify rape and trauma as core ethical themes in novels where they have previously been dismissed or remained unrecognized.

Tracing mythologies of rape

By depicting experiences of trauma through ghostly points-of-view, the material was shown to interfere with and challenge the interplay between what Emily Tilton has called rape myths that minimize rape and rape myths that catastrophize rape.[616]

By choosing a spectral girl or woman as their subject matter, the very premise of the stories invites comparison to catastrophizing mythologies according to which real rape is an extremely violent event that will likely result in death, or is a fate worse than death.[617] Indeed, within their plots, they portray literal connections between severe sexual violence and death. Three of the novels portray murders that are intertwined with brutal rapes, and in the fourth, *Osalig ande*, the protagonist dies by suicide many years after the sexual abuse she suffers, which is portrayed as having led to a lifelong struggle with trauma. However, in contrast to the YA novels *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Living Dead Girl*, identified by Lenise Prater to contain a troubling conflation of rape trauma and death,[618] the material examined in this study was found to distinguish between rape,

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[613] Frow, *Genre*, 110.

[614] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 146.

[615] Hessler, "En studie i skuld och våld"; Werkmäster, "En andes längtan efter svar."

[616] Tilton, "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility," 408.

[617] Sanyal, *Rape*.

[618] Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave."

trauma, deathly sexual violence, and suicide—even in cases when it explored the connections between these phenomena.

The idea that death is an inevitable or common result of suffering sexual violence is challenged in most of the material. In *The Lovely Bones*, for example, the narrator makes an effort to question readers' potential presumption that rape and death are similar experiences, and the narrator in *I Stop Somewhere* points out the very different social positions of living rape victims versus the ghost protagonist.

The ghost stories serve to provide nuance to Mithu Sanyal's implication that feminist anti-rape narratives are merely modern re-iterations of ancient mythologies of honor, in which death (literal or as a metaphor for trauma) is a fate more honorable than being a living victim of rape.[619] Rather than playing into catastrophizing mythologies where girls and women are permanently "damaged" by rape, this study has shown that the novels' uses of ghostliness instead resemble Herman's and Esther Peeren's very different metaphorical use of death: as a *social* position of being ignored or excluded from the human community.[620] In this way, the study pointed to the fact that death, in the novels, is used to depict crippling alienation in the aftermath of sexual violence, rather than taking on an aspirational meaning, as Sanyal claims that it tends to do in some feminist narratives of rape.

By telling stories about deathly sexual violence in ways that underline the victims' points-of-view and ambivalent agency, these ghost stories counteract catastrophizing myths about sexual violence, while simultaneously avoiding the instinctive response to shun narratives of femicide altogether, out of a belief that all such stories exemplify catastrophic mythologies—which would, in turn, be an example of cultivating minimizing myths of sexual violence, according to which femicide is not an important problem in society.

Interplay between catastrophizing and minimizing rape myths also take place within the plots. For example, in *The Lovely Bones*, the murderer's excessive strangeness embodies catastrophizing mythologies of rape, serving to make the rape suffered by Susie recognizable to readers beyond any doubt. The possession scene, on the other hand, can easily be interpreted through the minimizing myth that some kinds of forced sex are not really rape—and indeed remain unrecognized as rape by part of the previous research on the novel.[621] However, through the novel's Gothic doubling of Susie and Mr. Harvey, the similarity between their coercive actions is hinted at between the lines.

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[619] Sanyal, *Rape*, 39, 61–63.

[620] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 52; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 14.

[621] See, for example: Ann V. Bliss, "'Share Moments, Share Life'," 878; Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 187–188.

Both *The Antarctica of Love* and *I Stop Somewhere* explicitly criticize how minimizing and catastrophizing rape myths work together in many crime narratives' fascination in monstrous murderer–rapists, and their simultaneous disinterest in the experiences of victims of sexual violence. However, while these two narratives present an alternative to the myth that rapes are always committed by marginalized men, a new, post-#MeToo rapist archetype could perhaps be discerned in their choice to include rich and powerful serial perpetrators.

Within its plot, *Osalig ande* presents an example of how catastrophizing and minimizing rape myths work together to prevent Marika's story of rape from being believed during her life. During medical school, her husband is shown to come into the belief that women and children lie about rape, but also that rape is an event so damaging that no victim can ever enjoy sex again. The only one of the four novels to directly incorporate psychology as a discipline into the plot, *Osalig ande* draws attention to the fact that some myths that dismiss the existence of rape are influenced by narratives of trauma and memory historically legitimized by psychology and psychiatry.

Following Mieke Bal's call to examine the kind of sexual politics of focalization that determines whose point of view is favored in stories about rape, the study found that indeed, the focalization of rape in the novels was not neutral.[622] The novels called attention to the subjective nature of rape focalization as the narrators repeatedly noted the discrepancies between their own memories of rape and the way in which this event was seen, or not seen, by the living.

The material provides specific examples of how existing mythologies of rape serve to diminish girls' and women's authority as focalizers of sexual violence. Rape myths are shown to aid perpetrators; for example, when Marika's stepfather in *Osalig ande* and Mr. Harvey in *The Antarctica of Love* manipulate their victims by insinuating that they secretly want to have sex with them, or even to die.

Based on the readings in this study, we should also take Bal's argument further, and problematize the notion that there always is a strict separation between the perpetrator's, victim's, and surrounding community's points of view. The analysis demonstrated that narratives employed in the wider setting of the novels, favoring the perpetrators' or other antagonistic characters' points of view, can blend together with, or be echoed within victims' narration.

As has been previously shown to be the case among victims of sexual violence, the protagonists' internalized beliefs in rape myths correlate with self-blame.[623] For example, in relation to the above example, Marika is later represented as having internalized her boyfriend's false views of sex and trauma, causing her to feel like she should be more "damaged" in order to be an authentic rape victim.

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[622] Bal, *Narratology*, 145.

[623] See: Adolfsson, *Blaming Victims of Rape*, 57.

As the readings observed, the novels depicted the frustration of not having access to alternative narratives to make sense of sexual violence as central to the psychological pain experienced by the protagonists.

The politics of trauma narratives and the ethics of the ghost narrator

The novels' portrayals of trauma through ghosthood were found to emphasize how victims of sexual violence experience that they enter a dramatically different position in the world after the event. The material was analyzed alongside Herman's notion that events become traumatic when victims are robbed of power over their own bodies, as well as when ordinary adaptations to life prove insufficient, undermining the belief systems that previously provided their experiences with meaning.[624] The analysis located three essential ways in which the ghosts are used to portray victims' violent and existential confrontations with the powers and world orders that structured their lives on Earth: first, a daunting sense of powerlessness; second, an existential crisis; and third, a sense of defiance or freedom.

Using the ghost story formula combined with the narrative conventions of trauma fiction, the novels were shown to consider the powerlessness experienced in the moment of rape alongside the victims' other experiences of powerlessness and lack of agency before and after the event. Using the concept of invisibility—metaphorical before death, and literal after death—the narratives positioned instances of rape within settings where girls' and women's points of view are not valued. According to Herman, commonly unvalidated traumatic experiences become unspeakable, the victim rendered invisible—something which certainly happens to the ghost protagonists.[625]

As my readings of *Osalig ande*, *The Antarctica of Love,* and *I Stop Somewhere* have called attention to, the incommunicability of the ghost protagonists' traumatic experiences is not portrayed as being derived from any singular event itself, but from a myriad of instances in the past when their opinions, desires, and humanity have not mattered to other people. Actually, the transition from living person to ghost, although traumatic and dramatic, is portrayed in these three novels as partly a continuation of a lack of agency experienced in life. Through Peeren's notion of "living ghosts," the readings in this study have located the many instances where the novels compare their protagonist's existence as actual ghosts to the similarly invisible status they had when they were still alive—

[624] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33, 51.

[625] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

tracing how preexisting social hierarchies affect the environments in which sexual violence happens, and renders people with low social standing more vulnerable to abuse.

Even as a radical shift in the public perception of the protagonists after they died was portrayed in Stridsberg's and Carter's novels, their continued lack of agency in relation to the surrounding world was underscored. As Inni and Ellie went from "living ghosts," people whose desires, secrets, and thoughts are, according to Peeren, considered irrelevant and uninteresting by the public, to dead ghosts whose secrets the public now takes immense interest in, they still were shown to have no control over the narratives spun around their experiences.[626] In this way, the novels efficiently demonstrate how, in the depicted societies, stories about deceased victims appeal to media audiences more than first-person accounts: the latter may demand uncomfortable ethical readjustments from the reader, while the mystery element of the former can be imbued with whatever kind of meaning is convenient. It involves less risk for living people to engage with the "secrets" of dead victims: the complications of potentially having to face these women, as well as the risk of being tainted by them, are removed.

Moreover, experiences of trauma were shown to be shaped by the metaphysical makeup of the stories' visions of the afterlife. Herman's suggestion that traumatic events may "violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order" and cast her into a state of existential crisis resonates heavily in the material.[627] For example, in *I Stop Somewhere*, Ellie's ghostly state functions as a way to depict her moving from Christian beliefs about goodness being rewarded into a belief that the world is an unjust place, structured by misogyny. However, the analysis of the afterlives and limbos in which the ghosts find themselves after dying also offers conclusions that depart slightly from Herman's statement.

In *Osalig ande*, as Marika is thoroughly informed about the rules and regulations of the psychiatric institution which is the afterlife, Herman's conception of violated faith is reframed as coming into knowledge of the "natural order"—or cultural hegemony—in which atrocities like rape are allowed to happen. Here, experiencing psychological trauma is portrayed as being stuck in, and brutally exposed to, the authority of an all-encompassing world order. In *The Lovely Bones*, on the other hand, the novel's resistance to being a story of victimhood, its "teeth-gritted celebration of something not dismembered or shattered at all," renders its wish-fulfilling afterlife the opposite of a crisis or a revelation: the

[626] Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 36.

[627] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

event of brutal sexual violence, along with its suppression, is shown to bring Susie into even stronger faith in the values she held before the event.[628]

In the two earlier novels, the afterlives were remarkably compatible with the depicted societies. However, in the final two novels, the ghosts instead reside in emptiness. A conclusion that can be drawn from this sameness or emptiness is that the novels illustrate that it is very hard to imagine a different kind of world while suffering from trauma. But the emptiness depicted in *The Antarctica of Love* and *I Stop Somewhere* can also be interpreted as a cosmic variant of an existential crisis: a world that is found to be lacking and unfinished, indicating the possibility of change. In *The Antarctica of Love*, limbo is first a cruel, meaningless emptiness, and later reinterpreted by the protagonist as an ever-expanding and changing universe; and in *I Stop Somewhere*, it is an empty space in which the ghost "stops" and "waits" for others.

The in-between state of ghosthood is portrayed as at least partly defiant: the protagonists hang on to the living community and refuse to let go even as they suspect that their obliteration would be the most convenient option for the living. The lingering quality of literary ghosts—their refusal to fully "move on" to wherever they are supposed to go after they die—disturbs the notion of closure. For example, Marika's unwavering memory of childhood abuse is strong enough to resist even the process of rebirth; even after moving on to *The Lovely Bones*' second, supposedly permanent afterlife, Susie ends the story with a comment about how she is still "not quite" grown up; Inni, at the end of *The Antarctica of Love*, states that she is able to finally "let go" of watching her daughter's life due to her newfound belief that the universe—including herself—is in a state of perpetual expansion and change; and finally, in *I Stop Somewhere*, Ellie remains a specter indefinitely, listening to the stories of living survivors while waiting for an undefined "you."

The material displays an understanding of rape trauma according to which healing, or the failure to heal, are not expected to provide closure to the life stories of victims of sexual violence. Neat endings of narratives are unsettled, and we are invited to imagine different kinds of futures, even as complete healing, or "moving on" proves impossible for some victims.

Ghost-focalized personal narratives of rape challenge the postfeminist dichotomy of survivorship and victimhood, and urge us to see victimhood as a situationally dependent social position, rather than a fixed identity or defeated mentality.[629] The novels' positioning of the ghosts as characters who watch others, rather than make their own voices heard, shifts the focus from the identity

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[628] Smith, "A Perfect Afterlife."

[629] See: Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*, 26–27; Prater, "Testimony from Beyond the Grave"; Whitney, "Uneasy Lie the Bones," 355.

of the protagonist to the actions of other people, whose responses become crucial for the plots' outcomes. The specter's adamant gaze on the living, and, especially in the two latter novels, her gaze back at the reader, exposes how other people's silence or disrespectful talk often amounts to silencing the victim—but also recognizes that other kinds of responses are possible, and preferable.

As many scholars of spectrality have pointed out: ghosts *demand* something from the living.[630] These demands range from self-determination (to have their own version of events heard, rather than have their stories crudely told by others); to a recognition of other past abuses committed against them in addition to the obvious atrocity of murder; time to process the event (which they are granted or grant themselves by remaining in limbo); and most importantly: to be loved, believed, actively looked for, and viewed as a valuable part of humanity. In short: the ghost narrators demand that readers think ethically about how they respond to rape trauma.

On a more concrete, everyday level than the traditional literary trauma theory's emphasis on testimony and witnessing, the ghosts formulate an ethical demand for individuals suffering from trauma to be taken seriously and to receive sufficient social support. As the analysis has shown, the novels depict scenarios in which this is not a self-evident reality: they provide forceful examples of situations when even the most basic needs of victims are not met. Violence against women often takes place in the private sphere, and the novels insist that empathy and respect be shown to victims of sexual violence by people that they actually know, in their immediate circles—not just by a therapist, social worker, reader–witness, or a vague "public"—the latter two of which, especially, risk amounting to repeated observations without empathic connection. Fundamentally, the material points to the minimal conditions of social support and healing required for breaking potentially traumatized victims' isolation.

Moreover, the novels problematize available forms of justice for victims of sexual violence. Only *I Stop Somewhere* is centered around legal retribution, which is shown to fail at delivering justice. The narrator of *The Antarctica of Love* views the world as a fundamentally unjust place. Supernatural experiments with compensatory justice take place in the plots of *Osalig ande* and *The Lovely Bones*, in which the protagonists, through ghosthood, are allowed to try on a more empowered social position. However, in the former novel, the protagonists' rebirth as a boy is carried out against her will, and in the latter, this is shown to result in an eerie possession scene that evokes the dynamics of rape. In Sebold's novel, spectrality is used to portray wounded people—Susie, as well as Mr. Harvey—seeking restitution for past hurts through violent sexual domination of others.

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[630] Joanne Chassot, *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity* (Dartmouth College Press, 2018), 17; Norman, *Dead Women Talking*, 77; Ross, "Introduction," 4–5.

Nevertheless, the novels provide a vision of a world in which justice can be thought of as a long-term political goal, even as adequate justice may be unattainable within the lifetimes of individual victims. Readers are invited to consider, and hopefully do something about, the social and political mechanisms that isolate victims of sexual violence. In this aspect, part of the material—mainly Stridsberg's and Carter's novels—moves beyond the feminist politics of "speaking out" identified by Serisier, and embody her point that a central aspect of political action "is not breaking the silence but intervening in the process of refiguration."[631]

Throughout the four analysis chapters, I have shed light on the feminist and critical potential of the concept of trauma, nuancing the tendency within contemporary critical theory as well as psychotraumatology to view trauma as an apolitical concept: in psychotraumatology, because the ideal of empirical objectivity and reproducibility has maintained a hegemonic status; and in literature because of the common assumption that a turn inwards, towards the psyche, automatically means a turn away from the social world of politics and feminist struggle.

The results of this study demonstrate the potential of trauma fiction as a genre through which the nuances of sexual violence can be portrayed and considered more freely than in many other public genres of rape narration, where the narrator's authenticity and believability is often scrutinized, or where victims are expected to narrate details of rape in situations in which they are not in control.[632]

Finally, the literary ghost in rape trauma fiction underscores the ethical responsibilities that people who work in law, media, and healthcare have towards victims of sexual violence. All of the novels demonstrated how a lack of understanding of sexual violence and trauma within the settings of the stories resulted in pain for victims.

For example, *The Antarctica of Love* and *I Stop Somewhere* demonstrate the perils of media discourses that frame lethal violence against women through a lens of exceptionalism, and in which the overarching social structures that underpin femicide and other kinds of violence against women are ignored. These results invite those who are, in different ways, involved in shaping public narratives of sexual violence to consider the ethics of focalization—whose perspective is being favored in stories—as well as to consider what mythologies of rape may shape the angle of, for example, news reporting.

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[631] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 194.

[632] See: Adolfsson, *Blaming Victims of Rape*; Orrbén, "'Han hade sin penis i henne'—Representationer av agerande kroppar i sexualbrottsdomar," 150; Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 159; Sexualbrottsofferutredningen, *Anmälan och utredning av sexualbrott: förslag på förbättringar ur ett brottsofferperspektiv. Promemoria*, Sverige Justitiedepartementet (Fritzes, 2005).

I Stop Somewhere points to the potentially re-traumatizing effect of learning new facts about the rape or the rapist through police investigations and courtroom narratives—urging professionals in these fields to be mindful of the fact that these processes tend not to be centered around the wellbeing of victims, who might find themselves utterly invisible while hearing details nobody prepared them for.

Lastly, the results of this study invite clinicians and researchers working on PTSD—especially from a biological viewpoint—to consider the potential effects that different kinds of cultural narratives, but also the narratives of trauma constructed within their own fields, can have on victims. These stories overlap, but are also very diverse and sometimes contradictory. Specific attention should be paid to how mythologies of sexual violence may promote or disperse feelings of guilt and shame through social interactions.

The imaginative and sometimes fantastic depictions of post-traumatic experiences which can be found in fiction point to previously unrecognized relations between the stories we tell about ourselves, the stories others tell about us, and the trauma we may experience. Literature can bring into focus aspects of trauma that remain invisible in current psychotraumatological research and practice. The results of this study call attention to a perspective essential for medical practitioners to keep in mind: the meaning of trauma cannot be reduced to its definition as a disorder. To people outside of psychiatry, and certainly to survivors themselves, it contains multiple meanings.

By recognizing that trauma fiction can portray experiences that fall outside the PTSD diagnosis as well as psychoanalytic frameworks, we can notice how stories portray this emotional state as being contingent on the previous narratives available to us for communicating about such events. I hope that this study, along with the rich contemporary genre of trauma fiction, will inspire further discussion of trauma as simultaneously signifying the debilitating psychological pain sometimes caused by violent experiences, and a concept that over the past forty years has resulted in an incredibly efficient reorientation of whose perspectives are allowed to shape what we know of victims' and survivors' suffering in the aftermath of interpersonal violence.

This study has investigated novels that make use of ghost stories to counteract romanticized mythologies of dead girls and women, and, through the gaze of the traumatized subject, turn attention back to the actions of the living. In fiction about traumatic sexual violence, spectrality provides victims who are made invisible with a means of refusing complete disappearance: they continue to observe others, waiting for their gaze to be returned.

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Svensk sammanfattning

Denna tvärvetenskapliga avhandling syftar till att undersöka fiktiva berättelser om hur tiden efter sexuellt våld upplevs av offer. Detta görs utifrån fyra samtida svenska och amerikanska romaner där avlidna kvinnor och flickor, porträtterade som spöken, fungerar som berättare och fokalisatorer efter sin död. Studien analyserar de återkommande föreställningar om kvinnor och flickor, psykiskt trauma, sexuellt våld och död som uppträder i samtida berättelser, hur dessa ämnen behandlas, och vilka effekter detta får.

På vilka sätt överensstämmer de fiktiva skildringarna med, eller strider emot, vissa specifika förståelser av trauma som är rådande inom litteraturvetenskapen, psykotraumatologin och kulturen? Vilka blir effekterna av att romanerna använder spöken som berättare? Kan traumafiktion som behandlar minnen av våldtäkt genom ett övernaturligt litterärt grepp, där avlidna flickors och kvinnors blickar styr berättelsens fokus, bidra till kunskapen om hur upplevelser av trauma påverkas av den sociala respons som människor får, eller inte får, efter fruktansvärda händelser? Studien frågar hur spökenas relationer till andra, levande karaktärer skildras i berättelserna, och huruvida romanerna använder spöket som förstapersonsberättare för att undergräva våldtäktsmyter. Den utforskar hur romanerna skildrar relationen mellan traumabearbetning och huvudpersonernas upplevelser av maktförlust och brist på socialt stöd efter sexuellt våld. Slutligen undersöks om tvärvetenskapliga perspektiv från traumaforskning, feministisk teori och hauntologi—en teoretisk inriktning som undersöker hemsökelsens temporalitet, etik och estetik i kulturen—kan bidra till nya förståelser av de fyra romanerna.

Materialet som undersöks sträcker sig från 1990 till 2018, och består av Carina Rydbergs *Osalig ande* (1990), Alice Sebolds *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Sara Stridsbergs *Kärlekens Antarktis* (2018) och TE Carters *I Stop Somewhere* (2018). Dessa verk valdes ut eftersom de delar ett utmärkande drag: de använder spöken som förstapersonsberättare i romaner om sexuellt våld och trauma. Huvudpersonerna är kvinnor eller flickor vars upplevelse av världen förändras fundamentalt efter att de har blivit våldtagna—inte bara på grund av trauma utan också på grund av att de inte längre lever. Trots detta har de fortfarande en röst och perception i romanerna. I Rydbergs roman begår huvudpersonen självmord, medan huvudpersonerna i de tre andra romanerna mördas av våldtäktsmännen.

Spökena ger läsaren en inblick i sina subjektiva sinnestillstånd genom att fungera som berättare och fokalisatorer. De växlar alla mellan att återberätta minnen från sina liv, inklusive minnen av sexuellt våld, och att berätta om händelser som utspelar sig på jorden efter deras död. Spökberättaren öppnar upp för karaktärsutveckling för avlidna flickor och kvinnor inom traumafiktionen, och spökets rörelse i tid och rum tillåter berättarna att bevittna scener och detaljer som levande offer för sexuellt våld inte skulle ha tillgång till.

Jag har begränsat mig till skönlitteratur från 1990 till 2018 eftersom jag ser en intressant utveckling under denna period, både i USA och i Sverige. Under dessa årtionden etablerades hauntologi som ett kulturteoretiskt fält, samtidigt som den akademiska forskningen om minne och trauma blomstrade inom både psykologi och humaniora. Som psykiatrisk diagnos introducerades posttraumatiskt stressyndrom (PTSD) på 1980-talet men fortsatte att diskuteras och utvecklas under hela den period som studeras. Slutligen ägde flera inflytelserika feministiska diskussioner om våldtäkt rum under årtiondena efter 1970-talet.

Genom att inkludera både amerikanska och svenska romaner syftar denna studie till att utforska våldtäktstraumalitteratur från två olika språkområden. I en alltmer globaliserad värld där engelska är *lingua franca* får nordamerikansk populärkultur inflytande över författarskap långt bortom USA. Genom att analysera materialet med hänsyn till kulturell kontext syftar studien till att belysa globala likheter såväl som lokala särdrag inom samtida traumafiktion.

Med utgångspunkt i de övergripande disciplinerna litteraturvetenskap och medicinsk humaniora ansluter jag mig till en tradition av forskare som kritiskt granskar förhållandet mellan medicin, kultur och erfarenhet. Mer specifikt behandlar avhandlingen förhållandet mellan psykiatriska, psykologiska och kulturella uppfattningar om våldtäktstrauma. Studien placerar sig huvudsakligen inom tre fält: feministiska studier av sexuellt våld och dess kulturella mekanismer, tvärvetenskapliga traumastudier och litteraturvetenskapliga studier av spektralitet och hauntologi.

Studien undersöker fiktion genom kombinerade perspektiv från litteraturvetenskap och psykotraumatologi, vilket tillför båda fälten kunskap om hur berättelser formar kulturella förståelser av sexuellt våld och dess efterdyningar. Genom att lyfta fram fiktionens relevans bortom litteraturvetenskapen som ämne syftar boken till att vara användbar inte bara för litteraturvetare, utan också för andra forskare som arbetar med sexuellt våld och psykologiskt trauma.

Studien består av sju kapitel. Introduktionskapitlet redogör för studiens syfte och dess frågeställningar, urvalskriterier för det undersökta materialet, samt de vetenskapliga fält som studien förhåller sig till. I det andra kapitlet etableras de teoretiska grunder som vägleder analyserna. Först presenteras relevanta narratologiska begrepp: berättare, fokalisering och genre. Här diskuteras

litteraturteoretikern Mieke Bals insikter om den sexualpolitiska konflikt som avgör vems synvinkel som prioriteras i berättelser om våldtäkt. Därefter behandlas de teorier om hauntologi och spektralitet som används i mina läsningar, framför allt Esther Peerens teori om ”levande spöklikhet” och spektralitet som metafor för de personer som osynliggörs redan i livet genom att nekas handlingsutrymme i samhället.

Sedan beskrivs de begreppsliggöranden av trauma som studien bygger på, och jag diskuterar min definition av traumafiktion som en kategori av berättelser där samtida förståelser av trauma aktiveras på olika sätt. Min studie ansluter sig till litteraturvetaren Roger Luckhursts syn på trauma som en begreppslig knut som innehåller flera olika betydelser samtidigt. I denna studie undersöks hur romanerna kan läsas i dialog med några av de viktiga trådarna i denna knut: främst diagnosen PTSD, psykiatern och forskaren Judith Hermans feministiska traumateori, psykotraumatologiska studier av sociala relationer och trauma, samt litteraturvetenskaplig traumateori inspirerad av psykoanalysen och poststrukturalismen.

Vidare diskuteras den feministiska tradition från vilken jag hämtar min förståelse av våldtäkt och våldtäktsmyter. Jag redogör för den feministiska teoretikern Tanya Serisiers tes, att personliga berättelser om våldtäkt fungerat som en retorisk genre inom feminismen, som både möjliggjort att ämnet överhuvudtaget kunnat lyftas, men också begränsat vilken typ av berättelser som blivit erkända som ”autentiska” vittnesmål om sexuellt våld.

Slutligen redogör jag för studiens metodologi, och kapitlet avslutas med en reflektion över hur de teoretiska begreppen kommer att tillämpas i analysen. Därefter går studien vidare till en kvalitativ analys av romanerna. Varje kapitel ägnas åt en roman, med början i det tidigaste verket, publicerat 1990, och framåt i tiden till de två senaste texterna, publicerade 2018.

I kapitel tre analyseras romanen *Osalig ande* (1990) av Carina Rydberg, där huvudpersonen Marika just begått självmord och blivit ett spöke. Samtidigt som hon följer hur hennes familj reagerar på hennes död berättar hon om det sexuella våld hon upplevde i tidiga tonåren, då hennes styvfar förgrep sig på henne, något som hennes mamma aldrig velat prata om. Jag visar hur romanens användning av spöket belyser en dynamik där offer för sexuellt våld samtidigt upplever oönskad synlighet i förhållande till förövaren och osynlighet i förhållande till alla andra—två tillstånd som tillsammans får långtgående konsekvenser för huvudpersonens självbild under resten av hennes liv. Vidare argumenterar kapitlet för att *Osalig ande* delar många drag med amerikansk våldtäktslitteratur från samma tidsperiod. Att läsa Rydbergs roman som en del av denna tendens, snarare än jämte de svenska manliga författare hon ofta jämförts med, möjliggör en läsning som ser att trauma, till följd av flera olika sorters sexuellt våld, är ett bärande

tema i romanen—i motsats till de tidigare läsningar av *Osalig ande* som tolkat incest som en estetisk chockeffekt.

Socialt betingad skam, till följd av våldtäktsmyter och myter om kvinnlig galenskap, är en central del av Rydbergs traumaskildring. Kapitlet demonstrerar den vikt romanen fäster vid konstnärliga uttryck: via konsten finns en möjlighet att förmedla traumatiska upplevelser som tystas eller missförstås i andra sammanhang. I Rydbergs text är konstskapande ett viktigt sätt att hålla människor ansvariga, medan psykiatrin bara kan erbjuda en förvaringsplats för traumatiserade kvinnor och hindra dem från att skapa obehag för andra. Slutligen visar jag att *Osalig ande* skildrar huvudpersonens minnen av sexuella övergrepp i barndomen som starka och kontinuerliga, medan bortträngande och glömska framställs som en praktik som andra påtvingar offret för att upprätthålla ordningen inom familjen och samhället. Kapitlet argumenterar för att romanen är ett pionjärverk inom svensk våldtäktstraumalitteratur.

I det fjärde kapitlet undersöks Alice Sebolds bästsäljande roman *The Lovely Bones* (2002), där en fjortonårig flicka som faller offer för våldtäkt och mord fungerar som berättare. Romanen skildrar de känslomässiga konsekvenser som sexuellt våld potentiellt kan ha för ett offer vars sociala stödnätverk består av människor som sörjer ett förlorat barn—men som inte har ett språk för att prata om våldet kring hennes död. Istället för att skildra en posttraumatisk upplevelse genom en samtida psykiatrisk förståelse av PTSD-diagnosen använder Sebold spökfiguren för att utforska ett annat känslomässigt register, utifrån den sorg och längtan som uttrycks av hennes familj.

Kapitlet argumenterar för att romanen vill ge sin huvudperson handlingsutrymme genom att uppfylla de önskningar hon hade som fjortonåring: genom sitt spöklika tillstånd ges Susie makt att para ihop människor i kärlekskonstellationer som liknar dem hon känner till genom romantiska berättelser. Jag visar hur hemsökelsen fungerar som ett sätt för berättelsen att skapa kontakt mellan Susie och hennes nära och kära, men att denna kontakt präglas av en kuslig överföring av känslor mellan levande och döda, såväl som en skavande dynamik där offer för sexuellt våld söker tröst genom att dominera andra. Tidigare läsningar har tolkat Sebolds roman som ”terapeutisk”. Jag menar däremot att de berättelser om heterosexuell kärlek och sorg som i den amerikanska 1970-talsförort som skildras finns tillgängliga istället för våldtäkts- och traumanarrativ resulterar i motsatsen: en roman om förnekelse och längtan efter det förflutna.

Kapitel fem behandlar Sara Stridsbergs roman *Kärlekens Antarktis* (2018). Jag argumenterar för att traumat hos berättaren Inni, en missbrukande kvinna som utsätts för ett brutalt mord, skildras som starkt sammanflätat med de mytologiserande berättelser om sexuellt våld och döda kvinnor som omgärdar händelsen i offentligheten. Analysen visar hur Stridsberg komplicerar skildringen av

trauma genom att gradvis avslöja flera andra händelser, förutom mordet, som har gjort att Inni levt i en spöklik tillvaro även före sin faktiska död: fattigdom, upprepad utsatthet för sexuellt våld och katastrofer, ett heroinberoende och en brist på socialt stöd och handlingsutrymme. Den temporala strukturen i Stridsbergs traumaberättelse sammanfaller med samtida föreställningar om komplex PTSD: snarare än att skildra mordet som den definitiva händelse från vilken traumat härrör, visar romanen hur Inni redan långt tidigare gradvis har förlorat sin tro på en rättvis värld.

Stridsberg förmedlar Innis hemsökelse genom dissociativa tillbakablickar där huvudpersonen ser sig själv utifrån, som på ett fotografi. På detta sätt presenterar romanen en vision av våldtäktstrauma där symptom associerade med diagnosen PTSD inte helt kan separeras från mediediskurser om våldtäkt och mord, där offrets kropp fokaliseras genom en distanserad och sexualiserande blick—som internaliseras av offret. Kapitlet avslutas med en läsning av relationen mellan den spöklika modern och hennes barn som en öppning mot ett annat slags liv efter döden. Jag argumenterar för att denna relation leder till att Innis tillvaro inte längre definieras av plågsamma minnen och främlingars blickar, utan av en ny idé om att leva vidare, inte som individ, utan som en del av en värld där godhet trots allt är möjlig.

Kapitel sex analyserar TE Carters ungdomsroman *I Stop Somewhere* (2018), där den tonåriga huvudpersonen Ellie hemsöker platsen där hon blev våldtagen och mördad, och där hon bevittnar hur andra flickor våldtas av samma förövare. Carters roman, menar jag, använder spökets fokalisering för att skildra de potentiellt traumatiserande aspekterna av att efter en våldtäkt ta del av ny information som förändrar ens bild av vad som hände, och varför. Jag visar också hur den nya kunskap Ellie tar del av som spöke utvecklas till en feministisk analys av våldtäkt som en utbredd misogyn ritual, snarare än en enskild händelse. I början av romanen får den kollektiva dimensionen av våldtäkterna Ellie att känna avsky gentemot de andra offren, men kapitlet argumenterar för att denna känsla är instabil. I samband med huvudpersonens förändrade tolkningar av världen övergår avskyn och skammen i solidaritet med andra offer.

Analysen visar hur romanen upprepade gånger poängterar hur sexuella skript (socialt och kulturellt nedärvda regler för sex och sexualitet), liksom mytologier om våldtäkt, död och tonårsflickors psykiska hälsa, formar både flickors brist på sexuell handlingsfrihet och människors tolkningar av övergreppen de utsätts för. Slutligen menar jag att romanen presenterar stödgruppen som ett alternativt sammanhang där läkning, såväl som feministisk medvetandegörande, kan äga rum.

Det sista kapitlet presenterar de övergripande slutsatser som kan dras utifrån den kunskap som inhämtats genom studiens analyser. Jag menar att romanerna

genomgående betonar sociala känslor som skam och ensamhet, snarare än den rädsla som idag främst förknippas med diagnosen PTSD. I några av berättelserna kopplas skam samtidigt till själva upplevelsen av att vara med om ett övergrepp och till att bli betraktad av andra människor på oönskade sätt. Romanerna pekade mot faktumet att ensamhet behöver förstås inte enbart som en patologisk känsla som uppstår i och med traumatisering, utan som en reell situation som offer för våld kan befinna sig i på grund av yttre omständigheter, exempelvis andra människors oförmåga att lyssna. I romanerna utmanas psykoanalytiska idéer om upprepningstvång, samt uppfattningen, inflytelserik inom litteraturvetenskapliga traumastudier, att traumatiska händelser existerar bortom förståelse och språkligt uttryck.

Analyserna har visat att litteraturvetenskapen har mycket att vinna på att fortsätta vidga sin förståelse av traumafiktion bortom psykoanalytiska definitioner av trauma. Jag menar att de undersökta romanerna utgör exempel på en feministisk riktning inom traumafiktionen, där tonvikten ligger mer på offrets egen röst och upplevelse än på omgivningens vittnesposition. De betonar den isolering som människor kan uppleva när de är med om traumatiska händelser som inte lyfts upp som kollektiva katastrofer, utan ses som enskilda fall och privata angelägenheter.

Genom att identifiera intertexter i materialet har studien visat att litteratur är ett väl fungerande medium för att utforska en posttraumatisk dynamik där personer inte bara hemsöks av traumatiska minnen från det förflutna, utan också av tidigare berättelser om liknande händelser som påverkar hur offret själv och andra tolkar våldet. Sammantaget pekar analyserna mot en utvidgad förståelse av traumafiktion. Trauma bör ses som ett mångfacetterat samt historiskt och kulturellt betingat begrepp snarare än som ett oföränderligt psykologiskt tillstånd. Jag har utmanat förenklade och generaliserande traumateorier genom att visa hur spänningar mellan olika kulturella betydelser av fenomenet blir avgörande i skönlitterära texter.

Med analyserna som grund konstaterar jag i slutkapitlet att våldtäkt är ett bärande tema i alla fyra romanerna. Trots att tre av huvudpersonerna avlidit i samband med våldtäkt visar spökenas återberättande av tidigare händelser att det extrema våldet inte existerar i ett vakuum—alla huvudpersoner utom Susie i *The Lovely Bones* vittnar även om flera andra typer av utsatthet de varit med om, som inte blivit bekräftade av omgivningen på samma sätt som deras död blir.

Samtliga romaner i studien innehåller skildringar av hur våldtäktsmyter påverkar olika karaktärers reaktioner på sexuellt våld. Analysen undersökte vilka karaktärers syn på världen som orienterade berättelsernas fokalisering. Trots att romanerna fokaliseras genom offrens blick, menar jag att denna blick

fortfarande påverkas mycket av hur huvudpersonerna ser andra se på dem. Exempelvis kan flera av huvudpersonernas skam förstås i relation till de våldtäktsmyter som cirkulerar i samhället överlag, och som delvis internaliseras av huvudpersonerna själva.

Slutligen har jag funnit att romanerna betonar hur karaktärer som utsätts för sexuellt våld upplever att de efteråt intar en dramatiskt annorlunda position i världen. Romanernas användning av spökfiguren liknar Hermans och Esther Peerens metaforiska bruk av spöklikhet och osynlighet: som en social position som innehas av människor som ignoreras till den grad att de hamnar utanför den mänskliga gemenskapen.

Livet efter döden användes för att porträttera en existentiell kris, där limbot symboliserar huvudpersonernas nya insyn i den världsordning i vilken vissa människor kan bruka hänsynslöst våld mot andra. I de två tidigare romanerna, *Osalig ande* och *The Lovely Bones*, var livet efter döden anmärkningsvärt likt de samhällen som porträtterades. Men tomheten som skildras i *Kärlekens Antarktis* och *I Stop Somewhere* kan däremot läsas hoppfullt: det universum som blottas genom våldet visar sig vara bristfälligt och ofullbordat, ett faktum som innehåller en uppmaning till förändring. Samtidigt innebär spökets rörelsefrihet och osynlighet också ett motstånd i nuet.

Särskilt Stridsbergs och Carters romaner erbjuder, menar jag, en nyansering av den inflytelserika hauntologiska etik som formulerats av Jacques Derrida. Romanernas hemsökelser bygger mindre på idén om spöket som en auktoritetsfigur som de efterlevande måste lyssna till—snarare är hon osynlig och blir sällan hörd. Romanerna skildrar hur hopp uppstår när de levande, mot alla odds, lyckas ta henne på allvar som människa, och detta framställs som den viktigaste etiska nödvändigheten. Genom spökberättarna, menar jag, insisterar romanerna på att offer behöver bli empatiskt bemötta av människor de faktiskt känner—inte bara av terapeuter, socialarbetare, läsare av romaner eller en vag ”offentlighet”.

Spökhistorierna innehåller en implicit uppmaning till läsaren: att reflektera över etiken kring fokalisering—vems perspektiv som gynnas i berättelser—samt att vara medveten om vilka mytologier om våldtäkt som kan påverka dessa perspektiv. Slutligen erbjuder romanerna kliniker och forskare som arbetar med PTSD möjlighet att begrunda de effekter som olika typer av kulturella narrativ, men även de berättelser som konstrueras inom deras egna fält, kan få för personer som lider av trauma.

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