



# Trauma : A Genealogy

*By Ruth Leys*

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In a book that is bound to ignite controversy, Ruth Leys investigates the history of the concept of trauma. She explores the emergence of multiple personality disorder, Freud's approaches to trauma, medical responses to shellshock and combat fatigue, Sándor Ferenczi's revisions of psychoanalysis, and the mutually reinforcing, often problematic work of certain contemporary neurobiological and postmodernist theorists. Leys argues that the concept of trauma has always been fundamentally unstable, oscillating uncontrollably between two competing models, each of which tends at its limit to collapse into the other.

A powerfully argued work of intellectual history, *Trauma* will rewrite the terms of future discussion of its subject.

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## Trauma : A Genealogy By Ruth Leys Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #904755 in Books
- Published on: 2000-06-15
- Released on: 2013-10-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .90" w x 6.00" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Can trauma really be relived or is the quality of memory such that it is impossible to repeat experience except by a sort of theatrical simulation? What actually happens in therapy in which repressed experiences surface, and does it really matter whether the remembered trauma is "true" as long as the narrative account serves its purpose? Although she provides no answers to these and other longstanding questions, Leys's groundbreaking book provides a framework in which to consider the conflicts that, since the early 20th century, have beset theorists and clinicians involved in the treatment of trauma victims. Not for the intellectually timid, this book moves through psychoanalytic theory from Freud and Ferenczi to Lacan, encompassing the treatment of trauma victims from three wars and ending with a scathing critique of the newer neurobiologically influenced theories of Cathy Caruth and Bessel A. Van der Kolk. This genealogy does not aim to tie together threads of similar ideology, but instead points out where trauma theory seems to fall into a crevasse and implode. It is impossible to read this book without participating in Leys's unbounded thinking, which, through a process of constant synthesis and leaps of connection, stretches the mind. (June)

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From Library Journal

In this psychohistorical survey of the traumatic 20th century, Leys (Humanities Ctr., Johns Hopkins Univ.) shakes up scientists, clinicians, and postmodern literary gurus with an erudite and humbling critique. This key document for psychoanalysis and hypnosis as well as trauma studies and intellectual history is based on the author's in-depth research and strong background in the history of psychology. In eight chapters (three of which have appeared in scholarly journals) that traverse Freud, multiple personality (Morton Prince), war neuroses and malingering (Sándor Ferenczi, Abram Kardiner, Pierre Marie Janet, William Walters Sargant), posttraumatic stress disorder, and literary theory (Bessel van der Kolk and Cathy Caruth, both of whom she dismantles), Leys elaborates on "tensions between mimesis and antimimesis" in competing theories and treatments of trauma. Leys uses Freud critic Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen to good effect and writes clearly and emphatically enough. Especially in the introduction and conclusion, to be forgiven some lapses into academic gibberish. This is for sophisticated readers. Highly recommended for academic collections in psychology, medicine, history, literary criticism, and philosophy and for larger general libraries. DE. James Lieberman, George Washington Univ. Sch. of Medicine  
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About the Author

**Ruth Leys** is the Henry M. and Elizabeth P. Wiesenfeld Professor in the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University.

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