

PATRICK MCGRATH TRAUMA 2008

Charlie Weir is a man who tackles other people's demons for a living.

He has seen every kind of

trauma during his years as a psychiatrist in New York.

Yet he hasn't found a way of resolving his own conflicts,

particularly the fatal mistake that caused his wife and daughter to leave him condemning him to corrosive loneliness and restless anger

.Years later, he meets a beautiful but damaged woman who promises to restore his dwindling faith in both his profession and himself.

But as he realizes that she has become more of a patient than a lover, events conspire to send him reeling toward the abyss.

A central theme of the text is the effects of post-traumatic stress and the ways in which the mind deals with significant psychological trauma. As McGrath states:

[Charlie Weir] suffers trauma, but then rather than try to heal himself, have it seen to as he says, he instead examines it rather like a scientist, who has scratched his skin and infected himself with some virus. He watches it, simply out of curiosity as to what psychologically it looks like when one suffers the sort of disorder – the sort of post-traumatic disorder – that he has observed in his patients.

Review

"McGrath at his dark-hearted best." —*O, The Oprah Magazine* "Beautifully crafted and paced, **Trauma** [is] either a superb psychological thriller or a masterly evocation of modern alienation and despair. . . . A terrific literary entertainment, one that will keep you on edge." —*The Washington Post* "Full of sensitive, well-observed touches [and] elegant when it needs to be. . . . McGrath makes us see that our own minds are the most haunted of houses." —*Los Angeles Times* "Ambitious. . . . McGrath uses his potent storytelling powers to draw us into [his narrator's] fevered brain and convey his emotional distress." —*The New York Times* "The inversion of roles, the blurring of the boundaries between the rational and the irrational, the violence, the twisted sexual passions, the slipperiness of memory: these are familiar themes in McGrath's fiction. Here they are recombined in powerful and imaginative ways. **Trauma** is a gripping psychological thriller. McGrath's prose is taut and lean; his way with characters is deft; and his explorations of the dark side of human nature are disturbing. And at the novel's centre, the descent of its narrator from a false sense of superiority into a pit of madness and despair is handled with great skill." —Andrew Scull, *The Times Literary Supplement* "Tortuous, often gripping... The novel is aptly titled, since trauma can be said to be the origin and the end of its insidiously uncoiling developments." —Sven Birkerts, *The New York Times Book Review* "A haunting story of a man in the grip of a painful and beautifully articulated spiritual malaise." —*Publishers Weekly*

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If you're hoping for a soul-baring by one of McGrath's fascinatingly damaged narrators, think twice before buying *Trauma*

. As a fan of *Dr. Haggard's Disease*, *Spider*, and *Asylum*, I looked forward to more of the same sort of psychological study in *Trauma*. It actually belongs to a different genre from McGrath's other books -- not modern gothic (though there is a brief nod in that direction at the end), but a more mainstream exploration of an American psychiatrist struggling to live and work under the burden of a repressed childhood trauma.

Whenever anyone starts arguing about "literary horror," I always think of Patrick McGrath's excellent books. I don't believe he's been much embraced by horror fans. (Is there another genre where the word "literary" is consistently used in a pejorative sense?) And mainstream critics -- and publishers -- seem to avoid the "H" word. McGrath's work tends to be described as Modern Gothic

(The Gothic part presumably refers to the classic definition: a character deformed through isolation, a condition lurking at the heart of all his novels and stories.)

But there's more true, and truly disturbing, darkness on any page of *TRAUMA* than in any ten vampire/zombie epics. The fact that the book is written on an intelligent, adult level makes it that much more distinctive

The pace is good and the characters are well sketched

McGrath has a good grasp of his subject matter and displays a lot of insight into the psyche of people and what makes them react the way they do to various situations.

He deals with the age-old problem of sibling rivalry and the breakdown of relationships deftly. He also gives a reasonable depiction of people with varying degrees of mental illness/problems.

I found that the novel was Americanised.

the characters are American and it is set in New York,

A cynical psychologist of my acquaintance referred to one of his colleagues who'd had several suicides among his patients as "double 0 seven- He has a license to kill!" Of course, making cheap jokes on crazy mental health professionals is easy, as is making broad camp caricature. What Patrick McGrath does here is so much more subtle. Of course, with this author, you never know just how self-deceiving or malicious his narrator may be, so CAREFUL reading is in order. Still, his tale is compassionate and actually teaches us something about empathy and compassion while his characters blunder towards that dreamed-of state of grace.

McGrath continues to be the modern master of the unreliable narrator, not to mention the dark, dank passage into dementia. Trauma is no exception to his marvelous body of work.

McGrath has created an evocative, shadowed mystery all the more compelling for the fact that it is born in childhood experience, young Charlie Weir the heir of a dysfunctional family that ultimately casts him in the role of caretaker. With parents that lash out at one another and a gregarious brother who seeks his identity outside their troubled home, Charlie is the de facto caretaker of his alcoholic, depressed mother, who pens somewhat successful mysteries in her later years, ever praising older son, Walt, a successful artist, while denigrating Charlie's efforts to bring a modicum of peace and order to his mother's self-destructive days. While Fred Weir abandons his family for a younger woman and a wasted life of philandering, Charlie is the only one willing to step into the breach and protect the family from complete disintegration. It is no surprise, then, that in the 1970s Charlie should become a doctor who specializes in treating the mental disorders of returning Vietnam vets suffering from PTSD.

One of these damaged vets, Danny, is the focus of Charlie's professional energy, the young man severely traumatized by what he has seen- and done- while in service to his country. Danny's sister, Agnes, is an unexpected gift to the young doctor; Charlie and Agnes marry and have a daughter, Cassie, embracing the tormented Danny as a part of their small family. But Danny's slow disintegration ultimately takes a toll on the marriage, Charlie unable to comfort Agnes when she most needs him. His work becomes salvation until his mother's

death, when Charlie's careful house of cards comes crashing down: he assumes her chronic depression, a cloak of dread that weighs upon every aspect of his life. Charlie finds brief respite in Agnes' kindness and a chaotic romance with an equally-damaged Nora Chiara; but Charlie soon realizes that the needy Nora, while thrilling and seductive, is an emotional burden he cannot carry.

In an effort at self-preservation, Charlie changes jobs and location, drawn to a familiar place to confront his family drama. Subconsciously searching for safety, Charlie comes face to face with his own truth. His protagonist, the heart of this complex psychological thriller, McGrath exposes the layers of denial and pain that have shielded Charlie Weir from the memory he fears. The human mind is as dark and many-chambered as any nightmarish crime scene, this illness is far more subtle and pervasive, turning a well-meant life into a series of painful episodes that batter Charlie's psyche and leave him unable to navigate the world. Facing his brother, Walt, and an indifferent father in a heart-stopping moment of reckoning, Charlie's harrowing confrontation with the past is long overdue, his path strewn with loss and disappointment. A broken man, Charlie must find the strength to save the child he once was from a long-buried memory, to return to a life worth sustaining.