Chapter Seven: The Body of Evidence

Family History, Guilt, and Recovery in Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place*

> "Mother is our first home, the original *safe house* – or the idealized fantasy of such a person and place – by which all later spaces of belonging are measured."
> (ROBERTA RUBENSTEIN, *HOME MATTERS*)

> "Our wounds name or identify us; do our names in some way wound us as well?"
> (DENNIS PATRICK SLATTERY, *THE WOUNDED BODY*)

"Dol," "crip," "Sinistra," "la Diavola," "il Demone": these are the names and labels that Dolores, the autodiegetic narrator in Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* (2000), is given as a child by her own family. Dolores's disfigured hand, the result of a fire when she was a baby, is the constant target of her father's superstitious hatred and her sisters' bullying. The loss of two sisters, her father's violence, and her mother's decline into mental illness further contribute to Dolores's bleak childhood. Set in the Maltese community in Cardiff in the 1960s, which loosely reflects Azzopardi's own background,[1] the novel is framed around the narrator Dolores's quest for the past and for recovery. Back in Cardiff after thirty years, on the occasion of her mother's funeral, Dolores sets out to confront her traumatic past and (re)write her life-story as well as the tragedy of her whole family.

1 Several reviews emphasize the novel's Maltese perspective. D.J. Taylor, for example, states that "much of the novel's appeal stems from the unfamiliarity of its subject matter," while Azzopardi herself asserts that the novel was not consciously constructed around a specifically Maltese perspective (See "Out of Hiding").

Engaging critically with experiences of loss and violence, *The Hiding Place* particularly emphasizes the body in its representation of trauma, even more so than Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*. Wounds and scars, injury and branding appear as key topoi throughout the novel. The disfigured body, which bears the mark of the protagonist's primary traumatic experience of being injured in a fire, becomes an object of stigmatization and leads to cycles of physical and verbal violence. The novel's approach to trauma and the body and its complex psychology of stigmatization are, then, the main aspects I explore in the first part of the chapter, drawing on both trauma psychology and disability studies.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on how *The Hiding Place* explores processes of remembering, reconstructing, and narrating a traumatic past, especially in relation to recovery and to ethics.[2] Like *A Thousand Acres* and *Fugitive Pieces*, Azzopardi's novel is profoundly concerned with the complex processes and meanings of recovery. It is structured around the narrator's quest for the past, which is simultaneously an attempt at recovering what was lost and an attempt at re-evaluating what seems beyond understanding in her life-story and family history. Her act of rewriting the past revolves around the metaphors of "unearthing" and "putting things in order," expressing Dolores's desire to piece together the fragments of the past into an overall "design" (33). The novel's two-part structure, moreover, represents the quest for the past as a twofold process. While the first part highlights Dolores's solitary attempt at coming to terms with the past, the second foregrounds her urge to find a sense of consistency with her sisters about their shared past, emphasizing her longing for a familial community of memory. Through its emphasis on Dolores's pervasive desire for consistency, order, and understanding, the novel testifies to the psychological needs of victims of childhood trauma. In this sense, Azzopardi's novel resonates with psychological trauma discourses, while its overall textual politics at the same time signals sceptically that it may be impossible to fulfil these psychological needs. In other words, the narrator's desire for order, control, and stability contrasts with the text's poetics of fragmentation, disruption, and instability.

The novel's complex exploration of trauma and recovery is complemented by its emphasis on the intricate interrelations between trauma and ethics. As in Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, the family here fails to provide a space of safety and protection, constituting instead the main site of childhood trauma. *The Hiding Place*, which depicts six daughters suffering at the hands of their abusive father, also raises pressing questions about trauma and gender as well as about responsibility and guilt. However, Azzopardi's novel represents the familial history of

2 A number of key issues that I explore here regarding the novel's approach to memory, recovery, narration, and ethics are also discussed in my article "Loss, Violence, and the Ethics of Guilt."

trauma filtered through the lens of a decidedly unreliable autodiegetic narrator, which forces readers to reflect critically on how to respond to this trauma narrative and its implicit political and ethical vision. Yet the novel also emphasizes the narrator's psychological needs in relation to ethics. The textual performance of a crisis of ethics stands in tension with the narrator's continual need to engage with and find answers to questions of responsibility and guilt. Because of these recurring tensions, I read *The Hiding Place* as a thought-provoking exploration of the psychology of the posttraumatic that calls for a critical rethinking of some key premises of trauma theory. Revolving around Dolores's quest for memory, meaning, and reconciliation, the text pushes us to reflect on the psychological and theoretical meanings of notions such as "consistency" and "order." At the same time, Azzopardi's novel on childhood and family trauma signals time and again how much recovery is concerned with and dependent on the family.

DOLORES'S "BAD HAND," LOSS, AND "GHOST PAIN"

As part of its critical engagement with trauma and the body, the text foregrounds the complex psychology of loss Dolores develops in response to her primary trauma, a severe burn accident that happened when she was left alone at home as a one-month-old baby. In this accident, Dolores loses the fingers of her left hand, and this injury plays a prominent role throughout the narrative. Besides recurring nightmares of fire, Dolores has dreams of wish-fulfilment, in which dream magic allows her to "hol[d] the handle of the rope with *both* hands" (80). This desire for the recovery of her damaged hand permeates several crucial scenes. When her sister Celesta shows her how powder can make her scar become "almost invisible," Dolores's immediate impulse is the wish for her hand to be restored, too: "I hold out my bad hand for mending" (125). Her fascination with gloves similarly expresses her profound desire for the injury of her hand to be invisible: "My mother has padded out the fingers of the left one with pipe cleaners wrapped with wool. It's wonderful; I can bend them into any shape I like. My hand looks normal, nearly" (164).

While these passages revolve around fantasies of wholeness and recovery, the narrative as a whole suggests that Dolores responds to her hand through a profound awareness of difference and loss but, unlike her environment, she does not necessarily perceive it through the lens of normality versus abnormality. Dolores's meditation on how ice cream changes the visual appearance of her healthy right hand is a case in point: "[A]ll I could think of was how my one hand suddenly looked like the other, with the fingers hidden behind the cone and the thick drips running down" (187). Interestingly, this passage reverses the fantasies expressed in the previous

passages; here, Dolores focuses on the illusion of the normal hand looking like the disfigured one. Another telling example is her fascination with a one-eyed boy in the neighbourhood: "I'm curious about people who used to have two of something and then end up with one only" (94). The word "curious" indicates Dolores's interest in the phenomenon of loss rather than a perception of abnormality in a negative sense.

The theme of loss and recovery reappears in complex ways in Dolores's description of "Ghost Pain," an enigmatic sensory perception that seems to originate in her missing fingers. Through the pain, her missing body part manifests its presence in a strange and disturbing way, a phenomenon called "phantom pain" in medical terminology. As medical studies emphasize, "phantom limbs" are experienced as strikingly real, as integral parts of the body (Halligan 254-55). According to Dolores, her "Ghost Pain" puzzles her doctor: "Dr Reynolds says it would be normal if I'd ever had my fingers, but he thinks it's strange I should miss something I never knew" (80). Dolores highlights, however, that she does *not* find it strange, drawing a parallel to the loss of her sister Marina, who was "bartered" (i.e., gambled away) to a sinister business partner of her father's when Dolores was still a baby: "I miss Marina, and I never knew her" (80). The text here engages with the psychology of loss in a thought-provoking way, shifting the moment of loss to an even earlier point than the traumatic losses that determine the childhood of the protagonist-narrators in *Mandeville* and *Fugitive Pieces*.

The passages above raise crucial questions about the distinction between "absence" and "loss" that Dominick LaCapra investigates in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. LaCapra conceptualizes loss as historical and absence as transhistorical, asserting that "absence is not an event and does not imply tenses" (49). The doctor's assertion that "it's strange that [Dolores] should miss something [she] never knew" resonates with LaCapra's claim that "one may recognize that one cannot lose what one never had" (50). What the doctor suggests is that it would be natural for Dolores to perceive the lack of her fingers as absence rather than loss because she was too young to consciously experience the accident and, thus, lacks the temporal perspective inherent in the idea of loss. Through Dolores's statement that "[i]t's not so strange to [her]," the text implies that, although technically, "one cannot lose what one never had," to return to LaCapra's assertion, one can in fact feel a sense of loss about something that one once had, even if one did not consciously experience the loss. Due to infantile amnesia, Dolores cannot possibly have any memories of her sister Marina or of her left hand prior to the accident; nevertheless, she suffers from a painful feeling of missing something and of being haunted by a kind of ghost presence with regard to both. And, in contrast to Shelley's Mathilda, whose loss of her mother also precludes memory and conscious experience, Dolores deliberately confronts her sense of loss.

One reason why the logic of loss seems to prevail over that of absence is probably that with regard to both her sister and her hand, Dolores can imagine and construct the specific historical moment of loss that is unavailable to her memory. The idea of loss implies the possibility of narration and historicization, and, as LaCapra further emphasizes, thinking in terms of loss opens up perspectives of restoration and recovery, while absence represents a more constitutive, elemental state that tends to foreclose ideas of retrieval and recuperation (51-52). In this sense, Dolores's pervasive and multi-faceted sense of loss – with regard to her hand, Marina, her family, and her past – is one of the main forces driving her act of self-narration.

THE "EXTRAORDINARY BODY" AND THE DYNAMICS OF STIGMATIZATION

While Dolores's reconstruction of how she perceived her physical otherness as a child revolves mainly around her damaged left hand, the tragic fire accident remains inscribed on her body in several ways – through her hand, her scarred face, and her burned scalp. The scarring of hands and the face are especially significant because they are the most socially visible body parts, and, functioning as key organs of perception, they also constitute both the boundary and the connection between the individual and the environment. As psychologists Markus Landolt, Sandra Grubenmann, and Martin Meuli emphasize, the visibility of burn disfigurements poses the biggest challenge to an individual's adjustment to a burn injury as well as to his or her social acceptance ("Adjustment" 1042). It is surprising, then, that the scars on Dolores's face and her lack of hair are mentioned far less than her hand. Except for the scene with Celesta's powder and a moment when she studies people's heads, highlighting that "everyone blames the shock of the fire for [her] lack of hair," for the "brittle furze on the crown of [her] head" (124), the focus is entirely on her hand. Does this suggest that the fire's impact on her face and scalp is not as bad as on her hand? Does her hair eventually grow normally and her scars become less visible? Or might the disfigurement of her face be so traumatic that she cannot confront it?

Since the entire narrative is filtered through Dolores's perspective, there is no conclusive answer to these questions; the novel refrains from explaining why her physical disfigurement is explored almost exclusively in relation to her hand. What the novel signals powerfully, however, is the sharp contrast between Dolores's reaction to her burn injuries as a child, focused on loss more than abnormality, and the reactions of others. Dolores's description of the traces that the flames left on her body is pertinent here:

But the left hand. People who don't know me stare when they see it. They look away, then sidelong at my face in search of further evidence. There are scars there too: if they get close enough they could find them. But not many get that close: an outstretched hand, my left one – it's enough to ward them off.

I lost the fingers. At one month old, a baby's hand is the tiniest, most perfect thing. It makes a fist, it spreads wide, and when it burns, that soft skin is petrol, those bones are tinder, so small, so easily eaten in a flame. (33)

This passage is symptomatic of Dolores's concerns in the way it immediately shifts from describing the baby's physical injuries to emphasizing the reactions of others, the gaze of strangers. A retrospective attempt at capturing what she looked like after the fire, Dolores depicts the physical disfigurement of this "most perfect thing," her hand, as functioning as a barrier to the outside world.

The text implies, in fact, that Dolores experiences her damaged hand less as a trauma of physical disfigurement than as a trauma of stigmatization; it explores in detail processes of othering and stigmatization within the family.[3] The sections of the narrative focalized through her perspective as a child suggest that her family responds in far more negative ways to her damaged hand than she does, thereby aggravating the impact of her trauma.[4] Frantic superstition makes her father interpret the accident as a sign that "a devil had come into his house" (264). Moreover, Dolores recalls how her sisters Rose and Luca treated her as an inferior human being, bullying her repeatedly because of her hand. In this way, the trauma of being burned leads to further cycles of trauma.

In its depiction of stigmatization, *The Hiding Place* resonates with *The Wrongs of Woman* and its representation of Jemima as an outcast figure. Both novels emphasize how difficult – or even impossible – it is for a traumatized and branded child to fight against cycles of stigmatization within the family and the wider social sphere. In the case of both Dolores and Jemima, their siblings are so deeply influenced by their parents' branding of one child as inferior and hated that they begin to participate in the process of stigmatization themselves. Furthermore, both novels highlight how society reinforces and perpetuates the stigmatization experienced in the family. In *The Hiding Place*, staring functions as the primary means of stigmatizing in the social sphere. As we have seen, Dolores imagines that she was the ob-

3 For a detailed discussion of the novel's representation of the disfigured body and processes of stigmatization see also Schönfelder, "Verletzte Grenzen."

4 According to psychological studies, familial support is the primary indicator (more important even than burn severity) for burned children's "psychosocial adjustment" and their capacity to cope with the injury (Landolt, Grubenmann, and Meuli, "Family Impact" 1149). *The Hiding Place* emphasizes the crucial importance of the familial environment ex negativo, through the depiction of a severely dysfunctional family.

ject of people's stares as a baby, and she also describes in detail how the shop assistant in a local shop would always obsessively "inspect" her hand. As Rosemarie Thomson emphasizes in her discussion of staring, "stigmatizing is a social process that hurtles a body from the safe shadows of ordinariness into the bull's eye of judgment" (*Staring* 45). Dolores, then – in those moments when she is socially exposed – becomes a particularly visible or, in the words of Thomson, "stareable" subject (or object). Similarly, Jemima perceives herself as literally branded in the public eye: "I was sent to the neighbouring shops with Glutton, Liar or Thief, written on my forehead" (95). Stressing the devastating impact of stares even more explicitly than Dolores, Jemima emphasizes that becoming a public icon of contempt and scorn was "the most bitter punishment" (95).

The Hiding Place explores processes of othering not only through the phenomenon of staring but also through names and naming. Dolores's sisters call her "Crip" or "Stupid Crip," while her father refers to her as "Sinistra," "La Diavola," and "Il Demone." The derogative label "Crip" reduces Dolores's identity to one defining characteristic, her disfigurement and disability, while her father's labels dehumanize her, identifying her as a cursed being. These acts of naming within the family can be read as examples of what Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech* discusses as "injurious speech" or "hate speech." Exploring various ways in which words can wound, in which speech can produce injury, Butler highlights names as one important phenomenon that illustrates our "linguistic vulnerability" (30). As Butler asserts, "one is not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned" (2). In this light, the names and labels Dolores is called in her family can be read as performative acts that constitute her as a subject; these acts of naming determine – in a process of "sedimentation" produced by repetition – her identity through verbal wounding centred on her physical wound. Throughout the novel, Dolores emphasizes these forms of linguistic injury, which suggests that even though she seems to learn about some of the names her father used for her only indirectly, she perceives the impact of such names as powerful. The novel implies that, as a child, Dolores struggled to resist the force of injurious names and not to think of herself as being defined by her left hand, which her family – in another example of "hate speech" – always called her "bad hand."

Similar to Ben in *Fugitive Pieces*, Dolores also highlights the significance of her given name. She reports how disappointed her father was when he found out that she was not the long-desired boy he had hoped for, and she sketches the abrupt shift of her role from "luck personified" to an unwanted child who brings misery and bad luck to her family (12). This shift is reflected in the act of naming. While her father had proudly imagined that he would name his first son "Fortuno," the birth of another girl leaves her parents at a loss for a name, until "Dolores drifts up in miserable smoke" (15). The misery surrounding her birth, as Dolores implies, is

firmly inscribed on her identity through her name, which is derived from the Latin word "dolor," which signifies "pain." Not unlike the naming of Ben in Michaels's novel, the naming of Dolores is shaped by her parents' distress. Ben's parents' choice is described as essentially a protective gesture; nevertheless, both acts of naming are indicative of the parents' difficult relationship with their last child and their struggle to fully acknowledge this child in its own right. Dolores's narrative also implies, then, that her name does not quite fit. At her hospital bed after the accident, her father "chant[s] Bambina, Bambina, Bambina" because her name "has deserted him" (67); her mother, when writing down the names of her children on the back of a photograph, misspells and crosses out her name twice, "as if she hadn't got used to this last child" (248). Her nickname "Dol," finally, with its obvious resonances with the word "doll," could be read as another injurious name, implying a lack of agency and independence. Dolores's retrospective account, thus, repeatedly emphasizes names as playing a crucial role in the formation of her identity.

The act of naming or addressing someone, as Butler further emphasizes, tends to involve the act of placing the subject, even if "such a place may be no place" (4). In this sense, her parents' initial struggle to find a name for Dolores is an early indication of the difficult place she occupies in the family. More importantly, performatives such as "Crip" and "Sinistra" locate Dolores in the no-place of the outsider or outcast; because she is visibly marked, her family tries to make her socially invisible. She is mainly kept away from school and not allowed to play in public with her sisters or move freely around the neighbourhood. As Rose asserts, she is "bad luck and […] mustn't be seen" (79). Even more strikingly, Dolores is not only hidden from the public eye, but she is also pushed into hiding within the domestic sphere. As a baby, she has to sleep in a closed chest – a precaution against her father's hatred and violence. Later on, her father cruelly locks her in the rabbit cage in the garden. Through these claustrophobic, inhuman "hiding places," whose importance is signalled by the title, the novel ironically reverses the conventional meaning of a "hiding place" as a sanctuary. The degrading, dehumanizing hiding place of the rabbit cage is not a place of safety and shelter, but a place of confinement and exclusion, a place where Dolores is not hiding but being hidden away.

The Hiding Place is a thoughtful meditation on the psychology of stigmatization and on how a marker of otherness becomes a stigma. The label "Crip" identifies the protagonist according to her physical disability, which suggests that we can read Dolores, in the words of Thomson, as a "disabled figure" with an "extraordinary body" (*Extraordinary*).[5] As Thomson highlights, "the meanings attributed to ex-

5 *Extraordinary Bodies* is an attempt at bringing into dialogue literary studies and disability studies. As Thomson puts it, one of the main aims of her book is to "begin formulating

traordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships"; it is "social framing" and cultural norms that determine the value and the meanings of bodies that disrupt "the normal" (7, 31-32). Through Dolores, Azzopardi calls attention to the social framing of the disabled body. However, it is important to note that while the protagonist-narrator and the people around her construct her body as different and deviant, these internal and external constructions are focused primarily on what her body looks like, or does *not* look like, but they never refer to what her body cannot do, to any tasks it fails to perform. One exception is the scene when Rose shows surprise at the neat appearance of a list that Dolores has written – "as if the lack of one hand meant the other would be useless," Dolores comments (222). This scene resonates with the rhetoric of disability, which also applies to the repeated address "*Stupid* Crip" (emphasis added). Yet on the whole, *The Hiding Place* uses a rhetoric of deformity and disfigurement in its exploration of physical otherness much more than a rhetoric of disability and impairment.

With regard to stigmas marked by visual differences, Azzopardi's second novel *Remember Me* (2004) is a revealing counterpart to *The Hiding Place*. In the later novel, the autodiegetic narrator Winnie, a Norfolk bag lady in her seventies, who, like Dolores, narrates her life in retrospect, records how strongly her environment responded to her "telltale" red hair. Winnie's hair parallels Dolores's hand in the way her family regards it as a physical mark that needs to be hidden. Her grandfather obsessively tries to make it invisible by forcing Winnie to hide her hair under a beret when she goes to school. Yet because all the other girls wear plaits, the beret sets her apart; her red hair is soon discovered and becomes the target of the girls' bullying, who start calling her "pikey" (76). Winnie's hair, as Gloria Lauri-Lucente puts it, marks her as "the bearer of all that is different, and therefore the one to be excluded in a world in which marginality is the seemingly logical destiny of physical difference" (79). In the course of the narrative, Winnie is repeatedly forced to remove this visual marker of difference by changing her hair, and these physical transformations symbolically erase her past identity.[6] Thus, *Remember Me* calls attention to how crucially the "social framing" of the body determines which physical

what disability studies might look like as a subfield in literary criticism and cultural studies" (16).

6 *Remember Me* also echoes *The Hiding Place* in its emphasis on (injurious) names as a powerful means of identification and stigmatization. Winnie highlights the relentless struggle between her father and her grandfather about her name and records how she was first Patsy, then became Lillian, and later on Winnie. Winnie depicts these conflicts of naming as related to her ensuing identity crisis and also stresses the impact of the derogatory labels she was confronted with in the course of her life: a "hobo and a tramp and down-and-out; a dipso, a wino," a "beachcomber," and a "derelict" (111).

features are perceived not just as different but as abnormal; it demonstrates how even an unusual hair colour can cross the boundary to a stigma.

In *The Hiding Place*, the social framing of the "extraordinary body" is foregrounded especially through the emphasis on superstition. It is through the lens of superstition that her father perceives her disfigured body as a "sinister" object, a cursed body. Dolores's account of her childhood suggests that her father's rhetoric of cursedness had a powerful impact on her familial and social environment, especially on her sisters. Rose still calls her "Crip" at their reunion as adults (223), which demonstrates the persistence of this stigma. A key question that the text raises, then, is why Dolores's family responds in such a powerfully negative way to her, that is, why she becomes an object of superstition to this extent. I want to pursue one line of explanation related to general issues about trauma and the body.

Trauma, generally speaking, involves a confrontation with human vulnerability and mortality, and so does seeing the visible marks of trauma. While many trauma victims suffer from invisible emotional and mental wounds, Dolores also has wounds that are visible. Through her physical disfigurement, she is literally marked as a trauma victim; the state of woundedness associated with trauma is plainly exposed on her body. "Wounding," as Dennis Slatters asserts, "is one way the body shows its hyperbole, drawing our attention to it in unexpected ways" (11). In other words, the wounded body, and especially the disfigured body, can be read as a living memento of human vulnerability and mortality, that is, as an image or icon of trauma. A body like Dolores's calls attention to its materiality and physicality, forcing us to see the body in shapes that we do not expect, and often do not want, to see. As Thomson writes, "[m]odern culture's erasure of mortality and its harbinger, bodily vulnerability, make disabled bodies seem extraordinary rather than ordinary, abnormal instead of mundane – even though in fact the changes in our function and form that we think of as disabilities are the common effects of living and are fundamental to the human condition" (*Staring* 46). Thus, devaluing disabled bodies as other may be part of a psychological defence mechanism against the recognition of vulnerability and mortality. In this sense, physical disability can be perceived as a threat: "That anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities" (*Extraordinary* 14). In other words, an abnormal body may represent a particularly "threatening" other because it confronts the subject with his or her own vulnerability.

The Hiding Place demonstrates precisely this phenomenon. It shows how a trauma victim can become an object of fear, and how fear drives stigmatization. The fact that Dolores's father Frank locks her up in a cage suggests that he fears her like a dangerous animal; some potential foster parents are more scared by the prospect of having Dolores, a "damaged child," in their family than her pyromaniac sis-

ter (193); and her classmates refuse to sit with her because they fear she is somehow contagious. Finally, at the reunion with her sisters, Dolores finally realizes: "[*T*]*hey were afraid*. They still are" (272). Hence, fear alienates Dolores from her family and community.

With regard to these dynamics of stigmatization, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a revealing point of comparison. Frankenstein's creature is of course a being with superhuman strength, which contrasts with the vulnerability of the burned child in *The Hiding Place*; far from "disabled," the creature's body is "super-abled." Yet what both have in common is that their fathers and, as a consequence, their families and wider social environments reject them based on their physical disfigurement, based on specific features of their bodies that do not fit in the socio-cultural image of normal human bodies. In both cases, disfigurement makes their environment blind to their character. Their physical otherness becomes their stigma; their physical branding also becomes a social branding, and their bodies are associated with the monstrous and the devilish respectively. In *Frankenstein*, which has repeatedly been read as a kind of "patchwork text," the protagonist's physical scars are reflected in the novel's scarred textual surface, and, as I will show later in this chapter, the same is true of *The Hiding Place*, a text full of ruptures and gaps.

According to Norbert Greiner, *Frankenstein* can be read as a turning point in the history of literary and cultural representations of the scarred body: Greiner asserts that from *Frankenstein* on, scars in literature tend have negative connotations; they tend to be interpreted as signs of the non-human, as marking a subject who is both physically and morally deformed – in sharp contrast to mythological heroes such as Odysseus, whose scar functions as a positively connoted mark of his individual identity and history (203, 207). Focussing on the disabled rather than the scarred body, Thomson argues along similar lines: "The saint's stigmatic wounds, Oedipus's and Socrates's lameness, Tiresias's and Homer's blindness, and Philoctetes's wound certainly seem to function as ennobling marks rather than signs of diminishing abnormality like those of the modern 'cripple'" (*Extraordinary* 40). These shifts in literary and mythological discourses once again demonstrate the extent to which perceptions and representations of the scarred, disfigured, or disabled body hinge on specific cultural and historical contexts.

Thomson claims that in modern texts, unlike in ancient ones, disabled characters are almost never main characters and tend to be made "into freaks, stripped of normalizing contexts and engulfed by a single stigmatic trait" – freaks whose bodies serve as "spectacles" (*Extraordinary* 9-11). *The Hiding Place*, however, significantly departs from this pattern. The protagonist-narrator is disabled, and while some characters do reduce the protagonist to a "spectacle of otherness" (9), the novel as a whole makes readers see her as a complex human being. Through a conjunction of discourses on disability and trauma, the disabled figure is here represented in a way that encourages processes of identification and empathy in the

reader rather than processes of othering. I argue, then, that Azzopardi's novel depicts diegetically – rather than performing textually – the stigmatization of the extraordinary body. While Thomson sets out to "denaturalize the cultural encoding" performed by literary representations of disabled figures (5), *The Hiding Place*, in fact, enacts crucial aspects of this critical denaturalization that Thomson attempts in her readings. By exploring stigmatization through the eyes of a "physically different" subject, the novel allows insight into the psychological impact of processes of othering.

VIOLENCE, GUILT, AND GENDER

The depiction of stigmatization is one way in which Azzopardi's novel calls attention to the interrelations between trauma and guilt. Similar to *The Wrongs of Woman*, *The Hiding Place* highlights how much the protagonist is both wounded and wronged, and its approach to interpersonal trauma within the family raises important questions about trauma and ethics as well as about trauma and gender. Dolores's father, the primary agent of stigmatization and violence, is particularly important in this context; his six daughters and his wife all suffer because of his ruthlessness and cruelty. Recalling the tyrannical father figures in *The Wrongs of Woman*, Frank Gauci is depicted as a callous and cruel parent who is responsible for the family's tragedy.

The way Frank is introduced on the first pages of the novel is telling. Dolores is on the lookout for him so that she can warn her mother once he approaches. As she is waiting, she reconstructs, based on her mother's stories, how she had to be hidden from her father, who "would have smothered [her]": "I think about the little baby in the chest, and my father, creeping into the bedroom like a pantomime giant. He's lifting his legs very high, placing one shiny hobnail boot slowly in front of the other. He has a pillow concertinaed in his hands; he's sniffing the air for signs" (5). This disconcerting image of the father is extended to a detailed portrayal of fatherly irresponsibility, callousness, and violence over the course of the novel. For instance, Frank's obsession with gambling not only results in the family's financial downfall, but he also gambles away one of his daughters, Marina, giving her to a ruthless business partner in exchange for a house, a job, and money.

Moreover, the novel paints a decidedly negative image of this father figure through its many allusions to his physical violence. Dolores's description of her father hitting Fran is typical: "Fran knows the best way to behave in these moments. We all do. She stays absolutely motionless, taking small sips of air through her mouth" (113). Dolores here signals that physical violence at the hands of their father is part of the sisters' everyday experience. At the same time, the text contains

resonant details which suggest that a lot is left unspoken. Some of the most graphic images of the father's cruelty occur in connection with the family's rabbits. Dolores reports how her father dissected and killed one of these rabbits – loved by the children as pets – in front of her, peeling the fur, chopping off the feet, and exposing the different organs, "with his hand inside the rabbit" (156). It is significant that her narrative devotes more attention to her father's violence towards the rabbits, which function as the epitome of innocence violated, than towards her. Does this suggest that Dolores represses the memories of her father's violence against her? Could the memories of her father and the rabbits be interpreted as variants of screen memories (in Freudian terms)[7] and the rabbits as a kind of placeholder, screening off the memories of her own injuries? The novel refuses to provide answers to these questions, yet it sets up a close connection between Dolores and the rabbits, not only through its emphasis on Dolores's empathetic suffering with the rabbits but even more through the rabbit cage that the father perverts into a temporary prison for his daughter. Through the cluster of images revolving around the rabbits, the novel powerfully evokes Frank's cruel, de-humanizing treatment of his child. While Jemima in *The Wrongs of Woman* uses a polemical rhetoric based on animal comparisons to express the extent of the humiliation and maltreatment she suffered, *The Hiding Place* pushes the phenomenon of animalization even further, with the traumatized child being literally and physically placed among animals.

With its depiction of an abusive, ruthless father, its representation of several female trauma victims, and its choice of a female "marginalized" figure as the first-person narrator (Kačkutė 379), *The Hiding Place* can be read as a feminist novel, even though its specific feminist vision is not easy to define. Like *The Wrongs of Woman*, Azzopardi's novel situates children's and women's traumatic experiences within familial and social contexts – though the former panoramically spans different social classes, while the latter puts the focus on a clearly defined community, the community of Maltese immigrants in Cardiff. While both novels explore the dynamics between male perpetrators and female victims, their feminism operates in different ways. *The Wrongs of Woman* abounds with general statements about the deplorable circumstances of women, the cruelty and tyranny of the male sex, and the injustice created and perpetuated by patriarchal society. In contrast, the feminism of *The Hiding Place* is less explicitly verbalized, less directly stated. Both Maria and Jemima function as mouthpieces for Wollstonecraft's feminist politics and are, thus, in spite of their emotional involvement in the stories they tell, set up as essentially reliable narrators. In contrast, Dolores, who is represented as an unreliable narrator in several ways, is not given the authority to draw socio-political conclusions about the general implications of her life-story. Azzopardi also has Dolores narrate her tale in far less straightforward and positivistic terms than Woll-

7 See Freud's "Screen Memories."

stonecraft's Jemina. *The Hiding Place* lets the scenes of male violence against children speak for themselves, drawing on the power of "the many graphic images that burn in the mind unresolved" (Adams 18) and leaving readers to form their own conclusions. In this sense, the text displays features that recall Rothberg's notion of "traumatic realism." Traumatic realism, according to Rothberg, expresses the "search for a form of documentation beyond direct reference and coherent narrative" (101); it is "a realism in which the claims of reference live on, but so does the traumatic extremity that disables realist representation as usual" (104). It is precisely in this way that the novel expresses a commitment to the referential and documentary: like *The Wrongs of Woman*, it seeks to document familial and social scenes of violence, but it does so by self-reflexively troubling straightforward acts of reference and narrative coherence. The novel relies on the reader's recognition that the personal is political – a central notion asserted by Wollstonecraft and many feminists after her – but without saying so explicitly.[8]

The novel's approach to trauma and gender should also be considered in connection with issues of trauma and ethics. In particular, the text highlights the extent to which traumatic experiences, especially interpersonal trauma, inevitably involve questions of guilt and responsibility. The pressing need to reflect on these questions is encapsulated in Dolores's powerful statement: "Children burnt and children bartered: someone must be to blame" (75). The novel here calls attention to the child's vulnerability and issues of parental responsibility. It resonates with Adriana Cavarero's claim that "it is precisely the thematization of infancy that allows the vulnerable being to be read in terms of a drastic alternative between violence and care" (*Horrorism* 24). *The Hiding Place* explores this "drastic alternative" by depicting parental wounding rather than caring. Like the novels by Wollstonecraft and Smiley, it emphasizes the essential vulnerability of children by depicting a family where a parent functions as the perpetrator of trauma.

The Hiding Place calls particular attention to the complexity of guilt in connection with interpersonal trauma, emphasizing the difficulty of any clear or appropriate moral judgment. First of all, a particularly unsettling aspect of the novel's approach to guilt is its representation of Dolores's attitude to her father's guilt, an attitude full of tensions and contradictions. A few times, Dolores identifies her father's guilt explicitly. Moreover, the way Azzopardi has Dolores repeatedly juxtapose two parallel strands of narrative – switching back and forth between her father's dubious business transactions and the children's and mother's sufferings – also contributes

8 As Terry Eagleton asserts, the close interrelations between the private and the political is a recurrent key issue in novels by women writers: "[F]ew things are more politically and historically important than sexuality and the family, which is why Woolf, like Jane Austen, can engage with the wider world simply by recording what goes on at home" (*The English Novel* 322).

to a sense of blame. This structural pattern implicitly reinforces the charge that Frank is never where he is supposed to be, ruining rather than supporting his family. However, the fact that so much space is devoted to his life-story, his thoughts, and his feelings suggests that Dolores attempts to understand rather than simply condemn him. She makes the effort to reconstruct events from his perspective rather than simply pass judgment on him from her own perspective.

The novel here hints at a psychological dilemma typically experienced by children who are victims of family trauma. As Herman emphasizes, the child "must find a way to develop a sense of basic trust and safety with caretakers who are untrustworthy and unsafe" ("Recovery" 102). In other words, believing in a parent's "badness" is severely unsettling and destabilizing for a child; in response, the child will often blame him or herself and attempt to somehow reconstruct an image of the parent's "goodness" (103). While Dolores's representation of her father does not go quite that far, it does display her tendency to mitigate his guilt. Several sections of the narrative portray him as a thoughtless and unlucky gambler rather than a cold-blooded, cruel tyrant, and the discourse of luck, which can be traced throughout the novel, also contributes to a sense of ethical relativity.[9]

The way the protagonist-narrator in *The Hiding Place* responds to male violence, then, contrasts with Maria's reaction in *The Wrongs of Woman*. Dolores's reluctance to denounce her father reveals how much she differs from the feminist subject represented by Wollstonecraft's Maria as well as by Smiley's Rose; both Maria and Rose are figured as politically aware women full of anger and indignation against the wrongs done to women in a patriarchal system. In contrast, Dolores, the novel suggests, feels wounded as a daughter and sister rather than as a woman, and her quest for recovery is focused on the family, not on politics. In her struggle not to judge her father too negatively and her tendency to reflect on his point of view, she resembles Ginny, the protagonist-narrator in Smiley's novel, who is also torn between recognizing her father's abusive and destructive character and her desire to be close to him. It is telling, then, that Dolores mostly refers to her father using the diminutive and affectionate form "Frankie" rather than "Frank." In her reconstruction of her family's story, she also mentions that Frank had occasional pangs of conscience about the way he was treating his daughters, yet the text makes us wonder whether Frank, who in general emerges as a thoroughly irresponsible and callous character, did indeed suffer from a sense of guilt – or whether this is merely Dolores's wishful thinking.

9 According to Azzopardi's discussion of the novel in an interview, the idea of luck is a fundamental aspect of the character Frank: "I felt so much that his belief in luck was driving everything, and that it wasn't a complete act of will that he would behave in such an appalling way" ("Out of Hiding" 4).

Issues of responsibility and guilt become even more complex and ambiguous in Dolores's representation of her mother and her sisters. On the whole, her retrospective account portrays her mother as loving and caring and suggests that Mary mainly failed to effectively shield her children from their abusive father because she was also a victim and overwhelmed by the burden of holding the family together. Yet the text also creates ambiguities in its representation of Mary. Some passages suggest that Mary may not have been nearly as protective and loving as Dolores claims, and Dolores also mentions that her sister Rose is deeply critical of her mother. Could Dolores's positive representation of her mother thus be an expression of the traumatized child's urge to believe that her familial environment is warm and protective, even when it is not? Is it possible that Dolores projects her need for a caring, supportive, and loving parent, which her father radically fails to fulfil, onto her mother and, as a result, unconsciously idealizes her?

As these unresolved questions exemplify, *The Hiding Place* represents the family as generating cycles of hurt and violence that make it difficult to pin down cause and effect. As in *The Wrongs of Woman*, issues of responsibility and guilt are complicated by interpersonal constellations, where victims hurt other victims or even turn into perpetrators of trauma.[10] Yet *The Hiding Place* pushes the challenge to moral judgment even further; it creates a space of profound ethical uncertainty, exemplified by Dolores's representation of her sisters. Dolores depicts several scenes from her childhood in which Rose and Luca exclude, bully, or frighten her. While Dolores implies that her sisters, who are also victims of their father in different ways, internalize and pass on his aggression and violence, she still seems to blame them for also turning against her. For instance, Dolores portrays the moment when Luca tattoos her arm with a knife as a scene of sisterly violence. While Fran's tattoo, the source of inspiration for Luca, is represented as a mark of self-identification, Dolores represents her tattoo as essentially a wound. While Fran marks herself with her own name, Dolores is marked by another, which recalls the way in which she is repeatedly branded by injurious names. Dolores depicts the moment of being tattooed as a moment of fear and helplessness, a moment in which she identifies with the rabbits skinned by her father: "Luca takes up my father's rabbity knife, licks her finger and runs it over the edge; she's about to skin me" (184). Frank's knife, his instrument of violence, seems to symbolize the way in which Luca perpetuates her father's violence against her sister. Yet the scene also contains ambiguities. It is crucial that the theme of tattooing is placed in the context of what makes one "hard" (185), and the fact that Luca cuts Dolores's arm with the inten-

10 Azzopardi's *Remember Me* pushes the destabilization of categories such as victims and perpetrators even further. Towards the end of the novel, the autodiegetic narrator Winnie, who throughout the narrative portrays herself as a victim, finally confesses her own guilt, which forces readers to rethink their perceptions of innocence and guilt.

tion of cutting her own afterwards raises the possibility that the tattooing may be intended as a gesture of sisterly bonding and solidarity rather than wounding and violence.[11] Ultimately, this scene sheds an ambiguous light on Dolores's repeated emphasis on how her sisters participated in her father's cruel treatment of her.

Issues of guilt are complicated further by the text's emphasis on the unreliability of (childhood) memory. Memory talk with her sisters reveals that they were not locking her into the rabbit cage, as Dolores used to believe, but were, on the contrary, freeing her from it. This false memory raises questions about how distorted Dolores's other memories are – and, as a result, how accurate her view about her sisters' guilt might be. The text time and again creates a sense of ethical uncertainty. Azzopardi also has Dolores explicitly emphasize the plurality of truth and the impossibility of making firm moral judgments (in this case about her father's bad luck in gambling): "My parents argue about whose fault it is. She blames him, he blames me, and I can't blame anyone yet. But I will. I will lay it all at Joe Medora's doors [her father's business partner], when I'm ready. Except Joe Medora has so many doors" (23). Hence, each concrete allocation of blame is immediately destabilized. This pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety surrounding questions of guilt is representative of the novel's general approach to violence and gender. Its profound concern with feminism and ethics is expressed through resonant images (such as the chest and the cage, the rabbits and the father's knife) and knotty implications (such as the mother's involvement in familial cycles of trauma) far more than through overtly political rhetoric or explicitly judgmental language.

"PUTTING THINGS IN ORDER": THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOVERY

A pervasive sense of loss and deep anxiety about questions of guilt, then, emerge as the two dominant emotions in the narrator's attitude to the past. The novel, however, not only conveys the "radical disruption" caused by traumatic experiences (Caruth, "Trauma and Experience" 4); it also explores in depth the individual's attempt to cope with this disruption. Dolores's quest for recovery, encapsulated by her emphatic statement "I want a cure" (223), is depicted simultaneously as an attempt to recover her losses and memories as well as an attempt to understand some of the disturbing secrets of the past, especially of the family's history of violence.

11 As Ernst Jung emphasizes, tattooing tends to be connected with processes of individual self-awareness, self-representation, and self-fashioning (172). More specifically, some of its typical associations include pride and rebellion, freedom, and courage (172-74) – all attributes that the text evokes regarding Fran's tattoo.

The Hiding Place stages the struggle for recovery through the process of rewriting the traumatic past, thereby using a structural pattern that is typical of trauma fiction. All the trauma novels of my corpus feature autodiegetic narrators engaged in processes of narrating trauma and narrating the self; they play with the illusion that the traumatized protagonist-narrator becomes the fictional author of his or her own life-story. Thus, many fictional trauma texts evoke the frame of autobiographical writing. However, it is crucial to note that trauma fiction tends to depart from the model of a full-fledged fictional autobiography; most postmodern trauma novels subvert the autobiographical model in that they are structured as a more partial, fractional retelling of the past. As in Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* or Helen Dunmore's *Talking to the Dead*, for example, the fictional act of autobiographical writing tends to revolve around the integration of trauma into the life-story.[12]

The same applies to *The Hiding Place*, where the autodiegetic narrator does not record her entire life-story but focuses on her traumatic past and its present impact. The first part of the novel is centred on Dolores's past as a five-year-old, oscillating between the child's and the adult's perspective, while the second part is set at the time of her mother's funeral thirty years later. This structural division opens up a temporal gap of several decades in the narrator's life-story, which indirectly reinforces the narrative focus on trauma. A crucial aspect of processes of narrating trauma and rewriting the past, as mentioned in earlier chapters, is that they tend to express the individual's need for a sense of consistency, unity, or stability, a need caused or intensified by the disruptions of trauma. This aspect of self-narration is foregrounded in Azzopardi's novel, which depicts the process of rewriting the past with a powerful emphasis on the act of ordering. Highlighting both the need for narration and the need for consistency, *The Hiding Place* resonates with – or, perhaps, even deliberately draws on – psychological approaches to trauma.

The novel establishes a close connection between acts of narration and processes of ordering – in Dolores's words, of "putting things in order" (267). It depicts the quest for the past as closely interlinked with the act of homecoming. Back in the house of her childhood after thirty years, Dolores embarks on a project of retrospective ordering: "I go back, and try to piece together how it was. I think there must be a design" (33). The narrator's belief in – or hope of finding – the "design" underlying the fragments of her life-story and her family history drives the narrative. As Lauri-Lucente emphasizes, Dolores "perceives memory as the most powerful instrument in her struggle against fragmentation and oblivion" (78). She tries to piece

12 Some of these fictional texts may be said to follow the structural model of what Roger Luckhurst calls the "trauma memoir" more closely than that of autobiography: "[T]he trauma memoir recounts a discordance, a circling around a shattering event, from which self-knowledge arrives late, if at all, and with an uncomfortable awareness of the frangibility of the self" (*Trauma Question* 119).

together the past in an attempt to regain a sense of control and stability, often through a precise attention to detail. Standing in the kitchen, she examines how her present impressions of the light, the furniture, the colours, and the overall atmosphere correspond to her childhood memories (155-56). In this way, she tries to bring a sense of order to her fragments of memory.

The recurring phrase "putting things in order" is complemented by the leitmotif of lists. Dolores writes common lists, such as a shopping lists, but she also compiles several far more complex, symbolic lists, including a list of the "gains and losses" of her life, a list of who is missing from her childhood, and a list of hypothetical versions of her life. Her obsession with lists could be seen in connection with her profession as a reference librarian, but it can also be read more generally as an attempt to break down intricate issues into small, controllable items. Even though lists often tend to be written in associative or somewhat random rather than neatly ordered and structured ways, listing still implies the attempt at gaining an overview and a sense of control. The text indeed signals that Dolores clings to lists as a means of upholding a feeling of order and stability. At her mother's funeral, for example, she tries to fill her unsettling emotional vacuum by thinking of her list of family members and past acquaintances: "I don't feel anything. I'm just waiting for it to be over. I don't know who is alive now, and who is dead. I think about my list, tucked neatly in the pocket of my holdall. At least I can tick off Luca" (252). The novel suggests that lists also function as an emotional anchor for Dolores through their associative connection with her mother: "I must have got the habit from Mam, I say, She used to make lists all the time" (221). For Dolores, making lists serves both as an attempt to establish order and a way of identifying with her mother.

However, the primary medium Dolores employs in her project of retrospective ordering is autobiographical writing. What needs to be examined more closely, though, is the novel's specific framing of this medium, which raises fundamental questions about narratorial perspective, authority, and knowledge. In the first part of the novel, Dolores traces the roots of her life-story back to the time before she was born, describing her own birth, her tragic accident in the fire, and her early family experiences, interspersed with fragments from the lives of her parents and sisters. These sections of Dolores's narrative are puzzling in that she neither acknowledges the impossibility of having conscious memories of these events nor mentions any other source for these stories. In other words, the knowledge that the narrative claims clearly transcends the limitations of a homodiegetic narrator; the novel pushes the boundaries of conventional first-person narration. Several reviewers therefore argue for at least two narratorial voices: the autodiegetic narrator Dolores and an omniscient narrator who tells the events that the first-person narrator could

not have witnessed.[13] Yet this reading can be challenged by the fact that even in the seemingly "omniscient" segments of the narrative, the recurrent use of possessive pronouns, notably "my father" and "my mother," indicates first-person narration. At the same time, there are parts where these references to the parents are replaced by their names, which again challenges the distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration. Through this unusual narrative constellation, the novel can be said to consciously destabilize conventional narratological categories, encouraging readers to reflect on questions of narration and focalization.

While the novel refuses to let these categories become fixed, I suggest a reading with Dolores as the only narrator – at least in the first part of the novel. Dolores can be read as a highly unreliable narrator who constructs parts of her narrative based on other people's stories, hearsay, or her imagination, without indicating that this is what she does. The short non-numbered chapters that are interspersed throughout the main narrative, which carry the resonant titles "tinder," "interference," "amulet," and "missing," significantly contribute to this impression of unreliability. Focalized through Dolores as an adult, these chapters undermine the status of the main narrative through the narrator's comments on the difficulty of remembering the past – "I try to recall it" (156) – and on her lack of memories about someone who repeatedly figures in her narrative – "I don't remember Marina" (75). Hence, these short metafictional chapters, which interrupt the flow of the story, repeatedly challenge readers' "willing suspension of disbelief" and foreground the constructedness of Dolores's entire narrative. The novel implies that the act of remembering the past fundamentally involves (re)construction and imagination. As Lauri-Laucente puts it, "the reader is constantly reminded that memory is elusive and multifaceted. As a result, it is not always possible to distinguish memory from sheer fantasy, truth from falsehood, subterfuges and lies from historical actuality" (80).

The novel's narrative puzzles, the unreliability of its first-person narrator, and the constructedness of the narrative become more meaningful when interpreted in the light of trauma. The text's distinct narrative technique can be read as highlighting the traumatized subject's pressing need for a story or narrative to make sense of the past, the desire to establish some kind of knowledge or "truth" at all costs. *The Hiding Place* suggests that the gesture of omniscience – even if it is just a pretense – may give the narrator a sense of authority, control, and consistency. In other words, even if the "design" created by her narrative does not correspond to the his-

13 Kevin Mahoney claims that "[t]he narrative moves forwards and backwards in time, and jumps from narrator to narrator," and Meredith Blum argues that the novel "changes perspective constantly, shifting from Dolores's memories of her childhood […] to her father's flashbacks of his arrival in Wales to third-person accounts of the actions of minor characters."

torical truth, it may give her the illusion of knowledge.[14] The fact that Dolores begins her life-story with stories surrounding her birth also points to a characteristic problem inherent in the act of autobiographical narration, which Cavarero describes as follows:

> Autobiographical memory always recounts a story that is incomplete from the beginning. It is necessary to go back to the narration told by others, in order for the story to begin from where it really began; and it is this first chapter of the story that the narratable self stubbornly seeks with all of her desire. (*Relating Narratives* 39)

The pressing need for the "first chapter," as well as the dependence on others for this chapter, is particularly exposed here precisely through Dolores's pretense of knowing all about what she cannot possibly know first-hand; the mask of omniscience highlights the extent to which Dolores, as the "narratable self" and fictional autobiographer, is engaged in a quest for origins and for a life-story that would give her the sense of completeness and order.

Pushing this line of thought further, it is crucial to note that through its multilayered emphasis on the need for consistency and order, Azzopardi's novel responds to key issues in trauma and identity discourses. I read the novel as offering a critical reflection on the celebrations of multiple and fluid identities, of flexibility, malleability, and fragmentation that can be found in much postmodern writing and post-structuralist theory. The novel suggests that for an individual (especially a trauma victim) who suffers from an unstable identity, a shattered self, and a ruptured life-story, it may be exceedingly difficult to adopt a creative, playful, or performative approach to fragmentation and fluidity. In relation to trauma, ideas such as consistency and stability, order and control gain new meanings and value as potential sources of empowerment, not of constraint and disempowerment. It is through the lens of trauma that the novel forces us to rethink whether, to speak with Cavarero, the post-structuralist "demoniz[ing]" of unity may have gone too far (*Relating Narratives* 70).[15] The novel, in other words, critically alerts us to the ways in

14 In *Remember Me*, processes of remembering and reconstructing the past are also depicted as an integral part of survival. While Winnie, in contrast to Dolores, had always refused to reflect on the past, it is the incisive experience of being robbed that makes her, an elderly woman, realize how much the past matters and, like Dolores, she then embarks on a quest for that past. Like Dolores, Winnie narrates fragments of her own past as well as fragments from her family history that she cannot possibly know.

15 Cavarero discusses the need to rethink the notion of "unity" mainly with regard to feminism: "[G]iven the familiar metaphysical unfolding of the One in philosophical phallocentrism, it is above all unity that becomes demonized within the post-modern or post-structuralist horizon that these feminists embrace; with the odd result, as Christine

which theoretical notions may marginalize or gloss over psychological needs. The "disillusionment with the unitary subject" (Anderson 57), with notions of a stable self and a coherent identity, does not mean that the psychological need thereof is also dead – and this is particularly true in the context of trauma.

This is not to say, however, that *The Hiding Place* endorses ideas of a coherent autobiography and a consistent self in an overly optimistic or idealistic way or that it naively argues for a theoretical return to notions of a stable self or a unified identity. Rather, it alerts us to clashes between theoretical perspectives and the psychology of the posttraumatic.[16] The novel time and again calls attention to the trauma victim's psychological needs, which persist through postmodern and post-structuralist theoretical challenges, while it nevertheless, like many literary trauma texts, expresses ambivalence about the potential of narrative in the face of trauma. *The Hiding Place* can in fact be seen as a particularly interesting example of how trauma fiction emphasizes the tensions between, in Luckhurst's terminology, the "narrative" and "anti-narrative" dimensions of trauma, oscillating between "narrative possibility" and "impossibility" (*Trauma Question* 80, 83). Throughout, there is a powerful tension between the protagonist-narrator's need for consistency, order, and control and the emphasis on a *lack* of order, controllability, and unity enacted by the text as a whole.

While Dolores's narrative construction of the earliest chapters of her life-story and central chapters of her family history that precede her memory reflect her quest for origins and order, this specific narrative technique at the same time raises crucial questions about narratorial perspective and authority. Its narrative frame reflects the uncertainty and anxiety often associated with trauma and severely disrupts the reader's sense of narrative stability. According to Luckhurst, many trauma narratives "have ostentatiously played around with narrative time, disrupting linearity, suspending logical causation, running out of temporal sequence, working backwards towards the inaugurating traumatic event, or playing with belated revelations that retrospectively rewrite narrative significance" (80).[17] The novel uses several of these typical techniques. It jumps back and forth between past and present, challenges boundaries between memory and imagination, and withholds central revelations until the end. As is characteristic of postmodern trauma fiction, *The Hiding Place* problematizes processes of remembering, narration, and representation; like

Battersby would say, of confirming the traditional patriarchal meaning that wants 'women to be a fragmented self, incoherent and resistant to every synthesis'" (70).

16 On these tensions between theoretical conceptualizations of identity and selfhood and the psychological needs of trauma survivors, see also Schönfelder, "(Re-)Visions of the Buried Self."

17 For a discussion of characteristic features of trauma fiction, see also Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* and Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival*.

A Thousand Acres and *Fugitive Pieces*, the novel is profoundly self-reflexive.[18] It does not use postmodern strategies of intertextuality and rewriting like Smiley's novel, nor does it emphasize the functions of different genres of writing like Michaels's novel. Rather, what makes *The Hiding Place* radically self-reflexive is its distinct narrative technique, which challenges the status of large sections of the text, subverts narratorial categories, and forces us to question the narrator's reliability, authority, and knowledge. While some reviewers criticize this unusual narrative technique as a weakness of Azzopardi's debut novel,[19] I argue that the profoundly unsettling effect achieved thereby is deliberate and a key aspect of the text's approach to trauma. The novel's narrative "design," to return to one of the narrator's central images, is one of ruptures and indeterminacies, of gaps and textual scars, but it is vital to acknowledge that the challenge to narrative and (autobiographical) unity on the textual level throughout remains counterpointed by the narrator's desire for consistency and order (and for establishing order through narrative) at the diegetic level. In other words, the novel's relation to postmodernism emerges as essentially twofold: *The Hiding Place* is postmodern with regard to its poetics of trauma, while it problematizes and challenges views of identity that postmodernism and post-structuralism have made influential, forcing us to rethink these theorizations through the lens of psychological discourses.

Through these tensions between the diegetic and the textual level, the novel seems to signal that what is at stake here is an acknowledgement of psychological needs rather than a perfect fulfilment of them. The novel does, however, gesture towards the possibility of fulfilment by implying that notions such as consistency, unity, and order may be reconceptualized in less absolute and more subjective terms, a case in point being Dolores's approach to her family's past. Dolores's desire for wholeness extends from her autobiography to her family's history. It is pertinent that her narrative includes seemingly first-hand reports of important events (e.g., her parents' first encounter) of which she has only second-hand knowledge. Similarly, it is telling that her story also features her sister Marina, whom she never knew; the act of writing about Marina illustrates the extent to which retrospective ordering and the attempt at recovering losses are interrelated. Creating a sense of

18 Through its problematizing of knowledge, authority, and reliability, the novel may also be said to reflect critically on processes of life writing more generally and thus, perhaps, to point to the crisis of the actual genre of autobiography that some critics have diagnosed in connection with trauma (Luckhurst, *Trauma Question* 120).

19 Leo Carey, for example, criticizes the fact that "we get observations far beyond the scope of a child, and even descriptions of incidents at which Dolores was not present," and he dismisses the novel's narrative constellation as a sign of the author's inexperience. Likewise, Michiko Kakutani emphasizes that the novel's "narrative strategy can be distracting for the reader," without exploring the functions or the impact of this "distractive" effect.

wholeness and understanding seems more important to Dolores than uncovering the truth about the past: "But I'm not interested in old times. I want to know about scattering a family like grains of rice: about Marina, my father, Fran; about what it means to burn" (258). What matters primarily to Dolores, then, is not factual knowledge about "old times" but the meaning and impact of significant past events for her life in the present. The novel here resonates with psychologist Harald Welzer's claim that, for the individual, discovering the perfectly accurate truth about the past sometimes matters less than the *sense* of finding the truth about the past – and the factual truth may not be identical with the emotional truth (see *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis*). Indeed, passages like the one above demonstrate how much Dolores longs to grasp the meaning and impact of significant past events emotionally. In this light, the gesture towards understanding (or perhaps even sympathy or forgiveness) inherent in Dolores's stories about her father's past seems more important than their factuality. Dolores's quest for recovery thus emerges as a quest for a subjective sense of consistency and order.

RE-MEMBERING THE FAMILIAL PAST

In the second part of the novel, Azzopardi highlights an additional dimension of the protagonist-narrator's need for order and consistency by exploring in detail the interpersonal aspects of remembering the past. Throughout part two, Dolores displays a strong desire to establish a shared past with her sisters, attempting to consolidate – or perhaps rather initiate – a familial community of memory. Like *The Wrongs of Woman*, *The Hiding Place* highlights the need to feel that one's memories are validated and accepted by one's fellow human beings – a need that is particularly important for trauma victims, who tend to have a complex and conflicted attitude to their past. However, while *The Wrongs of Woman* stages the empowering potential of sharing memories and stories of the past, *The Hiding Place* explores the more dysfunctional aspects of telling and sharing memories. Wollstonecraft demonstrates how sympathy and mutual understanding may lead to a sense of communality and the emergence of a "community of suffering," while Azzopardi's novel highlights the unsettling effects of a memory community dominated by tensions, misunderstandings, and distrust.

In her quest to understand the past, Dolores relies on her sisters' cooperation, longing to fill the gaps in her autobiography and her family history through what I, with Welzer, want to call "memory talk."[20] She repeatedly confronts her sisters with

20 Welzer draws on the notion of "memory talk" as conceptualized by developmental psychologists such as Katherine Nelson, who explores how the parents' practice of memory

statements or questions about the past. However, her sisters not only refuse to join her on this journey back in time but also strongly disapprove of her attempts to "dig up" past events (266). Luca flatly denies her memories: "I don't remember, she says, turning away, Understand me, Dolores, I don't remember One Single Thing" (274). Celesta expresses her refusal to remember just as emphatically: "I Don't Do Memory Lane" (274). Because Celesta still lives in Cardiff with her family, her most pressing desire is to let the past remain buried in oblivion – which is diametrically opposed to Dolores's fervent attempts at "unearth[ing]" (277). While Jemima, Maria, and Darnford at least to some extent share the desire to narrate their past, Dolores seems to be the only one in her family who feels, or admits to, this desire. *The Wrongs of Woman* suggests that sharing past experiences of distress is crucial for a community of suffering to emerge; the parallels that Jemima and Maria recognize between their life-stories, especially through Maria's daughter, create a bond of communality. Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, moreover, demonstrates how empathetic listening may lead to powerful forms of interpersonal bonding through memory, even if there is no common ground of experience between the trauma survivor and the listener. In contrast to such positive visions of sharing memories, *The Hiding Place* signals critically that a shared past may not suffice for a community of suffering to emerge – or may even function as a barrier to it. Similar to *A Thousand Acres*, where the three sisters embody different attitudes to the past, Azzopardi's novel establishes a contrast between Dolores's and her sisters' approaches to remembering and forgetting. Both novels depict the familial memory community in crisis, highlighting the chasms that emerge when the willingness to recognize the past *as a shared past* is missing.

Dolores's attempts to create a sense of community, for example, her buying presents for her sisters and the inclusive gesture of her toast "To us, To *all* of us – wherever we are" (272), fail to produce the kind of bonding she desires. If we trust Dolores's perception of her sisters' persistently negative attitude towards her, their refusal to join her efforts at creating a sense of community could be read in the light of Dolores's possible function as a scapegoat within the family. The emphasis on Frank's view of Dolores as the harbinger of bad luck and the scenes that depict how her sisters internalized this view ("We're cursed, we are. We got a hex!" 264) could imply that Dolores acts as the family's scapegoat. According to Eagleton, the scapegoat is "symbolically loaded with the guilt of the community," so identifying with it would shift the community's feeling of horror from the scapegoat to its own

talk teaches children to acquire the narrative structures of autobiographical remembering (see *Language in Cognitive Development*). What Welzer emphasizes, however, is that "memory talk" continues to play a crucial role throughout adult life; he sees different forms of "memory talk" or "conversational remembering" as an essential social practice and life-long process (*Das kommunikative Gedächtnis* 16).

failure (*Sweet Violence* 278-79). As Eagleton further emphasizes, an essential characteristic of the scapegoat is its lack of individual humanity and subjectivity: "[T]he whole point of the scapegoat is its anonymity, as a human being emptied of subjectivity and reduced to refuse or nothingness" (278). Hence, if Dolores were allowed to become part of the sisters' community, she could no longer function as the scapegoat for the family's tragedy. Yet while Dolores's perspective seems to hint at such a reading, the text as a whole also allows us to interpret the sisters' reluctance to engage in the sharing of memories more neutrally as merely a different strategy of coping with the traumatic past, one driven by the need for denial, repression, or silent acceptance rather than explicit confrontation. Moments of dialogue with her sister Luca, for example, indicate that Luca experiences any confrontation with memories as profoundly unsettling. Luca's "sickness" when thinking about the past seems more powerful than her desire to distance Dolores (274).

However, Azzopardi has Dolores face further obstacles in her quest to understand the past, especially through her recognition of the unreliability of memory. In one of the moments when her sisters finally engage in a discussion about the past, Dolores is forced to realize that some of her memories are false. It turns out that her recollections of Joe Medora, a business partner of her father's – who plays an important role in the first part of her narrative – are not genuine memories but impressions based on "an engraving from an old book" (243). Each scene of memory talk produces a different version of the past, and the boundaries between memories and stories repeatedly get blurred. Her sisters make her painfully aware of the unreliability of memory. Hence, while Dolores needs her sisters in her attempt to "put[] things in order," they complicate her struggle to recover and understand the past in several ways. As Dolores states in a moment of disillusionment: "It felt like a swamp, this past we were supposed to have shared" (244).

In spite of her sisters' reactions, Dolores continues her quest for the past, looking for other opportunities to engage in memory talk. In her nephew Louis, Celesta's son, Dolores finally finds a companion who is happy to support her search for memories and who is also keen to discover more about the past. It is significant that Louis, though a member of the family, has no first-hand experience of the past Dolores seeks to reconstruct; it seems that the generational distance that separates him from this past facilitates the process of sharing stories. In their conversations, however, Dolores realizes how much Louis's stories of the past, these "gilt-edged stories" that are based on what he has heard from his parents and on rumours circulating in the neighbourhood, differ from her own version of the past: "A small fire is an inferno, a burnt hand is a horror story, and a falling-out between friends is murder. […] My own recollections seemed drab by comparison" (244-45). What is more, when Martineau, a witness of the accident in which Dolores was injured, describes the fire and the subsequent events, she reacts with suspicion, believing that "[s]omething is wrong with Martineau's story" (261). She downplays the status of

his account by stressing that "he's just telling a tale" (265). Thus, memory talk seems to result in disillusionment; Dolores realizes how much these different stories are based on reconstruction and interpretation rather than fact: "As with all truth, there is another version" (75). *The Hiding Place*, thus, conceptualizes the remembering and writing down of memories as inevitably hinging on reconstruction and interpretation, which resonates with a view of memory advanced by many contemporary memory theorists.[21] As Michael Lambek and Paul Antze put it, memory involves a continuous negotiation of "the balance between reproduction and representation, or fact and interpretation, or recollection and understanding" (xxvii). *The Hiding Place* expresses this notion of remembering, which contributes to the novel's self-reflexivity, through its persistent emphasis on unreliability and its conceptualization of both personal and familial memory as an intermingling of first- and second-hand stories.

The novel suggests, however, that the protagonist-narrator also plays with this critical awareness of memory. For example, after visiting Eva, an old friend of the family, who tells her that her father supposedly murdered one of his business partners, Dolores repeats Eva's rhetorical question – "Can you imagine!" – and replies "I can" (231); subsequently, she describes in detail the circumstances of the murder (231-34). Her account of the murder clearly carries undertones of spontaneous improvisation. Similarly, Dolores immediately integrates Martineau's story into her narrative, retelling it in her own words, despite the fact that she doubts its reliability. Here, she displays an approach to memories that resembles Winnie's philosophy of memory in *Remember Me*. Listening to all her father's stories about her mother, Winnie longs to hear more of them, in spite of her distrust of their accuracy:

> There's no reason to disbelieve him, but I do. […] I don't say a word. I want him to tell me again, to tell me all the other versions, the ones where he can believe how it might have been. […] I balance his memories, all the same, storing them on top of mine, carefully leaning one against the other like a stack of playing cards. (68)

Like Dolores, Winnie preserves other people's stories of the past with a keenness that betrays how much she longs to fill the gaps in her family history. Both protagonist-narrators think of the past as made up of different layers of stories – a bit like a palimpsest – and indulge in processes of (re)constructing and (re)creating tales and memories of their family.

The narrative technique of the second part of the novel is important in this context. In part two, Dolores's account of the reunion with her sisters is interspersed

21 See also Richard Terdiman's *Present Past*, Mark Freeman's *Rewriting the Self*, and Ian Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul*.

with fragments about the sisters' past. Again, it is not clear if these sections of the narrative are told – and constructed – by Dolores or if they are told by a heterodiegetic narrator who tells these stories focalized through her sisters. In this part, there are no possessive pronouns to indicate first-person narration, but given the narrative constellation in the first part and the way it plays with narrative categories, it is possible to argue that Dolores is the narrator throughout and to read the stories about her sisters as her attempt to empathize with them. Either way, multiperspectivism becomes increasingly important in part two in the way the novel reconstructs the perspective of several trauma victims. The history of family trauma is composed like a collage, with individual fragments and different perspectives that do not quite match. Even though the collage created here is not the perfect "design" that Dolores sets out to find early in the novel, the text suggests that it nevertheless yields some insight for her. As Kačkutė emphasizes, "[i]n *The Hiding Place* the family narrative functions as an active designer and an inherent part of the identity of the protagonist-narrator" (379). While spending time with her sisters, Dolores repeatedly reports that "something is being unearthed" (277); she describes how "the years piled up in front of [her]" and how "things surface" (276), signalling that she unearths buried layers of the past. In other words, Dolores's solitary and imaginary act of reconstruction is here coupled with some revelations and insights, emerging out of the snippets of memory talk with her sisters.

Moreover, despite the sisters' apparent reluctance to allow a community of memory to develop, there are a few moments when a sense of understanding and closeness does finally emerge among them. The most powerful scene in this context happens with Luca, who suffers with Dolores through an overwhelming moment in which she relives the experience with the rabbits in the cage:

> I'm kneeling with Luca in the long grass. I don't know how long she's been with me. She's holding my hair back from my face, and her mouth is pressed close to my ear; she's whispering words. There. It's gone, It's all gone. […]
> Bad dreams, Dol, she says. That's all they are. We all get them.
> With her arms wrapped tight around me, we walk the plank, unsteady as a pair of drunks. (278)

It is crucial that this moment of sisterly bonding occurs with Luca, who, according to Dolores's childhood memories, often bullied her. This scene of empathy and support, in which Luca admits to their shared past and creates a sense of communality through her use of the pronoun "we," functions as a counterpart to the tattooing scene and further destabilizes Dolores's interpretation of the tattooing as an act of sisterly violence. The moment of understanding and shared suffering with Luca is followed by another moment of bonding, this time while drinking whisky with Luca and Rose: "And this time I drink with them, and it feels warm, the whisky and the

moment and being on the inside" (279). For the first time, Dolores no longer feels excluded; the trauma victim reaches an – at least tentative – reconciliation with some of her sisters (and alleged victimizers), who finally acknowledge their shared past.

RECOVERY, GUILT, AND ETHICS

The final chapters of *The Hiding Place* express a move towards recovery in several ways, suggesting that the processes of writing and talking about the past constitute a key step in Dolores's struggle to come to terms with her traumas. The powerful scenes with Luca and Rose are just two of several symbolic moments. Furthermore, the novel signals that Dolores begins to fight the stigmatization she experiences due to her damaged hand. Finding it "damning" that Rose still calls her "Crip" (223), Dolores tries to counteract the persistent force of the stigma. Sitting in a café with her sister Celesta, Dolores consciously resists the impulse to hide her hand, leaving it on the table and intentionally exposing it to her sister:

> Celesta drops her spoon, places her right hand flat on the table next to my left. Careful not to touch me. Two grown-up hands now, mine and hers. I turn my palm upwards, expose the proud edge of bone where my thumb would have been, the crescent of white flesh and the splash of purple scar tissue where the skin grafts failed. I resist the urge to bury it in my lap. She has to look at me now. (242)

Dolores here attempts to overcome her passive role as the object of the stigmatizing gaze; instead, she actively orchestrates the moment of staring, thereby transforming a moment of helplessness to one of empowerment – a move that resonates with Thomson's claims in *Staring* about the positive potential of staging scenes of staring. Celesta immediately recognizes the significance of Dolores's gesture: "You don't mind it? she says, It doesn't bother you?" (242). Yet the power dynamics threaten to shift, as Dolores recognizes that her sister still struggles not to perceive Dolores's hand as a *Fremdkörper*: "I turn my hand over again; she means it bothers *her*" (242). In spite of her sister's reaction, which points to the vulnerability of the one being stared at and the fragility of an intentional staging of staring, this central moment nevertheless suggests that Dolores not only displays an acceptance of her hand's physical difference but now also consciously chooses visibility and exposure, rejecting the state of hiding and invisibility that her family used to assign her. Finally, Dolores not only stages herself as the one being looked at but also assumes the role of the one looking – "All the time I talk, I'm studying her face" (242) – in another gesture of empowerment.

Another way in which the ending of the novel evokes a mood of reconciliation, integration, and recovery is the last chapter's emphasis on Dolores's relation to her mother and her sister Fran, the two members of the family with whom she always had the strongest emotional attachment. In other words, the last chapter foregrounds the endurance of two forms of female relationships: sisterly attachment and a mother-daughter relationship. The novel's final scene is focused on Dolores's reunion with Fran, brought about by her nephew Louis. Similarly, the last chapter highlights Dolores's attempt to mentally and emotionally reconnect with her dead mother. Believing that "[a]t the end she made a start; putting things in order, tidying" (207), Dolores's rearranging and reordering of the furniture, a concrete counterpart to her mental and memorial acts of "putting things in order," serves as a way of bringing her mother's final actions to an end. Dolores then sits where she "used to sit with [her] mother" and performs one last act of identification with her mother's habits – she makes a list (281).

The persistence of the protagonist's strong connection to her mother, years after their physical separation, is an important theme that reappears in *Remember Me*. The "ghosts" that haunted Winnie's mother throughout Winnie's childhood have their counterpart in the "spirits" of the dead who often appeared to her when she was a teenager. Besides her affinity with the spiritual, the moment of (mis)identification, when Winnie mistakes her reflection in the mirror for an image of her mother, reveals her special bond with her mother. In both *The Hiding Place* and *Remember Me*, the mothers, suffering from physical and mental illness, are too weak and vulnerable to live up to a Wollstonecraftian ideal of education as pursued by Maria, who uses her experiences of being "schooled in misery" (110) to prepare her daughter for future hardships. Dolores's and Winnie's mothers seem more loving than many of the negative mother figures in *The Wrongs of Woman*, but they nevertheless fail to give their daughters the support they would need. Similar to Ginny's mother in *A Thousand Acres*, who is pushed into the role of an absent presence by the patriarchal father figure Larry even before her death, Dolores's mother, even though she seems to have more agency, also fails to protect her daughters against their abusive father. Both mother figures are depicted ambiguously with regard to their involvement, or even complicity, in familial cycles of violence and trauma. Yet both Ginny and Dolores express a longing to connect with their dead mothers – though in Ginny's case, this longing is always almost immediately erased by her father's overarching presence. Azzopardi's novels especially resonate with Wollstonecraft's credo concerning the fundamental importance of mother-daughter relationships – in Jemima's words, "a mother's affection" is "the grand support of life" (95).[22] While the novels on father-daughter incest by Shelley and Smiley fore-

22 Vickroy asserts that mothers and daughters feature prominently in much trauma fiction: "[M]others and children are most frequently vulnerable to situations of oppression, depri-

ground the damaging effects of absent mothers, the novels by Azzopardi and Wollstonecraft emphasize that a special bond between mother and daughter persists, even through dramas of wounding and suffering.[23] In *The Hiding Place*, it is through the emphasis on this bond that a hopeful note rings through the novel's ending.

The novel's move towards acceptance and reconciliation is expressed through further symbolic details. When Dolores sets out to leave the family home again, she gathers a number of objects closely connected to her childhood – an old wooden dice, a rosary, two photographs, and the chest she slept in when she was a baby – to take them with her to her new home (280). Her decision to keep these objects, these tangible tokens of memory, reads like a gesture of integration, signalling that Dolores finally accepts her traumatic childhood as part of her life. The chest, an object deeply inscribed with her father's violence, is especially significant in this context. It is not an object of nostalgia, like some of the objects that Winnie in *Remember Me* attempts to preserve; rather, it is a token of trauma that Dolores reinterprets as a symbol of resistance and durability: "It has survived a fire" (280). The chest also symbolically stands for the survival, endurance, and strength of the protagonist-narrator herself and for her development from a trauma victim to a trauma survivor over the course of the novel. In this light, the chest has connotations relating to the body. It is not only one of Dolores's physical hiding places but also a metaphor for her own chest, her heart's hiding place.

While the last section of the novel expresses a movement towards integration, redemption, and recovery in several ways, it clearly does so without turning to the kind of harmonizing or idealizing approaches to trauma that LaCapra criticizes (see *Writing History* 71). The positive tenor underlying the scene of reunion with Fran, for example, is counterpointed by the sad note resonating through Dolores's description of her sister: Fran is "crabbing along the road […], pushing a trolley full of bags," a bag lady who "looks like a refugee from a war zone," with "bruised and liverish arms" (281). It is telling that the "inky stain" on Fran's arm, the tattoo spelling her name, functions now as Dolores's means of identifying her. The last sentence of the novel once again evokes the cluster of images revolving around wounds and scars, branding and tattooing, names and identity, while the depressing image of Fran mutes the ending's optimism.

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vation, and exploitation. Further, mothers are uniquely positioned as powerful nurturers and socializers even if they often have no social power. They are frequently the locus for determining whether legacies of trauma will be resisted or perpetuated" (222).

23 Given the importance of names throughout the narrative, it is likely that the novel also suggests a special bond between mother (Mary) and daughter (Dolores) through names. The Latin phrase Mater Dolorosa or just Dolorosa is a commonly used to refer to the Virgin Mary.

The ending of the novel also raises pressing questions about issues of guilt and ethics. As mentioned earlier, Dolores repeatedly emphasizes the difficulty of determining guilt, and the text as a whole problematizes judgement in several ways. In this sense, *The Hiding Place* resonates with Rothberg's assertion that trauma challenges binary categories like victims and perpetrators, innocence and guilt: "The categories of victim and perpetrator derive from either a legal or a moral discourse, but the concept of trauma emerges from a diagnostic realm that lies beyond guilt and innocence or good and evil" (*Multidirectional* 90). Azzopardi's novel calls attention to how trauma pushes ethics to its limits, demonstrating how moral judgements disintegrate into a sense of uncertainty. For the protagonists, who engage with issues of guilt in the non-legal, highly emotional context of family trauma, it is exceedingly difficult to draw lines between victims and perpetrators. Yet the textual performance of trauma as a challenge to ethics throughout the novel remains in tension with the narrator's desire to unravel the intricate knot of intra-familial guilt. In her final list, Dolores once again reviews her life-story and family history in terms of responsibility and causality:

> If my mother had not left the house, I would not have been burnt
> If she didn't owe rent to Joe Medora
> If Frankie hadn't gambled it away
> If we still had the cafe
> If Frankie hadn't gambled it away
> If I had been a boy
> If Frankie hadn't gambled me away.
> I ran out of space, but I only needed to add one more thing: blame can be twisted like a flame in a draught; it will burn and burn. Ask Fran. (281)

Dolores's catalogue of conditional clauses about the past revolves around her father's gambling and irresponsibility, but the closing sentence, which is introduced as a kind of conclusion, shifts the emphasis to more general issues. The phrase "blame can be *twisted*" (emphasis added) signals once again that Dolores regards issues of guilt as complex and equivocal. The sudden reference to her sister Fran, for example, is ambiguous: Fran could be evoked here simply in her role as kind of fire expert, well acquainted with the dynamics of flames because of her pyromania, or with reference to her possible involvement in the fire that wounded Dolores. Even more importantly, the avowal that blame "will burn and burn" emphasizes that – irrespective of the complexity of guilt – the trauma survivor's need to explore questions of guilt persists. The image of the persistently burning flame of blame, then, represents the inescapability of questions of responsibility and guilt.

Furthermore, this sense of inescapability needs to be connected to the reader's position. While the ending refrains from providing final answers, its emphasis on

clashing acts of blame and contradictory moral judgements forces readers to confront questions of guilt. While Dolores hesitates to judge her father too negatively, we are left with the question of whether we should not, after all, assign the primary guilt for the family's psychological, social, and financial ruin to her father. Even though "trauma has the potential to cloud ethical and political judgements" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 90), can – and should – we indeed eliminate notions of guilt and perpetrators? Dolores's statement that "someone must be to blame" haunts us until the end of the novel (75). The text suggests that, even though trauma complicates ethical questions, to resort to ethical relativism may be both psychologically impossible and politically problematic. Instead, it encourages us to reflect on how such notions could be renegotiated in the context of trauma. What it especially signals is that, even though trauma tends to render ethical questions particularly difficult, the *need* to continue asking these questions – a need that may well be shared by those immediately involved and those more indirectly confronted with trauma – must be recognized. The novel's negotiation of ethics, hence, can be read as one more way in which the text stresses the individual's need for consistency. The ethical questions that reverberate throughout the novel point to the traumatized subject's urge to create a family narrative that she can accept – and the image of the flame of blame, despite its bleakness, may be said to gesture towards consistency precisely through Dolores's final recognition and acceptance that her family history *is* a history heavily punctuated by guilt.

The novel's approach to recovery raises a further set of ethical questions. Like *Fugitive Pieces*, *The Hiding Place* depicts the traumatized narrator's complex development from victimhood to survivorhood. In spite of the differences between their traumatic experiences, Michaels's Jakob and Azzopardi's Dolores both embody the struggle to move from their experiences as helpless, victimized children to a conscious and critical awareness of their traumatic past as adults. Revolving around processes of working through, both novels participate in contemporary discourses of what has been called a "wound culture." As Luckhurst emphasizes in *The Trauma Question*, both the "memoir boom" of recent decades and the prominence of trauma discourses in contemporary celebrity culture are important elements of this "wound culture," which tends to stage traumatized individuals in a frame of survivorhood. The idea of survivorhood allows for trauma victims to function not just as an embodiment of human vulnerability but also an embodiment of strength and endurance. This wound culture, in other words, testifies to a widespread fascination with stories of suffering, pain, and trauma as well as with the struggles to overcome these crises. As Rudolf Freiburg emphasizes, "[w]ithout any doubt, other people's pain, caused either by private accidents and tragedies, by regional or even global catastrophes, is fascinating" (171). Trauma novels with autodiegetic narrators allow readers to identify with these processes, to experience them vicariously through the act of reading. Yet *The Hiding Place* calls attention to

our involvement in the current wound culture by employing self-reflexivity in far more destabilizing and unsettling ways than Michaels's and Smiley's novels, notably, through a narrative technique that continuously challenges readers. Confronting us with a traumatized protagonist who is repeatedly revealed to be an unreliable narrator, the text encourages us to reflect critically on our attitudes and responses to trauma survivors. In this sense, Azzopardi's novel is an interesting counterpart to *Fugitive Pieces*. Michaels's novel raises ethical questions about representing the Holocaust by using a poetic, lyrical style that makes us wonder if the reader response it evokes is too comforting. In contrast, *The Hiding Place* employs more overt means of disrupting comforting and complacent reading experiences. In forcing us to reflect on the meanings and implications of the current fascination with (as well as consumption of) narratives of pain, suffering, and trauma,[24] the novel alerts us to crucial issues about the ethics of reading trauma.

The Hiding Place, a novel about loss and violence, is profoundly concerned with the psychology of the traumatic and posttraumatic, trauma and narration, and trauma and ethics. Calling for critical and ethically aware responses to trauma fiction, the text also performs a complex psychology of recovery, which focuses on the need to remember and reconstruct the past and on writing through and talking through individual and familial trauma histories. The novel departs from the anti-narrative, anti-therapeutic trajectory pursued by important representatives of literary and cultural trauma studies and resonates with psychological approaches to trauma – even as it echoes the scepticism about narration, integration, and recovery in the face of trauma that Caruth and others express. *The Hiding Place* dramatizes the tension between, on the one hand, trauma's tendency to challenge the foundations of narrative and disrupt stable notions of ethics and, on the other, the traumatized subject's need for narration and moral stability – but it is reluctant to resolve this tension. Yet what particularly characterizes this specific trauma text is its repeated insistence on the importance of re-evaluating and giving room to notions that theory has fundamentally challenged. Azzopardi's novel calls attention to how the disruption and fragmentation caused by trauma tend to evoke a pressing desire for regaining the sense of a consistent identity, a coherent life-story, and a sense of order and control – and how these needs of trauma victims should be acknowledged, even if their fulfilment may remain illusory. The novel also encourages us to rethink theoretical notions by foregrounding the specific, often highly subjective meanings "consistency" or "recovery" may take on for particular individuals. In Dolores's case, the quest for recovery is crucially connected to the family. Much like *A Thou-*

24 Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw discuss issues of consumption as follows: "[I]n a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion" (2).

sand Acres, the novel is a testament to the extent to which the family can hurt – but also to the persistent importance of familial bonds. Throughout, *The Hiding Place* demonstrates how much Dolores, despite all the wounds and wrongs she suffered, still defines herself and her life-story through her family. Her quest for recovery is ultimately a quest not merely for a lost part of herself but also for a lost family.