

*The Gothic in Contemporary British Trauma Fiction*

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Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

ISBN: 978-3030267278, 233pp. €72,79.

Ashlee Joyce's *The Gothic in Contemporary British Trauma Fiction* unites two fields, trauma studies and the Gothic, to create a lens through which to view contemporary British fiction's representation of, and response to, large-scale violence. Joyce skillfully demonstrates that the pairing of the Gothic and trauma studies enriches both disciplines, as well as enhances the study of contemporary British (or, though she does not say so, Western) fiction more broadly. Joyce situates works that might not otherwise be thought of as participating in the Gothic, including novels from Martin Amis, Margaret Drabble, Ian McEwan, Pat Barker and Kazuo Ishiguro, within this framework in order to argue both that the Gothic facilitates the representation of unrepresentable trauma in these novels and that such representation complicates the ethical position of both writer and reader in response to that trauma. In so doing, she makes a compelling case for the Gothic as a vital form of representation in an increasingly anxious and violent twenty-first century.

In the introductory chapter, which is the strongest of the seven, Joyce traces the theoretical affinities between the two fields 'as a response to the societal violence of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as an expression of the related crisis of representation brought about by the contemporary witness's highly mediated and spectatorial relationship to this violence' (5). Throughout the work, Joyce remains interested in the ethical responsibilities attendant on writers and readers of trauma fiction alike, positioning them as obligated to bear witness and suggesting that the Gothic offers a 'particular suitability' for combatting 'trauma fiction's rhetoric of aporia' (13). This section effectively draws on work

from scholars in both fields, notably Cathy Caruth, Maria Beville and Roger Luckhurst, to position Joyce's intervention as addressing 'the lack of critical attention to the clash between the pleasurable excesses of the Gothic and the ethical imperative of trauma theory' (23). Ultimately, she makes a strong case for each area strengthening the other, with the Gothic helping advance trauma studies past its position of 'mere unspeakability' (23) and trauma theory showcasing the Gothic's relevance and even necessity as a contemporary literary and critical mode.

Joyce's framework throughout the subsequent five chapters involves the application of her critical lens to a contemporary British novel (or, in the case of the Barker chapter, two) that depicts a significant traumatic event or the threat of such an event. These range from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, to genocide, to anxiety over nuclear war, or the potential for human cloning. One of the book's strengths is in its positioning of such events not only as traumatic but as contemporary Gothic representations of that trauma. The second chapter's reading of Amis's *London Fields* (2018), for example, positions anxiety over the threat of nuclear war (drawing on Derrida's conception of the threat of nuclear weapons as textual) as 'in excess of the contemporary witness's frame of reference' (41) and therefore in alignment with a contemporary iteration of the Gothic sublime. This framing allows for intriguing positioning of space and place, with black holes offered as an example of a Gothic space. Joyce takes pains to make clear, however, that the Gothic offers more than a reconceptualization of spaces and anxieties. The traumatic threat of nuclear annihilation that permeates *London Fields* might easily fall into the 'paradigm of postmodern trauma fiction that wallows in aporia' (64), but the Gothic 'allows for testimony in the face of inexpressibility' such that 'trauma's event horizon may be breached' (64). This chapter clearly illustrates Joyce's point that the combination of the Gothic and trauma theory benefits both, helping the latter to bear witness and the former to move beyond 'critical cliché' (64).

The following three chapters operate in much the same pattern, focusing in particular on ethical questions of testimony and representation in the works of Drabble, McEwan, and Barker. Joyce categorizes these texts as participating in the Gothic even as other critics (and, sometimes, the novel's authors) do not. Her primary interests in these novels are 'the ethical issues present for writers seeking to produce an aestheticized representation of the trauma of another' (107). Each chapter incorporates psychoanalytic theory to interrogate an aspect of violence and witnessing. The Drabble chapter, as with the Amis chapter, presents an evocative application of

the Gothic to contemporary events, suggesting that *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) uses the negative sublime to meet the challenges of depicting the Cambodian genocide. Because the event, as Joyce observes, eliminates its own witnesses and is instead portrayed via mass media to spectators, it ‘demands a mode of representation which acknowledges this paradox and its implications for provoking an empathic response in the reader-witness’ (70), i.e. the Gothic.

Joyce utilizes a different facet of the Gothic, the metagothic, to explore trauma on a more personal scale in her fourth chapter, a reading of McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001). The uncanny nature of the Gothic in particular, is useful to Joyce as she considers how the novel foregrounds the instabilities of the ‘cultural memory that houses the traumas of the twentieth century’ (139). She concludes the chapter suggesting that the ‘awareness of ... ethical ambiguity, heightened by the metagothic ... is one way in which trauma fiction may move beyond rehearsing notions of inexpressibility’ (141). The fifth chapter also utilizes a sub-aspect of the Gothic, which Joyce calls ‘Gothic Othering’ by which ‘victims of trauma ... cast others ... in the role of stock Gothic figures’ (164). This chapter, the only one in the book to consider two novels, charts differences between Barker’s *Regeneration* (1991) and *Double Vision* (2003) to indicate the evolution of ethical perspectives surrounding trauma and witnessing in contemporary British Gothic fiction. The former text, Joyce argues, suggests that ethical witnessing of trauma may be possible, whereas the latter rejects such possibilities. Further, the differences in the texts regarding testimony and ethics represent ‘the duelling tensions at work within the Gothic and trauma theory’ and in so doing ‘reproduce the broader trend ... within contemporary British trauma fiction’ (176). Chapters three, four, and five indicate Joyce’s theoretical framework and her synthesis of viewpoints from different fields, on full display in the first chapter, is still in effect throughout the literature chapters. The dense close readings these chapters provide, however, are not as strong as the more theoretical moments. The first chapter, too, has a strong organizational structure with precise and useful subheadings. These headings are missed in the lengthy literature chapters.

The final sections of the book, comprising a chapter on Ishiguro and a closing chapter that seeks to unite all the novels discussed, bring the work to a strong conclusion. The sixth chapter, reading Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), makes a nice pairing with the first literature chapter on Amis and nuclear anxiety by examining anxiety, particularly in Britain in the 1990s, this time regarding human cloning. For Joyce, this novel presents the clearest example of a

Gothic text ‘subverting assumptions of empathy in the reader-witness’ (179) to ‘move beyond the critical cliché of “unspeakability” that has come to define, link, and, indeed, limit critical approaches to both trauma fiction and the Gothic’ (181). Invoking Freud and Kristeva, but also Haraway and Atwood, Joyce convincingly positions *Never Let Me Go* as offering an alternative version of a trauma narrative that moves beyond readerly complicity and arrives at an ethically distanced reader, a model ‘from which literary trauma theory stands to benefit’ (215).

The concluding chapter builds on this suggestion to reiterate the book’s overall premise regarding the mutually reshaping and beneficial relationship between the Gothic and trauma studies in the contemporary moment because ‘The Gothic’s inherent metafictional awareness is precisely what allows the ethical issues imbedded in the act of reading, writing, and theorizing trauma fiction to emerge’ (223). Joyce rearticulates this idea by drawing connections across all six of the novels she has examined, and while this work is welcome, it does highlight the extent to which such connections were drawn relatively infrequently throughout the foregoing chapters. Overall, though, Joyce concludes persuasively that ‘The Gothic’s inherent metafictional awareness is precisely what allows the ethical issues imbedded in the act of reading, writing, and theorizing trauma fiction to emerge’ (226), and her work in this area will prove useful to scholars of the Gothic, trauma theory, and contemporary literature alike.