CHAPTER I. EMERGING GENRE

In this chapter, I will focus on popular captivity memoirs in their context in popular culture. Placing them in context provides information that is important to understand before conducting a close reading. I propose that the phenomenon of the popular captivity memoir contains the elements of an emerging genre. Why is it necessary to identify a specific genre for these texts? Creating the parameters and patterns of the texts allows for further discussion on commonalities and meanings.

Genre formulas and conventions

Genre is commonly used as a taxonomy to define a group of cultural texts based on similarities in form and content. In mass culture, genre is used in marketing and the publishing business. However, when I use genre here, the commonalities signify more than just surface-level identifiers. I wish to define these texts as an emerging genre to consider the common themes, styles, messages, and narrative choices. Identifying these commonalities and genre conventions is important in understanding how readers connect with these books and how the narratives reflect and influence cultural myths.

I turn to John Cawelti's work on popular genre and formulas, *Adventure, Mystery, Romance,* as the basis for this analysis. Cawelti, however, is not consistent in the way he uses genre and formula. For the purposes of this study and for clarity of my argument, I define formula as a component of genre. Cawelti defines formula as "…specific cultural themes and stereotypes [that] become embodied in more universal story archetypes" (6). This includes repeated character behaviors, situations, styles, story arcs, settings, and conflicts. I am using formula to include items that are formulas in relation to themselves and appear across genres

(i.e., the hot-headed detective, the flirtatious blond, the quirky detective), as well as actions and narrative components that are specific to a genre. For example, a popular captivity narrative is largely identified by the narrative of someone being abducted, held captive, and rescued, which is specific to this particular genre. The common formulas, however, must not only be present but also, as Cawelti notes, "for these patterns to work, they must be embodied in figures, settings, and situations that have appropriate meanings for the culture that produces them" (6). In other words, these aspects must be recognizable by and hold meaning for the readers so that they create expected outcomes and qualities. To maintain readers' interest, the text can vary or add slight variations to these conventions, but it still must be rooted in the familiar. Cawelti states that these meanings change over time and are affected by sociocultural factors.

I seek to establish this emerging genre not strictly for identification, but because of the significance of its contents. Cawelti proposes four hypotheses that support why the study of genre is important. Three of these are most relevant to the study of popular captivity memoirs. The first hypothesis is that "genre affirms existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes and helps maintain consensus about the nature of reality" (35). This can be found in the narrative formula as a binary of good v. evil. In these memoirs, the captive women are the good that is in direct opposition to their captor, who is the evil. Narrator and captor represent two ends of the binary, in which the good will triumph. There is no sympathy for the captor or attempt to explain his actions; he remains the consistent evil figure throughout. These memoirs reinforce the belief that good will triumph over evil, there are deterministic, causal relationships in the world, and that criminals will eventually be punished.

In another hypothesis, Cawelti states that genre is significant because it "enable[s] the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping into this boundary" (35). Popular captivity memoirs deal with an individual's trauma and suffering. This allows for readers to experience the trauma through a narrative and not in their real lives. This is related to the concept of witnessing, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Cawelti's third relevant hypothesis is that genre "assist[s] in the process of assimilating changes in values" (36) to traditional constructs of culture. Cawelti uses the example of the Western genre. Since it has become a recognizable genre, specific attention has been paid to representation of Native Americans and people of color. Changes can and have been made in the area of identity representation, while much of the Western formulas stay the same. Thus, the Western genre can retain its consumers by maintaining familiar formulas while exposing the audience to new social ideas and perhaps gaining new audiences.

The popular captivity narratives can, for example, help inform readers of the rising threat of gendered violence and provide emotional understanding to lend better support to prevention. Recent feminist scholarship, such as the work of feminist psychoanalyst Linda Brown, has addressed the importance of studying women's lived experiences and how women are socialized to constantly fear the threat of violence. Individually, these memoirs tell of violence against one woman, but collectively, they inform us about women's experiences. Brown, referring to current sexual assault treatment, states that trauma that pertains to males is typically public, e.g., war, and that women experience trauma more in private, such as domestic and interpersonal relationship abuse. To fully understand the trauma of all people, she urges scholars and caregivers to look beyond the public into the private, to "examine our definitions of human" and

challenging how a majority of the research on trauma is associated with dominant identity groups.

With this understanding of genre, what, if any, formulas are present in popular captivity memoirs? I propose the following as the formulas that define the popular captivity memoir genre:

(1) *First-person, confessional accounts based on true cases of captivity that were highly visible in the mass media*. In the chosen memoirs, both these women's abductions and rescues were covered widely across many media venues. The reader is often aware of the author's ordeal from prior media coverage.

(2) *Written by women*. Although there can be exceptions, women primarily write popular captivity memoirs. This is because women are more likely to be victims of abduction and captivity by men, more likely to write about it, or both.

(3) *Written in easily accessible narratives*. These memoirs are not considered for their literary merit. They are written in a way that is accessible and straightforward for describing their captivity. This does not mean that the writing is rendered less intelligent. Rather, they are written in chronological order without literary devices that need interpretation or use sophisticated phrasing. Accessibility to the greatest number of people also implies that there is an expectation of these achieving commercial success.

(4) *Contain three primary narrative phases*: The books cover three major parts, told in linear time: life before capture, the time in captivity, and life after rescue. These memoirs differ from autobiography in that they are not intended to cover the whole of these women's lives, but to focus on the events directly surrounding their captivity.

(5) *Embodies a simple binary of good v. evil*. The narrator, the captive woman, is the "good" force who must triumph over the "evil" force: the captor.

(6) *Transformation and inspiration resulting from their experience*. After their captivity, the women reflect on their experience and attribute to either a higher power or their sense of resilience and mental survival. This provides inspiration for readers to overcome their own hardships.

Identifying the genre formulas of the popular captivity memoir creates opportunity to discuss their commonalities and why they are significant. Cawelti explains that "when a group's attitude undergoes some change, new formulas arise, and existing formulas develop new themes and symbols, because formula stories are created and distributed almost entirely in terms of commercial exploitation. Therefore, allowing for a certain degree of inertia in the process, the production of formulas is largely dependent on audience response" (34). Many cultural phenomena can create this inertia, including the fear of the "other" often seen in modern horror movies (Wood), the rise of mass media, anxiety over surveillance, reliance on technology and the growing isolation of people in cities.

Social issues and political causes also affect cultural norms, such as marriage equality and reproductive rights. Some cultural inertia is constructed through hegemonic beliefs rather than specific political events, such as the rise of violence against women, feelings of personal safety, the criminal justice system, and the commercialization of entertainment and leisure. In the remainder of this chapter, I will use these genre formulas to expand on the context and impact of popular memoirs by women held captive.

The limits of truth

True events inspire popular captivity memoirs that are written by the primary survivors of violence and trauma. The words memoir and autobiography, although contain slightly different meanings, are used interchangeably. According to Leigh Gilmore, in *The Limits of Autobiography: Truth and Testimony*, an autobiography "is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts…to achieve as proximate a relation as what approximates truth in that discourse" (3). The authors of narrative trauma have made their best efforts to tell the truth as they experienced it. Captivity narratives focus on the specific period of a traumatic incident and provide minimal preceding and anteceding information as secondary content. When analyzing an autobiography, one must accept that an ultimate truth cannot be reached, nor should that be the purpose. Gilmore identifies this as a "limit" of the autobiographical form. However, her definition of limit defines it as a benefit rather than a hindrance:

> A different question would focus on the way testimony tests a crucial limit in autobiography, and not just the one understood as the boundary between truth and lies, but rather, the limit of representativeness, with its compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others, the peculiar way it operates both to expand and constrict testimonial speech, and the way it makes it hard to clarify without falsifying what is strictly and unambiguously "my" experience when "our" experience is also at stake. (Gilmore 5)

The lens by which these women narrate their trauma is beneficial to the reader experience. The four main captivity memoirs of this study were released not long after the tragedies happened. The endless news cycle and access to a constant flow of information allows us to know the facts and the frameworks of the trauma. However, the memoirs fill in the gaps that only the person experiencing it can share. Furthermore, these women are interpreting their trauma into a narrative, written form. The experience of trauma is often not experienced in a linear fashion.

Trauma also affects an individual's memory of events. However, the form of the memoir requires that the women put their experience in narrative form because of the requirement of the medium and the expectations of a reader of a memoir. There is an unavoidable transformation that occurs from memory to page. In a written memoir, there is no absolute truth about what transpired. This limit, according to Gilmore, is unavoidable yet still is not a detriment. The framing of the trauma narrative may have the effect of making sense of events for both the author and reader. Trauma will be discussed further in this chapter.

Amanda, Gina, and Michelle's rescue played out publicly in the news. The news reported the rescue immediately after Amanda emerged from Castro's house in Cleveland with a six-year-old daughter. Readers already knew about her daughter, but readers were seeking Amanda's narrative of becoming a mother while being held captive as the "truth" of what happened. Amanda's "limit," then, is her experience raising Jocelyn (a child she gives birth to) which gives her a unique perspective. Although Jocelyn played a large role in Michelle's and Gina's experiences, neither was her biological mother. It makes for an interesting study that the Cleveland kidnapping was written about from three different perspectives: by comparing these we can see the "limits" that Gilmore describes. These limits are not a hindrance to a semblance of truth. Rather, is the limits are a lens that shapes the experiences that most align with the writer's experience.

The limit, as Gilmore describes, in Elizabeth Smart's memoir is that she wrote it ten years after she experienced the nine-month captivity. Her narrative is based on recalling what it was like as her fourteen-year-old self, armed with the adult perspective of a twenty-four-year-old woman. This is similar to Jaycee Dugard, who, recalling her capture and rape at eleven years old, was able to convey the feelings of being young and not understanding her predicament from her

current adult perspective. The reflection of this innocence and the commentary on it is a limit. This limit is advantageous in that it creates context, a specific point of view, and stronger identification with Elizabeth at the time of the incident.

Narratives of trauma are especially important to women as well as other vulnerable populations that, until recently, were not given legitimacy. This is especially true in cases of sexual assault and abuse of women and girls. When the experiences of men have been privileged in scientific and legal institutions, personal narratives of women's trauma bring issues to the public's attention. Louise Armstrong's 1978 book, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight,* is considered one of the first popular trauma memoirs. It details her experiences with parental abuse and incest. These topics were considered taboo for popular culture at the time. The book's popularity coincided with the second wave of the women's movement, which fought to publish scholarly work on rape and assault. Previously considered to be a matter of the private, domestic spaces, these were now brought to public awareness. Gilmore continues:

> Autobiography exposes a limit between the private and the public: it is a representation of personal experience meant to make a claim on public attention. It cannily introjects private into the public and ensures that what is published cannot be considered exclusively private. While autobiography holds out the possibility that one might speak credibly to others about a life that challenges the assumption, for example, that law equals justice and justice prevails, autobiography is Janus-faced. It can incite voyeurism and censure as readily as sanctification and respectability. Auto-biography's negative capability is important here because it reveals that a self-representational text about incest and illegitimacy would lay the autobiographer bare to judgements about veracity and human value. Autobiography is a genre whose name makes it possible to make a declaration of illegitimacy. (49)

In other words, though it is impossible to determine if autobiographical writing is truthful, narrators can never be questioned because they are the only holders of that truth. Therefore, searching for an absolute truth in a memoir is a pointless goal. Although women's stories of abuse and trauma are becoming more visible, they open the possibility of exploitation for

commercial reasons, leading to a culture of distrust from readers. These captivity memoirs will always be open to skepticism about their truthfulness, yet absolute, objective truth cannot exist in memoirs, because they will always be from the perspective of the writer's unique experience.

Representing trauma

The texts in this study name co-authors or credits other authors with assistance in writing it. This is not surprising, considering the swift release of these books after the incident, nor is it uncommon with first-time memoirists. For the purposes of my study, I will still consider the woman held captive to be the main narrator of the books and I accept the blanket assumption that the memoirs represent an honest intention by the authors to describe the experience as best as the women recalled them. I also want to acknowledge that there is vast psychological work about the nature and impact of trauma. For the limits and scope of my study, I will not attempt to provide psychological diagnoses of the women.

First, it is important to define trauma. Unfortunately, this is not a simple task, as there are numerous attempts to define it from varying disciplines. For this study, I will use psychologist Cathy Caruth's definition, as her work focuses on narratives and witnessing trauma. She defines trauma as "a wound not inflicted on the body but a wound of the mind" (3). Whereas a wound of the body will heal within a finite time, she writes, a wound of the mind never fully heals. Trauma also includes remembering the difficult event and this memory affects life after the traumatic experience ends. In relating trauma to narrative, Caruth asks the questions "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? Is [trauma] a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of the event and the story of the unbearable nature of its

survival?" (7). In other words, the pain and suffering from trauma is not just in the event, but the difficulties of continuing life with the memories and changes inflicted on a person's mental state, relationships with loved ones, and even the ability to complete everyday tasks. The pain of dealing with pain expounds on itself. Surviving the trauma is the challenge.[1]

The women held captive obviously experienced severe trauma, and not just as a one-time event: For months and years, their every moment was traumatic, even if the coping methods they employed gave momentary points of relief. As they express in the books, their lives did not suddenly reverse course after they were rescued. Their trauma continued as they coped, and writing these memoirs was a key part of that post-rescue experience. There is a popular belief that to achieve mental healing, one must "share their story" as way of releasing pain and "giving back." In different ways, the women in the captivity narratives explain that they wrote their books to help others. Jaycee and Elizabeth have also started foundations to continue to help victims of violence and abuse, an extension of "sharing their stories."

> I want to turn my experience into something that gives hope to other people who are going through traumatic events in their lives. I would say that my biggest goal is to help other survivors get past their fears and to turn them into strengths…nothing makes me happier than hearing from someone who's read my book or heard me speak, telling me that I've helped them get through whatever difficult things they're dealing with (Knight 251).
>
> I don't know if I would have found myself in this role, trying to make a difference in sexual abuse prevention, education, and child crimes, had I not been forced to go through the things that I have gone through…I can honestly say that I'm not sorry that it happened to me because of where I am now, and the difference I am trying to make. I am grateful for the voice it has given me and for the strength I can share (Smart 316).

[1] Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is important to mention here because it often comes up when discussing trauma. PTSD is a psychological and medical diagnosis. The women do not mention this in their memoirs, although it is likely that someone who suffered captivity would deal with it. For my study, it is inappropriate to assign a medical diagnosis.

These passages indicate that Elizabeth and Michelle are coping with the trauma and the "unbearable nature of survival" by sharing their stories. Therefore, writing these memoirs has a therapeutic effect for them. Although I cannot claim to seek the true intentions of these words, the texts inspire several questions. For one, do the memoirs serve to assure readers that the women held captive are, indeed, grateful for what happened to them? Is this belief written because of the expectations of readers, following the formula of a redemption and inspiration? Would the memoir be published if these women still expressed anger and hopelessness? Except for Elizabeth's, these memoirs were all written within three years of their release from captivity. Would it be shameful to struggle with emotional recovery in such a short time after the traumatic event? A book that does not result in the road to recovery may not appeal to the reader. The captive women are not consciously trying to write to cater to audiences, but the result is that their recovery narratives fit readers' expectations of their own interactions with the books. The concept of witnessing can explain the reason that readers are drawn to these books and survivors may be drawn to write them.

Witnessing is a concept developed by Gary Weissman in his work *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*. Weissman explores the desire of non-witnesses, i.e., those that did not themselves directly experience the atrocities, to feel a connection to the trauma, an "unspoken desire of many people who are deeply interested in studying, remembering, and memorializing [the traumatic event]" (4). This work is important because, as Weissman and other scholars note, personal narratives in the media were instrumental in understanding the experience of living through the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a benchmark for the study of trauma in popular culture due to the postwar presence of mass media

and visual images that were unavailable at prior major historical events. Holocaust memoirs have been numerous since the 1950s.

According to Weissman, the desire to witness "can only be satisfied only in fantasy of witnessing [the Holocaust] for themselves. [Non-witnesses] attempt to actualize these fantasies through exposure to sites and texts where the Holocaust can be vicariously experienced and thereby made 'real' for visitors" (4). Attempts to have these vicarious experiences can be disappointing because non-witnesses do not feel what it was like to be there as much as they wish, but at the same time are aware they never really can. Weissman stresses non-witnesses' good intentions. However, the desire to witness can also lead to exploitation and a superficial appropriation of trauma for entertainment purposes. The daytime talk show culture of the 1980s and 1990s is often presented as an example of witnessing by exploitation in which people's trauma was paraded in front of viewers for shock value. According to Weissman, how witnessing happens is dependent on media culture and the cultural anxieties of the despite that witnessing originates out of a desire for empathy.

The desire to witness has, for example, created the modern concept of dark tourism, a type of tourism destination associated with death, disaster, and suffering (Lennon and Foley 3). Dark tourism includes kitschy crime scene bus tours and plantation tours but is most associated with tours of concentration camps, such as Auschwitz. Even within dark tourism studies, research has found that participants don't have one definitive motivation for participating. Some tourists participate to confront their fear of death, others want to feel more connected to trauma, and others do it for reasons similar to why people watch horror films: for vicarious emotional feelings. These reasons can all be applied to why people seek out memoirs about trauma. In fact, written memoirs are the most convenient ways to witness. They are easy to obtain, can be mass

produced, don't require travel, and can be consumed individually. These memoirs are literary dark tourism. The concept of witnessing provides a strong justification of why readers might engage with trauma memoirs. However, there are also ways in which witnessing affects the actual survivors of the trauma as well.

Psychoanalyst Dori Laub builds on Weissman's concept of witnessesing. He identifies three different levels of witnessing: (1) the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience (the witness), (2) the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others (non-witness), and (3) the process of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself (non-witness). The first level, being a witness oneself, represents the immutable, individual experiences of the women in captivity. Laub calls this a "trauma with no witness," in that nothing will replicate actual time spent in the traumatic situation. Just as trauma is a mental malady, one's own memory and aftermath is a witness, but one can never truly remember the incident as it really was. Laub explains how victims are not reliable narrators of their trauma: "No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity: a wholeness and a separateness- that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed by his or her witnessing" (66). Here, unreliability is not intentional. The women are not purposefully deceiving readers or have malignant motivations. This relates back to Gilmore's work on autobiography, in that one's own memory and lens of experience will always be limited. Therefore, the popular captivity memoir will never hold the truth of what happened, and the writer can never include everything and every feeling in a way that will make people feel like they have reached the truth. Still, there is merit in attempting to do so, because the attraction of being a non-witness, Laub's second level of witnessing, is what readers desire.

However conscious readers are of the limitations of non-witnessing, they still read trauma memoirs to place themselves in the trauma. Readers wish narrators to tell things in linear, descriptive order. Therefore, these memoirs often take on the same tone and form. They don't use abstract or aesthetic literary conventions because they may obscure the reader's desire to witness. Anne Rothe, in *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media,* states that the boundaries of witnessing are hard to determine:

> Non-witnesses essentially enact the reception equivalent of … "writing trauma" and juxtaposed to "writing about trauma." While the latter mode of representation is dominated by the interpretative powers of consciousness, the former supposedly allows the trauma to be externalized from the victim's mind into a narrative, without the interference of consciousness (Rothe 162).

What Rothe means here is that readers of trauma narratives don't acknowledge the mediated way that the trauma is delivered to them and that they fantasize about feeling the same things as the victim. These levels of witnessing highlight an important conflict between the reader (non-witness) and the writer (witness). This conflict promotes and helps explain the appeal of trauma memoirs. Ultimately, narrators are doing their best to approach the truth while readers are trying their best to experience that truth, but the two desires can never intersect. However, readers still believe they can seek the truth, which compels them to read on in the memoir or consume multiple memoirs. Since memoirs infinitely approach truth, readers believe they can close the gap between witnessing and non-witnessing. So, they continue to seek out these memoirs, making them popular.

Lowbrow and middlebrow

Captivity memoirs are considered popular because they are intended for consumption by the masses and are neither expensive nor hard to obtain. Popular culture scholars emphasize that it is important to study culture that is not considered elite, nor considered of the highest (and

therefore most specialized) aesthetic value, because it is the culture of the masses. In popular culture studies, it is common to categorize texts into categories including highbrow, lowbrow, middlebrow, and even no-brow. Much like genre, this categorization is useful in analyzing and comparing cultural texts.

Lawrence Levine's 1988 study, *Highbrow/Lowbrow, the Emergence of Cultural Study in America*, stresses that placing texts in categories is less important than examining the nature of hierarchies and why they exist. He argues that "because the primary categories of culture have been the products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable" (8). In other words, the categories in which we place these texts change depending on cultural climate and cultural shifts. Levine's work examines the nature of opera, which was entertainment for the masses (lowbrow) until the upper class appropriated it. Currently, opera is considered highbrow. Lowbrow becomes associated with commercially successful texts, because the lowbrow is made for the lowest common denominator, prioritizing appeal over quality. For example, Broadway musicals have gone through several cycles of being considered highbrow and lowbrow since their inception. In the early 20th century, Broadway provided mass entertainment; towards the end of the century it became elite and restricted in its audience. Now, with the mass popularity and accessibility of cast soundtracks, it can be re-classified as culture for the masses. However, exorbitant ticket prices create a boundary between lowbrow and highbrow. This example shows that the classification of culture is never stagnant.

Beth Driscoll, building on Levine's work, proposes the existence of a new category called the middlebrow. The middlebrow, as perceived by elite culture, "consist[s] of people who are hoping someday they will get used to stuff they ought to like...cut off from the highbrows,

desperately trying to emulate their cultural mastery" (7). To consume middlebrow culture is aspirational in that it is a substitute for more elite culture. However, Driscoll states that these middlebrow texts should be valued on their own merits and not solely as lesser substitutes. Driscoll's work focuses on popular fiction, and I argue that her ideas are also applicable to popular captivity memoirs. Like fiction, they have an "elite" equivalent: the literary memoir. Thus, the popular captivity memoir is to literary memoirs as elite literary fiction is to middlebrow fiction.

Driscoll identifies eight key features of the middlebrow: The middlebrow is (1) middle-class, (2) reverential, (3) commercial, (4) mediated, (5) feminized, (6) emotional, (7) recreational, and (8) earnest. Of these eight features, commercial, mediated, feminized, and emotional are the most relevant to popular captivity memoirs. Commercial appeal is a key facet of the middlebrow. The short time between the experience and the release of the book, deliberate coordination with media appearances, and common formulas indicate that popular captivity memoirs are meant to be sold to the masses. Commercial appeal also indicates that sales are meant to be optimized within a short time frame. It is very rare for these books to re-enter best-selling lists after their initial release. Driscoll points to a "constant tension between art and commerce [that] animates literary middlebrow culture" (23). The tension is found both in producers and audiences. A literary scholar or elite publisher may describe such memoirs as exploitative. However, this tension is crucial to the very existence and impact of these memoirs. If, as many of these authors say, the goal is to help others by sharing their stories, commercial appeal is the most effective way this can happen. Sales reports are more accurate measure of success than a positive review in a prestigious literary periodical.

The feminization of the middlebrow is a key factor when examining popular captivity memoirs. The readers of middlebrow texts are overwhelmingly female. Feminization makes the term "middlebrow" a derogatory term. A cursory glance at the literary field quickly reveals that prestigious literary accomplishments are associated with men, and women's works (including popular captivity memoirs) are merely seen as "guilty pleasures" or "chick lit." The same could be said about memoirs; Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*, both memoirs dealing with trauma, are esteemed in the literary genre. Often, men's memoirs receive more coverage in established circles of literature.

With very few exceptions, authors of popular captivity memoirs are women. Men who have been held captive are more likely to write memoirs if the captivity occurred in, for example, military service, because of its masculine setting (Caruth). Readers who are women are more likely to identify with the women held captive and men are more interested in reading about the details of the case, identifying with the investigator or law enforcement.[2] In a memoir, the woman held captive is the protagonist and hero; in a true crime account, the one who solves the case is the protagonist. It is possible that women are more likely to seek out the emotional experiences of the narrator rather than the logistics of the case as a crime.

Book covers are an important feature of the middlebrow and its feminized appeal. In the four works I am examining, two types of covers emerge. Elizabeth Smart's *My Story* and Michelle Knight's *Finding Me* both use first-person titles. This corresponds to their covers in that a picture of each woman takes up the entire space of the cover. Both women are styled conservatively but femininely, both wearing sweaters. Elizabeth, standing, looks directly into the

[2] For each of the cases covered here, several other books have been published by family members, law enforcement, and journalists about the cases.

camera with her hands clasped at her waist. Michelle is leaning against a wall with her head turned to face the camera. Both are smiling, but in a formal, performative way. Their expressions are socially coded as smiles for when one's picture is being taken rather than smiles that exhibit happiness. They are smiling to ensure us that they are safe and happy now. They cannot look very happy because the book details their traumatic experiences. Conversely, they cannot look too unhappy because they need to convey the fact that they have overcome their ordeals. This also speaks to how women are socialized to appear pleasant and non-confrontational. This instinct, as readers will learn, was also exploited by their captors.

The covers of Jaycee's *A Stolen Life* and Amanda and Gina's *Hope* are similar. Both feature a small picture centered on a cover of beige background, with the title above it and their names below. These pictures are nonprofessional photos or are purposefully made to look so. Jaycee's picture is one taken when she was a child, not long before she was kidnapped. She wears a sweater with kittens on it and is playfully sticking her tongue out of her mouth. This fits well with her title, *A Stolen Life*, because it represents the innocence that was stolen from her. In the picture on the cover of *Hope*, Amanda and Gina pose for the camera cheek to cheek, as if it originated from a candid shot; their dress and makeup do not look professionally done. The image resembles the pictures young women might take of each other to post on social media. Their physical closeness in the picture signifies an intimate friendship.

The covers suggest ways in which these books have been feminized. Female subjects are the covers' focus, and they are presented to show emotion. The smiles, regardless of their sincerity, provide the assurance that these women's stories have successful conclusions. The women are the sole focus of the covers, and the women look directly into the camera. The

woman is the clear subject of the picture, challenging the often-seen male gaze, in which women are the object and men identify with the subject (Mulvey).

Middlebrow works describe struggles which incite an emotional response from the reader. Because these works rely heavily on the response, this can lead to works being minimized as sentimental or melodramatic, descriptors that carry negative connotations. Perhaps consumers of the memoirs are explicitly seeking emotional reading experiences. Emotional content is a defining feature of the middlebrow and possible part of the appeal.

Levine's analysis of highbrow and lowbrow and Driscoll's analysis of the middlebrow are important to further identifying the genre of popular captivity memoirs. Placing these texts in the context of popular culture is important before we turn to a close reading of the texts.

Commodifying trauma as "mis lit"

Anne Rothe, in *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*, combines the analysis of trauma memoirs and the effects of mass culture, thus establishing theories about the modern phenomenon of trauma and witnessing as popular entertainment. Building on Weissman, Laub, and Caruth's work on witnessing, Rothe points to a specific event of the Holocaust as the origin of popular trauma culture. In 1961, the Eichmann trials were broadcast widely on television. Adolf Eichmann oversaw the transport of millions of European Jews to death camps. The broadcast of surviving witnesses' detailed testimony was especially captivating. Prior to this, news of the death camps was mediated through mainstream news channels, and even the Nuremburg trials that occurred a decade earlier did not convey victims' individual suffering. The witnesses at the Eichmann trials shared personal testimony, revealing the horrific details of their suffering that no one had heard before. These testimonies formed a

theme in which "the main character eventually overcomes victimization and undergoes a metamorphosis from the pariah of weak and helpless victim into a heroic survivor" (2). Enduring trauma is equated with heroism. Gaps in the historical record were filled through these individual accounts. Even though knowledge of the concentration camps was widespread, the horrors these witnesses had endured still surprised many viewers. Individual testimonies and stories became crucial to filling in gaps that the official, regulated information did not include.

Rothe also points to a more recent example. In 2006, Oprah Winfrey broadcasted a special episode of her popular talk show in which she tours Auschwitz concentration camp with noted Holocaust survivor and memoirist Elie Wiesel. Rothe criticizes Winfrey for engaging in what she terms as "Holocaust kitsch," in which Winfrey transforms an important historical event into a narrative that fits the themes of her show. "Reflecting and reinforcing dominant American Holocaust discourse, their televised sentimental journey through Auschwitz does not inform viewers about the complex socio-political history of the 'Final Solution,' but rather constitutes a search for a mystical revelations and uplifting self-help messages" (3). Here, Rothe is concerned that viewers will ignore the historical importance in favor of how the incident relates to their own lives. The episode further illustrates popular trauma culture because this special also tied into the presentation of Wiesel's memoir, *Night,* as the next selection in Winfrey's widely influential book club. By bringing a work that was previously considered elite literary memoir into popular discourse, Oprah brought the tragedy memoir into the narrative peddled by many daytime talk shows: inspirational transformation of the downtrodden. The very existence of a memoir reassures its consumers that things will end well, because the person needed to survive to write the book. One must have been transformed to write the memoir. The formula, then, is almost always guaranteed.

Rothe is particularly critical of Oprah Winfrey for what she sees as exploitation of victimhood and trauma to create trauma kitsch. Kitsch, as a general concept, is associated with sentimentality and often signifies the distasteful or disrespectful. Rothe uses kitsch in this way and sees it as an issue because it creates an apolitical representation of trauma. She explains trauma kitsch:

> By omitting the socio-economic contexts of oppression, victimization, and violence by representing these quintessentially political subjects as individual tragedies, trauma kitsch covertly reinforces the power structures that have created the represented injustices. In conveying the message that teary-eyed sentimentality constitutes an adequate and sufficient reaction, they suppress the critical reception from which political action can arise (45).

In applying trauma kitsch to the captivity memoirs, the "political subjects" would be the subordination, abuse, and victimization of women and people of color. Because each of these memoirs tell an individual story, her argument contends, these memoirs will not inform audiences about the larger issues associated with the trauma nor change their perceptions of it. Thus, trauma kitsch takes on the appearance of a melodrama. As mentioned earlier, in Cawelti's exploration of genre, melodrama involves a simplified dichotomy between good and evil, the innocent and the omnipotent evil, the hypermasculine villain and the feminized victim. Rothe contends that this simplified narrative of trauma is a way of appeasing the masses through a commercialized product. "The overt optimism expressed in the redemptive happy endings is undermined by the fact that the vast majority of the plot casts innocence as constantly threatened by seemingly omnipotent evil, which lurks everywhere under the surface of mundane life. The simultaneous overt optimism and covert angst may explain the addictive capacity that made [trauma kitsch] such hot commodities" (49). Reading these memoirs is a way to confront this omnipotent evil, yet it also perpetuates it, eradicating neither from the reader's life. This will

cause the reader to seek more of these memoirs as they seek to eliminate the horrors from their lives.

Rothe is also cynical about the way audiences interact with texts. “As audiences seek more and more reassurance that, despite appearances to the contrary, all will be well in this late-modern world, they look, ironically, in all the wrong places. Despite its optimistic endings, the kitsch-sentimental melodramatic emplotments of the pain of others actually reinforce the consumer’s sense of omnipresent but intangible danger that is paradigmatic of trauma culture” (47). In other words, the more readers seek trauma as assurance of transformation and inspiration, the more reading trauma creates unconscious fear of the dangers of the modern-day world. In popular captivity memoirs, women may want to read about other women who overcome the evil domination of men to feel inspired and empowered. However, according to Rothe, the consumption of these texts reinforces the idea that men are always a source of danger to women despite women’s efforts to free themselves from the fear.

Rothe explains that the demand for trauma memoirs led to the creation of a modern subgenre, dubbed by the publishing industry as misery literature, or “mis lit.” Mis lit refers to memoirs that “represent real-life experiences, particularly child abuse, illness and addiction, according to the plot paradigm dominant in popular culture: they construct a melodrama of suffering and redemption around ethically simplified conflicts of good and evil embodied in the characters of villain and victim, and they rely on kitsch’s clichés and tropes to arouse teary-eyed sentiment in readers” (88). Mis lit is based on a very clear binary of good and evil. Readers of captivity memoirs are in no way supposed to identify with or humanize the captors. The captor and victim serve as “characters” in the memoirs’ melodramas. I am not advocating sympathy for captors but pointing out that a simple binary conflict of good/evil is comforting and easy for the

reader to comprehend. Rothe's obvious critical view on mis lit reveals that she feels the way the events are presented is too simplified, which, to her, reflects audience' misguided willingness to accept simplicity. This also implies a mistrust of audience response.

Furthermore, mis lit promotes the idea that enduring great suffering is the highest accomplishment someone can achieve. This is unlike other types of memoirs, which base a person's meaning on remarkable accomplishments. Previously, stories were based on heroes actively taking on challenges. Mis lit celebrates bad things happening *to* someone. Great suffering gives life meaning. Readers are hungry for the specific details of the suffering. This requires the author to be willing to disclose these details. The worse the experience gets for the victim, the more significant, and satisfying to the reader, the redemption will be.[3]

Rothe calls the abundance of self-disclosure the "pornographic details" of mis lit. Here, pornographic does not refer to sexual content, but to the way that details of suffering are graphically described to arouse visceral emotional responses. The publishing industry has driven this to be a one-upmanship culture: whosever memoir is the most horrifying will sell the best. Readers have a "voyeuristic fascination with bodies that are both naked and in pain coupled with the exculpatory belief that extremity reveals some absolute and profound truths" (95). The more specific and graphic the details, the more it must be true. This includes notable memoirs *A Child Called It*, about child abuse, the aforementioned *Kiss Daddy Goodnight,* and Augusten Burrough's *Running with Scissors*, about an abusive and neglectful family.

Rothe holds the opinion that the mis lit industry is unethical because publishers exploit authors' traumas for commercial gain. In fact, the demand for the genre has created an

[3] This is very similar to Cawelti's analysis of the melodrama genre.

environment where fabricated memoirs have been published.[4] The most recent notable fabricated memoir is 2006's *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey. Oprah chose this memoir for her book club immediately after Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Frey's memoir was about, among other things, his time in a strict in-patient alcohol addiction facility and the suicide of his girlfriend. It was later revealed that the publisher encouraged packaging the book as a true story, although it was only loosely inspired by events in Frey's life. The heaps of praise quickly turned to a public shaming of Frey, particularly by Winfrey. Ironically, readers were upset that Frey had not suffered all the "pornographic details" in his book. Even though the content of the book did not change, its re-classification from memoir to fiction tarnished the book. Reading about the trauma in his book may not be as satisfying to some knowing that he didn't actually experience it.

As with middlebrow and mis lit, popular captivity memoirs are written for the masses. Regardless of the writer's intent, the four memoirs I have chosen are published by mainstream publishing companies and my focus is on the information contained within, not the aesthetic value of the writing. In fact, several of the books issue an apology for the lack of literary cohesion. Jaycee includes an author's note of apology:

> This book may be confusing to some. But keep in mind throughout my book that this was a very confusing world I lived in. I think to truly begin to understand what it was like, you would have to be there, and since I wish that on no one, this book is my attempt to convey the overwhelming confusion I felt during those years…If you want a less confusing story, come back to me in ten years when I sort it all out! (Dugard, Author's Note)

There is a hint of defensiveness in this note. Why, then, not wait ten years to write this when she has thought it all out? It is likely because the publisher means to capitalize on her recent news-worthy rescue. Book releases are planned in conjunction with television interviews, television

[4] Holocaust memoirs are of particular interest to fabricators, as there is a cultural worship as Holocaust survivors. A well-known case is Binjimim Wolanski, which is detailed in Rothe's *Popular Trauma Culture*.

specials, and photo shoots in *People* Magazine. How much of this is instigated by a publisher looking to exploit a tragedy for book sales? How much of this is the survivor controlling her own narrative to receive payment that will help her adjust back to everyday life? How much of it is a psychological need to share a story as part of a healing process? It is possible for all of these scenarios to be true.

Popular captivity memoirs could be considered "trauma kitsch." They contain the same formulas and themes (to be discussed in more depth in the next chapter) that resemble melodrama. Amanda and Gina introduce the book *Hope* with:

> We have written here about terrible things that we never wanted to think about again. But our story is not just about rape and chains, lies and misery. That was Ariel Castro's world. Our story is about overcoming all that. We want people to know the truth, the real story of our decade as Castro's prisoners inside 2207 Seymour Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio. (Author's Note)

This introduction is a blueprint for the mis lit genre. It assures readers that the book will fulfill their needs: both the pornographic details (rape, chains, misery), and the uplifting message (overcoming).

This also fulfills the final facet of mis lit: the simplified conflict. The enemy is easy to identify: it is the captor. There is no grey area, no sympathy, and no attempt to understand motives. I do not propose that the captors deserve empathy, but in melodramatic formulas, readers are assured that embodiments of evil will receive punishment when the captives receive redemption, restoring the balance of justice. I argue that popular captivity memoirs should be included in the category of mis lit. However, Rothe's definition contains cynicism and focuses on the readers' use of these as kitsch, implying that the trauma is exploited for its disturbing content and that writers may be intentionally exploiting their own traumas for commercial gain. The popular captivity novels I am including in this study cannot be reduced to a single purpose

or intention. Writers may have multiple, and possibly conflicting, reasons for writing their memoirs. The texts contain many ways of making meaning, all which can exist within the same text.

In this chapter, I used the frameworks of genre, formula, the middlebrow, and the concept of "mis lit" to identify and contextualize the significance of popular memoirs of women held captive. Applying genre theory to the texts, I identified six formulas found in the popular captivity memoir. I used these formulas to further explore the impacts of autobiographical narratives, how trauma is represented through narratives, and the significance of these memoirs as 'middlebrow' popular culture. Then, I explored how these memoirs have the potential to become trauma kitsch, depending on the audience reception and the way the publishers market them. It is important to frame captivity memoirs and their place within popular culture before closely reading their content. In the chapter three, I will focus on the texts' common themes.