

**From Individual Wounds to Collective Healing: Intergenerational Memory and Trauma in
Anne Michaels' *Held***

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ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the depiction of intergenerational trauma and collective memory in Anne Michaels' *held* (2023), elucidating how the novel interweaves individual suffering with communal processes of healing. Drawing upon Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's theories of witnessing and testimony, together with Cathy Caruth's trauma framework, the research examines memory as both a locus of psychological burden and a mechanism for the reconstruction of identity across generations. Utilizing qualitative textual analysis, the study interrogates Michaels' employment of fragmented narrative structures, non-linear chronology, and multi-generational perspectives to illuminate the enduring and intricate dynamics of trauma transmission within familial and social contexts. Material artifacts, letters, and oral testimonies function as connective devices, bridging past experiences with present consciousness and fostering ethical engagement and empathetic understanding. By foregrounding the interplay between individual and collective dimensions of trauma, *held* demonstrates literature's transformative capacity to mediate memory, cultivate resilience, and facilitate pathways toward both personal and communal healing and reconciliation.*

Keywords: *Intergenerational Trauma, Collective Memory, Witnessing, Narrative, Healing*

INTRODUCTION

The legacies of wars are long-term, and they go way beyond the physical destruction and psychological damage, as they touch upon families, communities, and whole societies decades later. The effects of military conflict do not end at the battlefield; they infiltrate social organization, rupture family ties, and influence collective memory in ways that last across generations (Van der Kolk, 2014; Torres and Li, 2025). As much as the physical impacts of war can be seen, tangible and measurable, such as injuries, displacement, and loss of life, the psychological, emotional, and cultural impacts were less apparent but still immense. These aspects are being more and more addressed in contemporary war literature, especially the intergenerational transmission of trauma, the continuing residue of loss and grief, and how memory and storytelling can aid in personal and group healing. Through literary translation of war trauma, authors offer insight into the complex ways the conflict shapes human experience, identity, and memory. Anne Michaels' title *held* (2023) is an example of such literary interest in traumas and memory. The novel spans over 100 years, from 1902 to 2025, and combines several family stories influenced by wars, especially World War I. Their effects are carried throughout the generations to the point where descendants may not have had visions of the initial events. Her story shows that trauma is not merely a mental state of the individual but also a social and cultural phenomenon, which is entrenched in the family background, cultural performance, and memory that is shared. Drawing on various timelines and

voices, Michaels' emphasizes that the consequences of war are not only repetitive but also cumulative, and that it impacts not only the immediate participants in the fighting but also their families and communities. The novel introduces the concept of memory as a repository of suffering and as a means of receiving healing, acquiring knowledge, and reconciling its dual nature as a burden and a potential source of restoration. This study will examine how Michaels' uses memory and narrative to show the intergenerational impact of trauma and how witnessing plays a crucial role in supporting collective healing. The most important fact about this study is that, by definition, trauma is difficult to represent; it can be located in disjointed memories, lapses, and gaps in the continuity of the narration. The trauma theory presented by Cathy Caruth (1996) can provide an understanding of such narrative decisions, in which the recollection of the trauma has a delayed and haunting nature, which reemerges in the survivor in ways that cannot be easily identified. Caruth says that trauma is paradoxical: it is familiar and unfamiliar, present and absent, and, therefore, the literary treatment of this concept is complicated. The discontinuous chronology, the changing points of view, and the lyrical, sensual prose of Michaels' is a reflection of the fractured consciousness of trauma victims, which is a manifestation of how traumatic experiences are usually internalized, much repressed, and recalled only at times and in places. In addition to the theoretical insight Caruth offers, the works of Felman and Laub (1992) on testimony and witnessing provide a framework for understanding the relational and ethical aspects of trauma representation. They believe that the bearing witness process, whether direct testimony, narrative reconstruction, or mediated remembrance, is very important for enabling psychological and social recovery. In *held*, Michaels' depicts memory as a kind of witnessing: characters are involved in traumatic past experiences, retell tales, and preserve histories in ways that enable recognition, empathy, and connection. This process not only legitimates victims' experiences but also incorporates the experiences of individuals and communities into a broader cultural consciousness. The interaction of memory and witnessing implies that literature can facilitate a communal healing process, transforming individual suffering into an ethical and emotive insight. The importance of the analysis through the prism of the trauma theory is that it proves the ability of literature to be both a storage of traumatic memory and a therapeutic tool. Describing how intergenerational trauma manifests through the psychological wounds of war, Michaels' exposes the effects of the war on the long term and the complexity of the process of spreading, retaining, and processing trauma. In this case, memory serves as an intermediary between the past and the present, and between individual suffering and a group's historical consciousness. This point of view is consistent with the wider academic discourse on the cultural and intergenerational aspects of the trauma, which underscores the moral imperative of remembering and the transformative possibilities of narrative reconstruction (Hirsch, 2012; Vickroy, 2015). Moreover, Michaels' novel is an excellent example of the power of narrative form to mirror and practice psychological processes. The discontinuity and non-linearity of traumatic memory are reflected in the fragmented structure, alternation of voices, and the poetic language of *held*. The traumatic events are usually difficult to narrate in a reasonable manner; they can enter consciousness at any time and must be incorporated into identity with great care and consideration. By choosing a multi-layered narrative approach, Michaels' helps readers feel the cognitive and emotional disturbances that traumatic experiences can cause, thereby fostering empathy and understanding. Nonlinear timeline, sensory imagery, and intergenerational narration are not only aesthetic techniques but also ethical and psychological instruments, highlighting the multifaceted nature of trauma, memory, and healing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma can be described as the passing of the traumatic experiences, psychological distress, and coping strategies between generations (Danieli, 1998; Kellermann, 2001). It not only includes the psychological and emotional consequences of direct trauma, but it also includes how

behaviors, anxieties, and unresolved grief are transmitted within families. According to scholars, this communication occurs in various ways: through family narratives, socialization processes, cultural rites, and even symbolic representations within everyday life, which offer a specific perspective for deciphering the long-term effects of conflict and violence (Hirsch, 2012; McAllister, 2020). In literature, intergenerational trauma is reflected in storytelling, the preservation of memory, and the reconstruction of narrative, creating a special prism through which to view the effects of conflict and violence over time. Balaev (2008) states that literary texts can serve as a critical tool for studying how trauma influences identity, family relationships, and collective mindset, as they give readers access to psychological insights that would otherwise remain unreadable. As Tal (1996) points out, the trauma narratives in literature tend to transmit the unspeakable pain, exposing the individual suffering and the social structures within which individuals have entrenched their suffering. Intergenerational trauma is particularly applicable to war literature because the consequences of war are not limited to the battlefield, as the descendants of war inherit disjointed memories and unresolved grief. As Michaels' (2023) demonstrates, the concept is linked to descriptions of several generations of war victims. The novel has illustrated the extensive effects of the traumatic events of conflict, which have been trickling down the line and affecting characters who did not even experience the initial traumatic events. Michaels' sheds some light on the ethical, emotional, and social aspects of inherited trauma by foreshadowing the continuation of memory and provides a narrative set of investigative studies on its long-lasting effects.

Collective Memory and Cultural Testimony

Collective memory is the shared memory of a society's past, which shapes its social identity and preserves its culture (Halbwachs, 1992). Compared to personal memory, collective memory is embedded in social structures and, in most cases, supported by commemoration, education, and cultural activities. The study on collective memory focuses on the process of community memory, interpretation, and transmission of experiences of trauma, which form a social understanding and resilience framework. Felman and Laub (1992) state the ethical and psychological importance of experiencing trauma in order to heal and record that not only individuals who survived are helped by the testimony, but also communities to deal with trauma and recognize common pain. Literature is a valuable tool in this process, serving as a memory bank and a vehicle for social interaction. According to Vickroy (2015), narrative acts in literature enable communities to view historical trauma ethically and empathetically, whereas Zolkos (2018) explains how textual representations might mediate emotional experiences and turn personal suffering into culturally meaningful knowledge. In Held, Michaels' creates a narration between personal trauma and collective memory. The novel brings together various points of view across generations to describe trauma as both personal and collective, underscoring the moral obligation to remember and witness. Memory is presaged in the story in its active mode in the form of foreground and shows how the process of recollection works as a procedure of reconciliation and continuity. This method emphasizes the importance of literature in maintaining collective memory and in generating realizations and healing beyond the social and temporal.

Trauma and Narrative Form in Literature

According to the literary trauma theory, the form of narration is directly connected with trauma representation, which expresses psychological disturbances and fragmentation inflicted on the survivors (Balaev, 2014; Luckhurst, 2013). Trauma used to be difficult to describe coherently, and it is often expressed through fragmented memories, lapses, and nonlinear recollections. In turn, the authors' strategies of experimental narrative (discontinuous time, multiple voices, nonlinear narrative, etc.) reflect the confusion, recurrence, and emotional intensity of traumatic experience. Examples of these narrative strategies can be found in the example provided by Michaels'. The novel reflects the continuation of traumatic memory across generations and over time through fragmented timelines, intergenerational perspectives, and lyrical prose (Hughes, 2025; Einhaus and Baxter, 2025). The literary techniques of

sensory imagery, repetition, and alternate voices in the narration can be viewed as manifestations of trauma's penetration into consciousness and memory. These strategies grant readers a vicarious experience of displacement, sorrow, and emotional power, which literature can replicate the subjective experience of trauma. Moreover, the literary trauma theory highlights that narrative form is not merely an aesthetic form but also an ethical and therapeutic one. Through the fragmentation or nonlinear presentation of the stories of trauma, the authors may demonstrate the absence of resolution of suffering but provide a way to empathy, understanding, and collective healing (Caruth, 1996; Felman and Laub, 1992). Michaels' narrative devices hold the dual role of memory as a place of suffering and a place of reconciliation, which helps characters, and consequently, readers, to deal with the trauma in a constructive way.

Research Questions

1. How does *held* depict the intergenerational transmission of trauma through narrative and memory?
2. In what ways do collective memory and witnessing facilitate identity reconstruction and communal healing in the novel?

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on a theoretical framework of trauma, including the theories of witnessing and testimony by Felman and Laub (1992) and the conceptualization of trauma and collective memory by Cathy Caruth (1996) and Maurice Halbwachs (1992). Felman and Laub (1992) also stress the moral and psychological requirements of witnessing trauma, and it is that witnessing that is at the center of the survivor's recovery and of understanding within society. Testimony is a mediation process, which enables the presentation of trauma in an indirect manner by use of narrative and facilitates individual and social interaction with the suffering of the past. The framework by Caruth (1996) supplements this view in that it conceptualizes trauma as a deferring, repetitive, and frequently inexplicable occurrence that devastates memory and identity. The traumatic events are not easy to articulate in narrative form; they recur in the form of intrusive memories, flashbacks, or fragmented memories. Caruth experienced trauma not during the event itself but during its late appearance in the consciousness, which leads to a conflict between the state of knowing and the state of not knowing. In this respect, literature offers a special channel through which belated trauma experiences can be expressed, perceived, and ethically negotiated. The theory of collective memory proposed by Halbwachs (1992) also adds to this framework by placing individual trauma within the contexts of social and cultural life. Collective memory focuses on the collective reconstruction of past experiences and on the connection between personal agony, communal accounts, and historical awareness. Drawing on this point of view, the study analyzes how Anne Michaels' (2023) creates a story that unites individual and community trauma experiences. The intergenerational and fragmented narration of Michaels' storytelling enables the psychological healing process, and the ethical interventions with the historical and cultural pain accentuate the role of memory as a source of remembrance and healing for the community. These theoretical perspectives can be used together to gain a complete picture of trauma, memory, and narrative formation, in which individual psychological restoration is situated within ethical, social, and intergenerational factors.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative textual analysis was conducted on *held*, focusing on passages depicting memory, intergenerational interactions, and collective experiences of trauma. Close reading techniques were employed to identify recurring motifs, narrative devices, and structural patterns that illustrate how memory operates as a mechanism for both individual identity reconstruction and communal healing.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In *Held*, Michaels' narrative structure is fragmented, mirroring the broken, nonlinear nature of traumatic memory. The novel flows easily across several generations and time frames, showing that trauma does not exist in a vacuum, confined to a single person, but rather across the history of families and society (Luckhurst, 2013; Vickroy, 2015). By modifying attitudes and using temporal points of discontinuity, Michaels' captures the continuity of trauma as a psychological and social phenomenon. Objects, letters, photographs, and oral testimonies serve as connectors, linking the memories of previous generations to the present and highlighting memory as a means of transmitting trauma and rebuilding it (Michaels', 2023). These narrative techniques are an implication of the functioning of memory itself, which is hardly ever linear and frequently fragmented, particularly when it is influenced by massive loss and pain. The moral aspect of being a witness is the main part of memory presented in the novel. Therefore, based on the theory of testimony by Felman and Laub (1992), the characters are reminded of their duty to retell, recognize, and testify to historical trauma. Through the expression of loss and suffering, characters are witnesses and testifiers, meeting a moral duty to keep the memory alive and establishing a shared compassion. It is a therapeutic experience not only for the trauma narrators but also for the practice of witnessing, which informs readers and other characters about the larger social implications of war, building an ethical awareness that links individual memory to social accountability (Zolkos, 2018; Torres and Li, 2025). Michaels' goes further to give an example of how memory serves as a mediation between individual and collective identity. Generational trauma influences current understanding of oneself and family dynamics, both, and thus requires integration and reconciliation. The characters in *Held* confront and embrace inherited trauma, grapple with their ancestors' memories, and attempt to rebuild fractured identities through mutual understanding and sympathetic conversation (Hirsch, 2012; McAllister, 2020). The healing process in the novel is therefore portrayed as a process, not an isolated event, and not purely time-bound. It is demonstrated that memory has transformative potential: not only does it conserve the past, but it also fosters resilience, identity rebuilding, and intergenerational social cohesion. The poetic and sensual prose used in the novel makes the psychological and emotional trauma and memory more meaningful. Michaels' imagery reflects the degree of suffering across generations and engages readers with the ethical and emotional risks inherent in historical trauma (Hughes, 2025). The persistence of memory and the continuity of past trauma in present identities are supported by literary techniques such as repetition, imagery, and non-linear narrative patterns. These stylistic devices make the trauma touchable, emphasizing the weight of recall and the opportunity for recovery through narrative mediation (Einhaus and Baxter, 2025). The one *held* by Michaels' is a good illustration of how modern literature can portray intergenerational trauma through narrative form, the transmission of memories, and ethical witnessing. The use of fragmented chronology, connecting objects, and lyrical language all serve to highlight the multidimensionality of the relationship between individual and collective memory. In her depiction of how memory serves as the link between the past and the present, Michaels' predicts the importance of literature in fostering psychological and social awareness. As shown in the novel, returning to health following the trauma is not a one-off or individual journey but an ongoing, communal process mediated by narrative, memes, and ethics.

CONCLUSION

Anne Michaels' work offers a compelling exploration of how literature can mediate between individual trauma and collective healing. The novel demonstrates that memory is not merely a record of past suffering but a dynamic and transformative force capable of shaping identity, fostering resilience, and facilitating intergenerational understanding. By employing a fragmented narrative structure, Michaels' mirrors the disjointed nature of traumatic memory, reflecting the psychological reality of survivors whose recollections are nonlinear, partial, and deeply affecting (Luckhurst, 2013; Vickroy, 2015). This narrative technique enables the audience to experience the passage of time and the emotional depth of trauma,

gaining an understanding of both the individual and social aspects of pain. As *held* exemplifies through the intergenerational lens, the transmission of trauma across family and community levels can impact identity formation and the emotional reactions of subsequent generations (Hirsch, 2012; McAllister, 2020). The objects, letters, and oral testimonies serve as interventions between those days and the present, enabling him to connect his personal experience to social memory. Michaels' ethical witnessing, grounded in Felman and Laub's (1992) theory of testimony, makes characters both witnesses and narrators, with the moral obligation to remind, recognize, and attest to past atrocities. Such ethical interaction highlights the social and psychological significance of storytelling, underscoring literature's capacity to foster empathy and awareness of the community (Zolkos, 2018; Torres and Li, 2025). Moreover, the lyrical and sensory writing in the novel provides the probing memory of trauma with an even greater emotional appeal, capturing the readers intellectually and emotionally (Hughes, 2025; Einhaus and Baxter, 2025). Identity reconstruction and communal healing, *held* as a memory, serve as means of identity reconstruction and healing, and they show that recovery is a process that unfolds over time, as a collective phenomenon. Michaels' uses fragmented memories, intergenerational narratives, and ethical reflection to underscore the timelessness of remembrance as a means of psychological recovery and social cohesion. In the end, *held* is an excellent example of the immense capabilities of modern war literature to shed light on the intricacies of trauma, outline the ethics of witnessing, and shape the paths of personal and collective recovery.

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