

## Meeting 11 3 October 2017, Corsham, 11am

### Writing and Trauma

Our speakers set out to address the question of how writing can help us to deal with a sometimes painful and problematic world. How can writing help refugees? What is the role of empathy in rewriting our lives and the lives of others?

32 members of the BSU Research Community, including PhD students, post-docs, MA students, lecturers and professors sat down around a table to hear two presentations from psychotherapist **Dr Agata Vitale** and psychologist **Dr Judy Ryde**, followed by shorter and less formal presentations from novelists **Fay Weldon**, **Gerard Woodward** and **Maggie Gee** and non-fiction writer **Richard Kerridge** – the last four explained from the point of view of their own individual practice as writers what happens when we rewrite our lives. This was followed by over an hour of discussion and reflection. Many thanks to Empathy Group member **Andrei Branea** for recording those speakers who were willing to be recorded.

**11.00am Coffee and Introductions:** welcome to the new MACW and M Res Transnational Writing students, brought by **Sian Melangell Dafydd**. Non-presenting staff included **Lucy Christopher**, **Kylie Fitzpatrick**, **Lucy English** and **Gavin Cologne-Brookes**; PhD students past and present included **Dr Tanvir Bush** (now as Associate Lecturer), **Dr Alice Herve**, **Linda Blair** and **Camila Fuentes Diaz**. Among news shared during introductions was the publication of **Linda Blair's** new non-fiction book, *Siblings*, and former MA student **Patrick Edward's** two-book contract with Titan Books.

### 11.15 am

Psychotherapist **Dr Judy Ryde** at the Trauma Foundation South West and Senior Lecturer in Clinical/ Abnormal Psychology at Bath Spa University **Dr Agata Vitale** gave two complementary talks on how empathy and writing can both play a key role in the recovery of individuals affected by trauma. Their talks were partly inspired by the creative writing workshops that they have been running together with Dr Andy Smart (Reader in Sociology at BSU) and novelist and BSU Reader Nathan Filer with refugees.

**Dr Agata Vitale** spoke first, saying that her thoughts are a work in progress, as she is still collecting data based on Nathan Filer and Judy Ryde's workshops. She began by defining with clarity and insight some of the psychological terms and the basic theories that underlay ideas about empathy and trauma, eg 'Theory of Mind', which explains the individual's cognitive ability to 'take' another person's perspective, 'cognitive empathy', the cognitive ability to understand situations and events from another individual's perspective, and 'emotive empathy', an individual's ability to understand the other person's feelings and emotions from their point of view. Dr Vitale believes that medications per se are not the answer to the treatment of individuals affected by trauma. Instead, individuals should be provided with a holistic approach, which includes psychological therapy and creativity-based interventions, such as creative writing. Because traumatic events are processed when under

extreme distress they cannot be properly assembled together and remembered as a coherent narrative, and so are stored in the 'nondeclarative' memory, which operates unconsciously and it is not processed in words. Creativity, including creative writing, helps individuals dealing with traumatic memories, including shifting them into the 'declarative memory' where they can be finally recalled and told in a coherent manner. Another point that emerged clearly from listening to Agata Vitale was the idea that refugees struggle to integrate in the UK, (partly because of the way they are processed?) and this adds further stress to their mental health, which has already been impaired by pre-and post-migratory traumatic events, so trauma is multiple.

**Dr Judy Ryde** spoke about practice: her earlier work with groups suffering other kinds of trauma, and then working with the refugees themselves. Finding out what to write about with refugees was neither easy nor obvious, and gaining trust took time. At first, many refugees did not want to revisit bad experiences they have not yet fully processed. A more oblique approach was often called for. Judy told us of a particularly successful session which did not overtly approach trauma at all but centred on people's memory of childhood games, and described a moment of joy when Judy and a refugee writer realised that a childhood game the latter had been describing from their country of origin was in fact another version of the British game we know as hopscotch, linking the old and new home in a single shared experience. Other experiences might be hard for the rest of the group to take in, though telling them might be very important to the writer. What emerged again and again from both talks was the value of empathic listening, the potential value to the speaker of terrible truths being told and heard. Thus someone might learn that listeners could bear to hear them and perhaps feel less alone.

*Dr Agata Vitale is a Bath Spa University Senior Lecturer in Abnormal/ Clinical Psychology. Her current research interests lie on service users and health professionals' involvement and evaluation of mental health services; and assessing multiple levels of stress on asylum seekers. See*

<https://theconversation.com/how-using-paint-pen-on-paper-or-song-to-revisit-trauma-helps-us-put-it-in-the-past-77744>

*Dr Judy Ryde is a psychotherapist and trainer and is a founder of the Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling, co-founder and past chair for Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, and an associate researcher at BSU. She is director of the Trauma Foundation South West, a charity which provides psychotherapy and counselling for refugees and asylum seekers.*

## 12.10

Then it was the professional novelists' and memoirists' turn.

**Maggie Gee, Gerard Woodward, Fay Weldon and Richard Kerridge** discussed first, how far their writing was based on their own lives, and secondly, what the process was of writing fiction or memoir based on traumatic experience.

Novelist and memoirist **Maggie Gee** suggested that in a sense we can ONLY write from our own lives, broadly interpreted to include our dreams and the lives of our friends/acquaintances, though when writing fiction, a transformation takes place that makes her feel she has 'become other people' in another space. This feeling is both solacing – an escape – and empowering – a re-imagining of things that trouble the writer. Memoir and fiction are two different things, to MG – writing about a long-ago attack and subsequent breakdown in her memoir *My Animal Life* brought her suddenly, briefly, surprisingly close to breakdown again, but writing about fictionalised trauma has never had the same effect. Lastly she mentioned the recent joys of writing a fictional badly behaved character who has no empathy – very liberating on occasion to escape the duty to feel with and for others.

Novelist and poet **Gerard Woodward** said that at first he had resisted writing about his own birth family. It was difficult, and perhaps he felt he did not have the skills. When he was in his 30s, he began trying to do this in his novel *I'll Go to Bed at Noon*. Making characters from real-life people offered him some kind of power over what had happened – though he remarked that it's complex, because fictional characters also tend to go their own way. Like MG, he didn't write about his own parents until they were dead. He had noticed one effect at least from writing about the past; before he wrote the fiction drawing on it, there were things he turned over and over in his mind; after writing the fiction, he no longer did that.

**Novelist Fay Weldon** said that though she had spent decades denying it, she increasingly realises and believes that everything she writes is autobiographical. Writers reveal themselves through the wicked characters in their books – there was rueful laughter as she asked, should we all be locked up? However, Fay has written memoir as well as fiction, and there was a difference. A passage she started writing in the first person in her memoir *Auto Da Fay* became so painful that she had to start it again and write it in the third person, from the outside, as if she were a character.

**Non-fiction writer and eco-critic Richard Kerridge** talked about his memoir, *Cold Blood*, which is both a record of a boy growing up with a difficult father and a description of the boy's passion, collecting snakes, toads, frogs and newts. He described how after his father's death in a car-crash when Richard was a teenager, for a long time he became obsessed with needing to know what it had actually been like, the precise facts of the accident and what it felt like – and at the same time was suspicious of his own drive to know. He compared it to a scene in his new book (from which he had read a passage at an earlier Empathy Group meeting) in which he went out to the Great Barrier Reef with a party to snorkel, but became fixated on the true story of a couple on an earlier diving trip who had accidentally been left behind when the boat came back to shore. How long had it taken them to die? What had it been like for them? Did this show a coldness in the writer, or was writing about it a way of dealing with something that was very upsetting, trying to control and stabilise a frightening/disturbing experience? (**Judy Ryde** and **MG** thought the latter, that writing was helping to deal with an imaginative trauma.)