ABSTRACT

RACHEL CANNING

“I Promise I’m Funny: The Serious Role of Humor in Trauma Narrative

(Under the direction of Professor Barbara Bennett.)

With the popularity of sensationalized memoir reaching a crescendo in recent years, a response towards a more casual method of creating trauma narrative began to grow quickly. This came about in the form of humorous retellings of life events, with David Sedaris as the face of the movement. There exists a complex and varied discourse on whether or not humor is a useful way to approach trauma, with concern growing within psychological debates. What this largely leaves out is the necessary discussion on how women’s unique traumas are represented and the fact that female writers’ perspectives are necessarily different from men’s. Women’s voices are often left out of discussions attempting to answer the question of whether or not humor is a useful tool in recounting trauma through writing.

In order to attempt to create a more whole and well-rounded approach to finding women’s niche within humor and trauma narrative, I have re-approached views across multiple scholarly disciplines in a way that puts women’s voices at the forefront of the conversation. Three female memoirists were chosen for this work, with one memoir from each analyzed. They are Jenny Lawson, Firoozeh Dumas, and Judith Henry. These writers have arguably achieved a similar level of success to male memoirists such as Augusten Burroughs and David Sedaris, yet are frequently left out of the conversations around memoir and humorism. As a result of highlighting women-specific issues, the validity and necessity of lifting these voices to the forefront of conversations has been proven through adding analyses of their contemporary texts to existing scholarly discourse across disciplines. This leads to what should be a growing study in memoir/humor discourse in that it can continue to bring in broader perspectives to relate societal influences and interdisciplinary discourse.