

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Malady or Myth?

Chris R. Brewin. London: Yale University Press (yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/). 2003, 288pp., \$40.00, (hardcover).

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has elicited a disproportionate amount of debate in recent years. Whereas other psychiatric disorders tend to focus on moderate discussion, PTSD is frequently at the center of much controversy. Chris Brewin's book offers a review of the major issues invoking debate about PTSD. In the initial chapter, Brewin states that "In this book I want to use the existence of these controversies both to reflect upon the social forces that have shaped the study of traumatic stress and to help us understand the nature of trauma itself" (p. 3). In aiming to achieve these goals, Brewin provides the viewpoints of 'skeptics' and 'saviors' (Brewin's terms). The view of the saviors represents the perspective of those who believe that the psychological needs of those exposed to trauma have been neglected for many years and now believe that PTSD is finally recognizing the valid needs of traumatized individuals. In contrast, the skeptical view questions the validity of the PTSD diagnosis, arguing that it is strongly influenced by social constructs that tend to pathologize common human experiences.

Recognizing these two views, Brewin proceeds to review and discuss a number of issues. These include the debate over the validity of the PTSD construct, the causes of PTSD, the neuroscience of PTSD, the recovered memory phenomenon, and the means to treat PTSD. Overall, Brewin's analysis provides an excellent overview of the major controversies surrounding PTSD and the field of psychological trauma. One of the most pleasing features of this book is the manner in which it is written. Although Brewin addresses the various topics with great knowledge and expertise, he explains these topics in a refreshingly clear and understandable style. The result is a book that is easily accessible for the reader who is a novice to the study of PTSD. Lay readers can easily digest this material and feel quite familiar about the current knowledge base about psychological responses to trauma.

Although Brewin attempts a balanced appraisal of the savior's and skeptic's perspectives about trauma, the reader is left in little doubt about Brewin's own perspective. His opinions about a range of matters convey the sense that although he is skeptical about many issues of PTSD, he is at heart a savior. Brewin adopts a more lenient view than some commentators in the field when he discusses the issue of repressed and recovered memories. Although he provides a very good outline of the different arguments involved in this debate, he appears to favor the savior's view that recovered memories can be valid recollections of childhood trauma. It would have been reassuring to have this claim supported by a more detailed critique of the studies conducted. Although Brewin does a nice job of describing many experimental studies relevant to the remembering and forgetting of traumatic experiences, he presents many conclusions of studies without detailing methodological issues that may influence the strength of some of these conclusions. To be fair, Brewin has provided the reader with a comprehensive overview of a very complex literature; the price of such a broad review is that it is probably impossible for Brewin to critique individual studies in close detail. Nonetheless, I felt some issues in this book, including the sections on repressed memories, could have benefited from more attention to the skeptics' view.

In summary, this book is exceptionally well-written by one of the world's authorities on PTSD. Brewin has successfully synthesized the major controversies surrounding PTSD into a single volume that is readily accessible to the lay and professional reader alike. It is probably impossible to write an interesting book on PTSD by maintaining a totally balanced view. Brewin's tendency to adopt a savior's perspective adds to the book's appeal because he actively tries to consider this view in the context of the skeptics' criticisms. The resulting product is an informed opinion about PTSD that has considered the opposing views. Instead of sitting on the fence and not expressing his opinions,

Brewin typically sides with the saviors but always does so with the skeptics' comments at the forefront of his discussion. In this way, Brewin gives us a wonderful insight into some fascinating and controversial issues facing the field of psychological trauma. Both novice and experienced readers about PTSD will thoroughly enjoy this accessible account of this controversial disorder.

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