

## Survivor Café: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory

**Review Number:** 2215

**Publish date:** Thursday, 18 January, 2018

**Author:** Elizabeth Rosner

**ISBN:** 9781619029545

**Date of Publication:** 2017

**Price:** £20.00

**Pages:** 304pp.

**Publisher:** Counterpoint

**Publisher url:** <http://www.counterpointpress.com/dd-product/survivor-cafe/>

**Place of Publication:** Berkeley, CA

**Reviewer:** Ellis Spicer

*Survivor Café: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory* is novelist Elizabeth Rosner's first foray into non-fiction. Using her experiences as a child of Holocaust survivors, she navigates the audience through the realms of epigenetics [the suggestion of trauma infiltrating familial DNA], psychotherapy, history and philosophical struggles to bring something unique to the study of trauma. Recognition of the value of interdisciplinary study within historical fields is far from universal, but everything has a history and therefore where there are links with other disciplines, historians *should* look to other fields and their methodologies to fill crucial gaps. And this can be observed within Holocaust and other trauma studies. We are living in a society that has seen an explosion of Holocaust art and culture, with so many people having a core set of 'facts' and values as to what the Holocaust was – noting influences from literature, art, psychology, sociology to further our understanding. And yet we are a society on the brink of a world without survivors and first hand testimony, therefore the responsibility falls to those left behind and the second generation. This is the context that Rosner's work appears in, straddling the right to pursue an independent life unhampered by her parents' history and a responsibility to the memories of those no longer alive to tell their tales.

The introduction frames the author's concern and self-ascribed obsession with how memory will continue once the voices of those who experienced it disappear, fuelling the notion that time is running out and that is why we have this surge of interest. Chronologically this book starts towards the end of the story, being Rosner's present, however paradoxical this might seem. Rosner begins with her third trip to Buchenwald with her father in 2015 for the 70th anniversary of liberation. This appears a natural place to begin as we are immediately grounded in the present and modern commemoration of the Holocaust. Here we are introduced to the notion of the 'survivor café', an event taking place at Buchenwald where those who *were* there could interact with those who were *not* there, fostering an intergenerational interaction that Rosner so admires. We are exposed to this third 2015 Buchenwald trip entirely from the author's perspective.

From the opening scenes of the 'Beech Forest' (Buchenwald in German), we are then transported into a thematic navigation of the material, from the language used to define a survivor, to this idea of surrogate parents and the family in survivor communities, a theoretical examination of trauma and the importance of

the second and third generations. Interspersed throughout these broad themes are two further trips Rosner took to Buchenwald with her father in 1983 and 1995. These personal recollections provide a dimension that softens some of the most indigestible theories and concepts that we have come to associate with memory, psychology, psychoanalysis, trauma and history. The final chapter on post memory and the paradox of artifice is particularly evocative as a summary of the author's thoughts on the 'future' of Holocaust memory and the challenges that memory faces. Post memory itself is a theoretical concept that underpins Rosner's question – combining epigenetics, psychology and history – do second-generation survivors like herself inherit these memories in a literal or perhaps symbolic way?

The author is introspective about her own experiences and slots them into a broader framework around genocide and trauma. And indeed there are many things which we *don't* yet understand about trauma and the physicality/anatomy of it – epigenetics is a field still in its infancy, and Rosner herself admits that it will be years before we can understand or *prove* that trauma can be transmitted as if through a mother's milk. The author highlights many different theories and suggestions but is ready to face the notion that there is still so much ground to cover in the field, paving the way for future studies.

Rosner's contribution to the field lies in the book's raw emotionality, personal stories and thematic strengths. Her history as a second generation child provides a sensitive blend of memoir and theory that has echoes of Eva Hoffman's *After Such Knowledge*. The main thematic strength is the 'inadequacy of language', which the author confronts the audience with immediately at the start of her work in 'the alphabet of inadequate language'. The ABC of trauma and genocide with such vivid emotional emphasis that sets the scene, challenging the audience to take it in, highlighting that this book will not just be about the Holocaust. For instance H is for Hutu and Hiroshima just as much as it is Hitler and Holocaust. In other words, this is not just a Holocaust memory examination but a glance at 20th-century historical trauma more generally. This seems to be an echoing resonance in recent years – that it *is* possible to compare genocides without trivialising one or the other, and it is timely that Rosner has chosen to note this as survivors increasingly use their profile to warn of other atrocities in the world today. The author defines this as 'connective' rather than 'comparative' – once again conveying that the words we choose to use have significance and impact. But in her alphabet of inadequate language, the author encourages us to 'Now go back to the beginning. See under: A' – reflecting that we still have so much to learn and understand. Indeed, her metaphorical emphases and emotions highlight what she as a novelist has to add to the field; a level of creativity and sensitivity that sometimes academics struggle to muster.

Rosner finds a key ally with regard to her concerns over the inadequacy of language and her slight revulsion towards Holocaust novels, film and the 'industry' forming around them in figurehead survivor Elie Wiesel. She gives central credence to Wiesel's notion that 'we need to invent a new language' when it comes to the Holocaust as what already exists does not reflect 'the fracturing and silencing of human experience'. And indeed, artists have almost been tasked with restoring language in this context and finding a way, but Rosner finds this view difficult to stomach. Like Wiesel, she is weary of Holocaust literature, deeming it to be rife with 'an absence of humility in the face of what can never be revealed'. The author is far from alone in this assessment – you only have to take a cursory glance at historians' opining about historical accuracy and how survivors recoil from certain cultural material surrounding the Holocaust to realise the subject leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many an audience. It is where Rosner conveys to us her opinions and experiences rather than quoting from others that we find our human connection and valued contribution.

In places, the structure of the book tends towards 'snapshots' which can be difficult to unite in an all-encompassing theme whilst maintaining readability and flow. This is particularly evident in chapter two where she examines the 'S' word [survivor] and is somewhat critical of its usage, tracing cultural comparisons with post A-Bomb Japan and the language used to define a survivor. Whilst there was clearly a unifying theme here, there could have been further discussion by the author herself and linkage with her own thoughts and experiences. In other sections of the book, she takes a more integrative approach, interspersing the tales of others with her own musings and recollections, and we as readers feel that there is a more coherent structure. However, we must all consider that a volume so dedicated to trauma *needs* to be difficult

to read in places – this is not a normal or everyday occurrence, and it is not rational or even explainable, as the inadequacy of language thesis so successfully highlights. I would be interested to hear more about the author's writing process and whether the application of a more creative structure draws on her experience as a novelist seeking to bring back some connection and emotion that academia has lost. Are we as a society becoming desensitised to traumatic recollections of genocide and violence, and are we losing sight of the human element of these stories? As previously highlighted, the key strengths of this book lie in its connection and link to the personal.

Rosner's self-reflective look at the second generation emphasises the connection we begin to feel with her as a reader, bridging this gap between the academic text and the memoir. She is fairly forthright in both the positive and negatives of growing up with a survivor for a father and does not skate over the difficulties she has faced within this context in terms of identity. This in many places is something relatively absent from academic discourse – preoccupied with burden, duty and the notion of transmitted trauma, but notably paying minimal attention to resilience and honouring a familial history. Yes Rosner feels the inescapable pull and responsibility to her parents' memories, admitting that she feels more afraid of forgetting her parents' stories than she is her own, because she fears amnesia and the threat that it poses to how we approach and think about genocide. The Holocaust and the weight of her parents' memories becomes omnipresent, impacting her identity and leading to her quest to speak to as many 'survivors' as possible, soaking up their stories like a sponge and passing on the message, facilitating intergenerational interaction whilst there is still the ability to do so.

Survivor Café reminds us how important intergenerational interaction is when it comes to histories of trauma. This can be seen in the kinship between the first, second and third generations but can also be applied more broadly. For instance, Rosner's epilogue reinforces to her audience that 'we are all obligated to remember, imperfectly and uncomfortably'. This is a call to all, where everyone has responsibility, particularly when the last of the survivors are gone. But yes, memory is imperfect and shouldn't be comfortable – we are arguably in a stage where society as a whole is *too* comfortable with the stories of the Holocaust and are desensitised to the horror, further reflecting the impotency of language to convey such horrors. What the author has given us is occasionally discursive but consistently powerful prose that meticulously blends theory, experience and personality into one coherent narrative.

The author replies:

I'm honored by the thorough and thoughtful analysis undertaken by Ms Spicer; in this review I find plentiful evidence of a genuinely meaningful engagement with my themes as well as the architecture of the book as a whole. It is gratifying to see recognition of important intersections between the personal and the academic perspectives, and to be acknowledged for 'bridging this gap'. I would welcome further discussion of my 'application of a creative structure' in a future dialogue with the reviewer, and with any other readers who might wish to participate.

#### **Other reviews:**

Kirkus Review

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/elizabeth-rosner/survivor-cafe/> [2]

New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/17/books/elizabeth-rosner-survivor-cafe.html> [3]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2215>

## **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/293022>

[2] <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/elizabeth-rosner/survivor-cafe/>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/17/books/elizabeth-rosner-survivor-cafe.html>