

Facing the Sky: Composing through Trauma in Word and Image, by Roy F. Fox. Parlor Press, 2016. 298 pp.

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In his foreword to *Facing the Sky: Composing through Trauma in Word and Image*, Peter Elbow notes how his own 1973 book, *Writing Without Teachers*, spoke to the benefits of freewriting in much the same way that Roy F. Fox's 2016 text speaks to the benefits of trauma writing. Yet, he says (and Fox would clearly agree), the debate of "whether freewriting and personal writing can improve writing" (xi) still rages in composition and rhetoric scholarship. In this way, *Facing the Sky* begins with a clear thesis: While trauma writing is both useful and necessary, the method, characteristics, and rhetorical advantages of trauma composition remain largely unexplored.

Beginning with a short story recounting his grandfather's death, Fox realizes, for his then ten-year-old self, "word and image did not exist" (5) to help him deal with the trauma because it never occurred to him to write—or talk—about the loss. Several decades later, though, he witnesses the power of language to support the grieving process as he watches his daughter face the death of their family cat through the lens of *Charlotte's Web*. In these early anecdotes, Fox makes it clear that he practices what he preaches, and this authenticity only adds richness to the text's theoretical and practical outcomes.

We've long known that literacy activities help us cope with life's difficulties (see Allen; Anderson and MacCurdy; Borrowman; DeSalvo; Pennebaker), but through his diverse case studies, Fox explains how—and, more importantly, why—*composing through trauma* is especially powerful for the healing process. In his first pages, Fox details the most significant benefit of trauma writing, one which makes his text applicable to a wide readership. Trauma writing, he says, allows us to work through difficult circumstances, but it also allows us to "generate more and different thinking" (33). The act of writing about trauma not only works psychologically, creating a "less fragmented self" (24), but also allows educators to look beyond students as "learning machines" (43) in order to reinforce the value of expressive writing at all levels and in all disciplines.

Throughout the text, Fox focuses simultaneously on the humanity and the practicality of trauma writing. In chapter one, he provides a thorough and diverse review of the literature, citing studies from rhetoric, medicine, and history, which fully immerse the reader in the current conversation surrounding trauma writing. Exemplifying the theoretical lens he often employs for analysis, Fox then moves down Hayakawa's Ladder of Abstraction—a diagram adapted from Alfred Korzybski's work, which illustrates connections between language, perceptions, and meaning. Moving to the bottom of the

Ladder to provide concrete examples of trauma writing, Fox includes bits of letters from Presidents Jefferson, Lincoln, and Truman to anchor his literature review. These examples from our collective history combined with Fox's own stories of personal trauma showcase his readable prose and set the stage for the diverse set of participants and writing presented later.

In chapter two, the author outlines his methodology and describes his extensive background in teaching trauma writing to rural American high school students, developmental writing college students, and South African HIV-patient writers. This rundown of Fox's career as a writing teacher adds depth—and, again, Hayakawan concreteness—to his already extensive review of the literature. One of Fox's strengths is his ability to connect with people, and as such, the case study represented here spans five years and fourteen participants, all of whom were some level of literacy expert. Fox tells us that his friendships with his participants led to the raw, deep, and honest data his study produced, but it quite often left him feeling like “a phony priest . . . exploiting the tragedies of others” (76). Fox represents research as a highly personal endeavor much like the subject of his study itself. This honesty and reflexivity allow the author to enter his data through multiple points, apply different lenses, and produce a text as authentic as the words and images within it.

In chapter three, Fox showcases the trauma writing of Lucy, one of his former doctoral students, who was diagnosed with stage four metastatic breast cancer at age 42. More than a beautiful and heartbreaking story, this chapter demonstrates the forms trauma writing can take—emotional, rational, and professional—and the role of audience within these forms. Lucy's letters, emails, posts on a cancer website, and journals depict trauma writing as the most reliable external representation of the internal process of coping. Through her skillful and imagistic language, we can see Lucy rejecting society's typical depiction of a breast cancer patient: the bescarved smiling woman taking a selfie from a chemo chair. Fox describes the effect of Lucy's identification as a cancer patient and subsequent rejection of the typical cancer patient trope, giving us a peek into the verbal mind of his participant.

Again showcasing his reflexivity, Fox discusses his interview transcription process, noting how his choice to include Lucy's hesitations emphasizes the semantic process of verbalization. It is here that Fox makes his first suggestion of how trauma writing leads to improved writing across all genres: The power of this passage is in Lucy's “highly specific language,” which allows the action to slow down and grants the author time to more completely process the situation (84). In this section, Fox also applies James Moffett's theory of simultaneous differentiation and integration to suggest that trauma writing is effective even beyond its ability to improve writing skills. He notes how Lucy often seeks to distance herself from typical cancer images, and in doing so, “the presence of

some *other thing* . . . helps to *ground* and *anchor* those feelings being tapped from our internal reservoir” (146). The *other thing* is a theme which re-emerges throughout the text, manifesting in words and images from multiple writers.

Much of the strength of Fox’s book is his refusal to adhere to overly prescriptive qualitative methods; his experimentation in chapter structure and content allows for his theoretical foundation to find a practical application. Chapter four is one such break from the traditional structure as he moves from focusing on a single case study participant to analyzing texts produced in his trauma writing graduate course. He provides brief explanations for fascinating assignments like *The Monster* and *the Angel* through which students like Minji were able to “crystallize” their traumatic incidents by refashioning their traumatic images (*The Monster*) into images of hope (*The Angel*) (126). Through his discussion of his students’ work, Fox makes a clear point about the nature of trauma writing: Though the intensity of traumas varies, some seemingly less severe forms, like one graduate student who writes about his loan debt, might be more “subtle and insidious” than they seem on the surface (141).

Chapter five highlights another singular case study participant in *Kate*, a woman who lost her husband to a tragic motor scooter accident. While audience is featured prominently in *Lucy*’s chapter through her differing forms of writing, *Kate*’s chapter covers only one form of trauma writing—her personal journals. The intimate nature of this chapter forefronts the unique mutability of trauma writing. For example, in one entry, *Kate* lists and describes her husband in a format which turns him into characters of *Hank the ____* (the blank filled with multiple labels like “gourmet” and “wordsmith”). Fox uses this opportunity to discuss naming, images, and metaphors as framing devices, which serves to unpack the implicit meanings communicated in text. Throughout this chapter, Fox peels back the layers of *Kate*’s situation, drawing parallels to *Lucy*’s situation and providing clear examples of key trauma writing themes such as “tapping into the inner stream,” differentiating and integrating to discover selfhood, and, like in *Lucy*’s case, using *the other thing* to process the traumatic event (202).

These varied and interesting case studies come together in the final chapter wherein Fox connects the themes across the various forms and authors. Some outcomes can be applied across many genres of writing. Elements leading to writers’ perseverance and internalized principles of rhetoric, for example, speak to the ways trauma writing improves all writing. Other outcomes reveal the unique benefits of trauma writing—the writers’ ability to gain control and pursue oppositions—and make a strong case for increased trauma writing in both educational and medical environments. Most importantly, though, Fox makes an effective case for integrating trauma composing into our academic

courses. He lists a myriad of “characteristics heralded by academic thinking,” which he also identifies in trauma writing (231).

As a writing program administrator, when I read this book, it struck me that so many of the texts we read in the classroom concern trauma, but so few we write do. Clearly, trauma writing is already venerated in our culture, and as such, Fox suggests we need also revere it in our writing classrooms. Trauma writing—unlike many other types of academic writing—allows us to start in the middle and work our way to a sound conclusion, prompting thinking all along the way. After all, as Fox says, “If we *begin* with a judgment or conclusion, why go further?” (170).

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