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Domestic noir: Fictionalising trauma survival

Abstract:

How can authors fictionalise trauma without cognitively suffering intense vicarious trauma in that writing process? This paper explores this question through the lens of fictionalised Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) representations in domestic noir narratives. Domestic noir operates within the constraints of a domestic space that is subverted from a sanctuary to a potential psychological space of tyranny or violence. This may include reiterative chronic traumas such as IPV or other forms of relationship violence. Viewed as a trauma fiction, domestic noir is peculiarly suited to interrogating the survivor narrative. The domestic noir models focused on IPV develop a complex combination of the victim, survivor and hero in their representations of traumatised protagonists. The effects of writing about IPV trauma may be transformed by this fictionalising into an emerging hero-as-survivor narrative. The Emerging Hero Process developed and elaborated within this paper indicates, through reiterative cycles of the protagonist's emotional and behavioural response, their capacity to summon the heroic act that may enable a reframed and reconciled survivor outlook. The Emerging Hero Process has evolved into an IPV writing model of a survivor narrative that may also filter or reposition the vicarious trauma of the writing process.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Fictionalised trauma, domestic noir, Intimate Partner Violence, Emerging Hero Process, geographies of fear

Introduction

The trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined. (Balaev, 2008, p. 155)

Fictionalising the trauma of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) within domestic noir centres the narrative on the domestic space and the female protagonist-as-survivor. Joyce (2017), from The National Centre for Writing in the UK, talks of domestic noir as a genre that is “a capacious, flexible category that encompasses realist writing about domestic violence, intersectional feminism, religion, mental illness, and women’s rights” (Joyce, 2018, p. 3). In recent years, the rise of domestic noir as a category of popular fiction is being recognised as “put[ting] the female experience at the centre of the narrative” (p. viii). The concept of the home-sanctuary is subverted, presented instead as a space or place of psychological tyranny or violence. This becomes a domestic space where knowledge and power, known and familiar to the reader (Abbott, 2018, p. 283), bind together to create a geography of fearful intimacy.

This paper focuses particularly on IPV and the capacity of domestic noir to investigate the female protagonist at points of action within reiterative cycles of chronic or complex trauma. Within this repetitive patterning the protagonist is attempting to develop their emotional and behavioural responses into a survivor narrative. These are not simply plot points of traumatic action and reaction, but moments of self-knowledge for the protagonist where there is the capacity to change the survivor narrative. Creative representations of fictionalised survivor narrative integrating the Emerging Hero Process presented within this paper enables an authentic exploration of a strongly traumatised protagonist while seeking to protect the writer from experiencing vicarious traumatising.

The identification of an Emerging Hero Process arose from a creative writing research project, where the concept of domestic noir interrogating the incremental steps of survivor narrative was examined and tested within a fictionalised long short-story. The project itself analysed the fictionalising of the writer’s experience of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) with a critical

review of Gumb's (2018) Ordinary Hero concept. This analysis led to the identification of an Emerging Hero model with which creative practitioners can ensure their fictionalised narratives are layered with authentic IPV experience, emotions and ordinary heroic action, tempering their own re-traumatisation in the process.

Context

There are strong linkages between the genre of realist domestic noir and that form of exploration of geographies of fear directly related to IPV. To contextualise further, this section explores the constraints of domestic space as a geography of fear, and the fictionalising process that enables the first-person point of view to inhabit that intimate and fearful space.

Geographies of fear

Urban and human geographers such as Pain (2010), Valentine (1989) and Listerborn (2002) are particularly interested in the relationship between fear and space. Fear in this context is defined within the relationship between violence and perceptions or usages of space, either domestic or public. Pain explores fear within "its social and spatial rather than purely psychological qualities" (2010, p. 1088) as a way to explore perceptions and uses of space. "Fear is an emotional reaction to a perceived threat that acquires meaning from its context" (p. 1088) and this is particularly relevant to the domestic space in terms of IPV.

The nature of women's geographies of fear has come into focus through researchers such as Valentine (1989) who indicates women's fear of male violence directly inhibits their use of public and domestic spaces: "as a product of their fear, many women not only perceive, but also experience, their environment differently to men" (1989, p. 387). A childhood commonality of learnt fearful reactions from female adults towards male strangers, coupled with media reports of violence against women, leads to women developing a heightened awareness of risk and danger. This awareness is compacted by the lived experiences of women whose "personal space is frequently invaded by whistles, comments [and] actual physical assault from strange men" (p. 386). Valentine concludes that "women's inhibited use of space is a spatial expression of patriarchy" (p. 385), with women constantly physically and emotionally negotiating their movements and reactions to the space around them. Similarly, Khurana (2020) investigates this patriarchal cultural effect on women's fear of spaces in a study of public transport in New Delhi. This investigation indicates the underrepresentation of women in public spaces as "keeping them 'boxed in' within the figurative and literal spaces of the women-only coaches allocated on trains" (2020, p. 19). This leads to a "spatial exclusion" (p. 19) echoing that sense of exclusion from community that also comes from IPV and abuse within domestic spaces.

Listerborn (2002) interrogates the nature of the geography of women's fear. She identifies the "mental maps" women create in line with "their fears and perceptions of danger" and

purposefully restrict their movements accordingly (2002, p. 37). A woman's perception of danger and fear motivates their movements, causing women to develop dedicated strategies to avoid unsafe places at unsafe times by taking out-of-the-way routes to avoid the perceived danger (p. 37). Listerborn further suggests "the character and meaning" (p. 37) of a place or space changes as time passes, as does women's perceptions of danger. A space in the daytime is often viewed as being safe, while at night the same space is suddenly full of a range of potential dangers. This perceived danger feeds the fear of a space or place that causes a correlated and calculated constraint on women's movements, ultimately underpinning women's notions of geographies of fear.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and the domestic space

IPV exists in seemingly pandemic proportions and is a recognised human rights abuse and global behaviour phenomenon (Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015, p. 1; WHO, 2012, p. 1). Perpetrators formulate a plan of widespread, systematic and comprehensive abuse of their victims by asserting their dominance, preying on the victim's intimate hopes, regrets, shame and joy (Hill, 2019, p. 6). This constant eroding of a victim's self-worth – their very spirit – sees the perpetrator gaining complete control over the victim, to the extent that the abuser has the power to incite terror from just looking at their victim (p. 6). IPV is pervasive and coercive in nature and, unlike other forms of abuse, typically impacts all facets of the victim's life through physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, mental and financial abuse (WHO, 2012, p. 1). While men can be victims of IPV, women feature heavily (WHO, 2012, p. 1), with global studies finding that 40–70% of female homicide victims were killed by their intimate partner who engaged in IPV (p. 7). In fact, two women are killed every week by their partners in England and Wales (Walmsley-Johnson, 2018, p. xii), while an intimate partner murders one woman each week in Australia (ANROWS, 2018, p. 2; Bryant & Bricknell, 2017, p. 19–20; Cussen & Bryant, 2015, p. 2). Additionally, data also demonstrates that one in four Australian women experience IPV in their lifetime (Hill, 2019, p. 4).

Given how prevalent IPV is in societies throughout the world, how is it that IPV keeps occurring? The reality is there is no simple answer, except to say that through a plan of constant, complex abuse, the victim's geographies of fear are built within the intimacy of the domestic setting itself. The "perfect" unrestricted space of the home means that perpetrators can extensively manipulate their victims into believing that the abuse is a "normal" part of domestic relationships (Hill, 2019, p. 13–14; Power et al., 2006, p. 179; Walmsley-Johnson, 2018). In the case of male perpetrators, there is a further factor anchored in history and societal expectation that sees the strengthening of IPV, that of a shared sense of patriarchal entitlement (WHO, 2012, p. 5) coupled with the belief that to be in control is to be a fully functioning male (Hill, 2019, p. 8). These attitudes and beliefs lead many male IPV perpetrators to view their intimate partners (and children) as chattels or possessions – theirs to control, manoeuvre and manipulate (Yardley et al., 2013, p. 133). This initial control mindset and power obsession can escalate into heightened states of abusive behaviour. If victims attempt to leave the relationship or seek assistance, IPV perpetrators respond decisively to declare their victim ownership and maintain control. Revenge-style abuse/crimes such as animal torture/killing, petrol/acid

dousing, revenge porn, holding partners captive, rape with implements, partner homicide and murdering children are devastatingly common in occurrence (Campbell et al., 2021, p. 2355). Perpetrators of IPV use their victim's geographies of fear to engage in total manipulation, control and power to fulfil their incessant need for control and self-pleasure. Surviving the repetitive traumatic events within IPV is a demonstration of a survivor's individual strength and courage.

Trauma fiction

In the psychiatric literature, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). The Center for Anxiety and Mood Disorders defines trauma as a “psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing” (The Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders, n.d). There are categories to differentiate types of trauma, and, in the context of IPV, the focus is on complex or chronic trauma. Complex trauma is prolonged and repetitive with cumulative effects on the trauma victim.

Trauma fiction is defined by Whitehead (2004) as a genre which conceptualises trauma and is most accurately reflected when mimicking symptoms which indicate the collapse of any sense of time or order. There are many trauma fictions written from a first-person point of view (for example Atwood's *Surfacing*, or Walker's *The Colour Purple*) striving to empower the female protagonist within socio-political systems. The fictionalising of trauma within domestic noir brings that sense of writing about events into an internal geography of fear for the protagonist.

Fiction has the power to immerse the reader into the mind and life of the characters. Fiction is also a powerful vehicle to contribute to people's understanding of the effect trauma has (Vickroy, 2014, p. 139) by placing the reader into the circumstance of the character's life and experiencing their perspective on traumatic situations. The value of fictionalising trauma is that it allows both the writer and the reader to share the raw trauma experience through the safer lens of the characters that are living it. As Balaev notes, “We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an ‘everyperson’ figure” (2008, p. 155).

Domestic noir texts may provide the opportunity for readers who are IPV victims to assimilate and identify their own trauma experience through the trauma events portrayed in fictionalised trauma. This assimilation process allows victims to mentally, as O'Mahony and Trees (2017) put it, “rehearse strategies” (p. 2) to begin the process of evolving from victim to survivor of their trauma experience. The fictionalised trauma provides clear depictions of the choices, diverse reactions and possible repercussions which can be harnessed as clear strategies within an individual's reference bank. Strategies can be mentally accessed, rehearsed and implemented with the intention of a catalyst of change within a victim's reality.

IPV trauma victims and survivors create an internalised master narrative/life story around major life events (Neimeyer, 2001, p. 263). This master narrative/life story and worldview

becomes challenged when new events such as trauma enters life, as traumatic events have the power to displace core beliefs and fundamental truths (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 71). In effect, as humans, self-identity and what we know is turned on its head when the master narrative is challenged, and, consequently, we may also find it arduous to create a narrative surrounding trauma events that enmeshes easily with the existing life story narrative (Jirek, 2017, p. 168; Neimeyer, 2001, p. 263; Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 182). The necessity to create specific, unique narratives integrating challenging events into the master narrative/life story is imperative to accept the trauma event/s and create a new normal. When this happens, it may become necessary to construct new recovery/survival narratives.

Sitting within the master narrative, creating an internalised survival narrative around challenging events (such as IPV) ensures that individuals (and by association, writers) avoid re-traumatising themselves when faced with fresh trauma in the future. Indeed, formulating a new survival narrative into the master narrative provides the individual with emotional strength, hinged on feelings of acceptance and increased safety. With a focus on acceptance, this survival narrative seeks to give voice to the trauma and survival story initially alongside, then subsequently merged into, the individual's master narrative where transformative movement towards personal growth occurs (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 170). The importance of transforming trauma experiences into a narrative memory that an individual can live with and accept cannot be underestimated. Through acknowledging and accepting the whole truth surrounding the traumatic experience (the event, history and emotions involved) the victim can grow around the traumatic event and move forward with ameliorations to their master narrative.

While some researchers view the re-authoring of trauma stories through recovery/survival narratives as a stage of recovery (Herman, 1992, pp. 176–177), this is more accurately identified as a necessary stage of survival. The effects of trauma are so long-lasting and profound (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 171) that it is necessary, through constructed narratives, to insert the traumatic event – the response and the external support responses – into the survivor's master narrative. The capacity to accept and acknowledge the trauma sees the individual moving forwards to emerge and embrace a new future built around (or perhaps more correctly on top of) the traumatic event/s. This harnessed capacity gives the individual the ability to function in the world, with their trauma incorporated into their narrative of survival (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, pp. 171–174; Neimeyer, 2001, p. 290), providing future-focused survival, rather than trauma “recovery”, for the reality is that the trauma experience sits within their master narrative forever.

Defining domestic noir as trauma survival fiction

Domestic noir is based in a sanctuary, for instance a home or other “safe” space, which is now territorially threatened by the relationships allowed into that safe space. Although domestic noir is not necessarily focused on IPV, there is a threatened violence in the relationships that may find correlations with fictionalising the trauma of IPV.

Aligning domestic noir to IPV trauma

In “Writing domestic violence in Marian Keyes’ *This Charming Man* (2008)”, O’Mahony and Trees (2017) discuss how fictional writing is particularly beneficial for interacting with IPV and exploring the issues that surround it (p. 2). Fictionalising IPV offers readers the opportunity to engage, learn and rehearse active strategies when faced with violence in their lives (p. 2). This leads to the conclusion that the narrative strategies used within fiction, and domestic noir by association, positions readers to view IPV as a shared societal issue and builds empathy towards victims (p. 14).

Perhaps the most gripping element of domestic noir is the genre’s heightened capacity to portray the often-hidden violent experiences of women, by tipping on its head the notion of the home existing as a safe harbour or sanctuary (Crouch, 2018, p. vii). The reality is that for women in IPV situations, home is anything but safe. Reflecting on these real-life issues, authors of the genre typically seek to give voice to the physical, financial, emotional and sexual violence and abuse women and children suffer as a result of IPV behind closed doors (p. viii). The genre also takes this a step further by fictionally exploring IPV trauma, traumatic reactions (Vickroy, 2014, p. 132) and survival instincts.

Domestic noir authors who focus on the domestic lives of strong yet challenged female protagonists orchestrate varied violent experiences to wreak havoc upon them, leaving moral conundrums, trauma and survival plotlines in their wake. Sitting within the larger genre of crime fiction, authors intentionally choose to place the female protagonist central to the violent narrative, together with the violence occurring within a domestic or interior setting, that gives the sub-genre its strong identity (Crouch, 2018, p. vii).

Domestic noir as a genre provides a space for both authors and readers to explore the devastating depths of IPV and the victims’ associated trauma. Dodd (2018) argues that this is because readers expect and knowingly accept the dark crime elements that domestic noir is known for because of its association with the broader crime fiction genre (p. 3). This expectation gives authors permission or encouragement to explore the geographies of fear of real IPV experiences textually through their domestic noir plotlines. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect for both readers and writers is that domestic noir texts provide a satisfying end to their texts, with the victim portraying the survivor mindset (Vickroy, 2014, p. 133) and emerging to move forward with their life despite the trauma effects that remain with them.

The depiction of trauma stories such as IPV within domestic noir texts is successful due to the micro setting of the domestic space, which allows the author to explore the geographies of fear surrounding the macro relationships of the characters that inhabit them. For those domestic noir authors who have experienced IPV and trauma, fiction writing allows them to distance themselves from their traumatic history by channelling their first-hand trauma knowledge through their protagonist’s actions, thoughts and emotions. Brien indicates how narrating trauma is a powerful healing process and that the need to have the narration heard, such as

through published domestic noir texts, is essential to assist with survival (2017, p. 5). Narrating trauma through fiction gives the author a practical, textual way of exploring their own residual personal trauma through protagonists sharing similar characteristics as themselves. Probing and interrogating the limits of their own residual trauma experience strengthens the author's personal survivor narrative and worldview. The fictionalising process enables some form of distancing from their trauma heritage – relieving the writer of the possibility of re-traumatisation – by giving them control of the fictional narratives.

The domestic noir protagonist

Survival is an often unrecognised yet essential trope of the domestic noir genre, as protagonists seek to overcome their difficult lived situations, such as IPV. Rachel from Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015) is a very recognisable trauma-affected, but ultimately survival-driven, protagonist in recent domestic noir literature. Utilising three unreliable narrators, the novel's plot is built around a series of toxic relationships steeped with IPV; protagonist Rachel's trauma experience provides the most significant insight into her character's growth and survival mechanisms in the face of IPV.

Viewing Rachel's chapters as the strongest in demonstrating lived trauma experience (Giovanelli, 2018, p. 39), her narrative clearly presents itself as a survivor narrative, facilitating a hero-emergence journey, despite the pressures of IPV. Rachel vacillates between her heightened emotions and behaviours throughout the storyline as she struggles to mentally construct an internal survivor narrative in the face of gross manipulation by her ex-husband. However, once her survivor narrative is actualised, Rachel continues to strengthen this narrative within herself by identifying the truth of her reality to the point where she can convert her survivor narrative into hero capacity. The capacity to ensure her survival by performing a heroic action (namely killing her ex-husband in self-defence) is predicated on her new understandings of her circumstances and her fortified self-belief:

I watch him come, I watch him, and I don't move until he's almost upon me, and then I swing. I jam the vicious twist of the corkscrew into his neck. (Hawkins, 2015, p. 402)

After Rachel's heroic action, which guarantees her survival, Hawkins (2015) demonstrates that Rachel has moved from her hero mindset to her own survivor narrative by revealing her trauma acceptance and plans for the future.

On first look, *Shakespeare's Landlord* (Harris, 1996), book one from *The Lily Bard Mysteries* book series, may not appear to be the "traditional" domestic noir text, and is centred on the trauma of violence more generally. However, on closer inspection, the series shares the many common tropes of domestic noir. *Shakespeare's Landlord* features a flawed and traumatised protagonist who has survived one graphic traumatic event and is attempting to start her life over in a new town with a new job as a domestic cleaner. Highly vigilant and prone to midnight street-running to combat her trauma-filled insomnia, Lily faces additional violent experiences and deaths, which inflict further trauma upon her and threaten her survivor mindset.

As with the majority of domestic noir texts, Harris (1996) endows Lily with strength yet clearly displays and makes accessible to readers the real struggle that Lily faces as she attempts to live with the trauma in her everyday life. Combining the protagonist's active vulnerability and strength, Harris opens the door to the inner workings of Lily's trauma-infused mind as she endeavours to present as a survivor to her external domestic world. Harris's raw, graphic and authentic descriptions of Lily's past and present life engage readers with the harsh reality of Lily's at times dysfunctional relationship with the domestic world around her.

Within *Shakespeare's Landlord*, Harris (1996) choreographs Lily, through the use of a first-person stream of consciousness flashback, to disclose the details of her violent and graphic kidnap, gang rape and the terrible act she had to commit in order to stay alive.

The horror on the faces of the men who came to investigate the body told me that I had gone beyond some boundary. I had passed; I had become the thing that had happened to me. (Harris, 1996, p. 67)

The reactions of Lily's rescuers reduced Lily to a "thing". The trauma event engulfed the very essence of Lily herself, forming an unbreakable link and stealing her identity, leaving her family to see her as her original rescuers did; a mere artifact left over from the terrible fate that befell her.

However, despite this lived traumatic connection to the heinous crime, Lily is building a survivor mindset which slowly evolves into an internalised survival narrative surrounding her traumatic event. Through her daily challenges, coupled with facing new traumatising events, Lily constructs a trauma survival narrative that she accepts as her new truth before incorporating it into her master narrative. It is through acceptance of her strength as a survivor, and the story (survivor narrative) that she attributes to her traumatic experience, that Lily has the power to move beyond the trauma itself while taking on her survivor story.

Domestic noir: The Emerging Hero Process

As indicated by both Harris and Hawkins, domestic noir literature can be interpreted as a form of fictionalised survival narrative, one in which the protagonist slowly constructs her own internalised survival narrative and integrates it into her master narrative even while acknowledging that the trauma event itself has changed her irrevocably. This survival/master narrative approach to fictionalising trauma was tested through the creative writing project which is the impetus for this paper. The creative work *Survival and Sunflowers* (Harris, 2021) is a fictionalised trauma in a domestic noir genre, focused upon the traumatised protagonist and the last days of her IPV relationship with her husband.

I didn't do it, Dan. I'm not going to beg you to believe me. I simply didn't do it.

I don't know what the hell I am going to do with you. You can't even make a cup of coffee, let alone a meal. I mean, what kind of wife can't even make dinner for her husband? I'll tell you, an absolutely useless one, that's what. You're a pathetic excuse for a wife. (Harris, 2021, p. 6)

Sunflowers and Survival (Harris, 2021) allows exploration of the catalyst moment when the victim harnesses the capacity to move to a survivor mindset. Gumb (2018) reconceptualises the trauma victim as an ordinary hero of their own story. While the Ordinary Hero is easily identifiable with domestic noir protagonists, Gumb emphasises recovery narratives (2018, p. 462) rather than viewing the Ordinary Hero story as a survival narrative. We contend that when individuals emerge as their own ordinary hero, they move through a process, with defined stages, that make up a narrative of survival. It is not a process of recovery, for as noted above, trauma stays as a part of an individual's master narrative, but rather a process of survival.

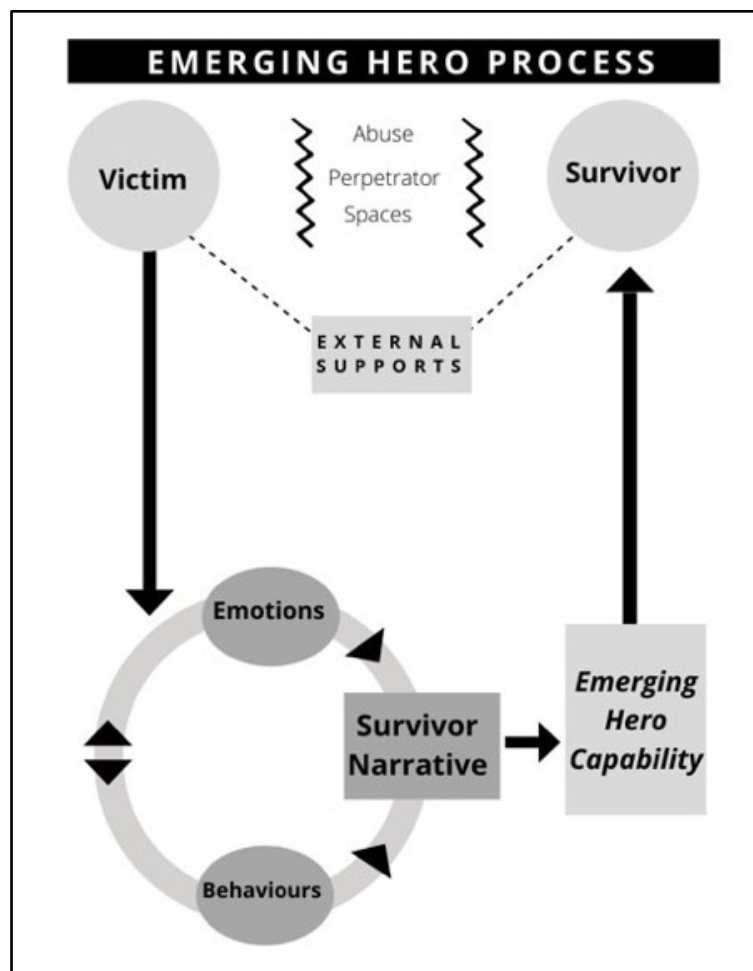


Figure 1: Emerging Hero Process, graphic process model, (Harris, 2021)

The fictionalising of trauma within the domestic noir genre is compared throughout the research project to the writer's experience, and the IPV resource materials and narratives of survival as trauma accounts. The aim is to creatively articulate the process of developing a survivor mindset, and thus a survivor narrative to sustain that mindset. The application of the

trauma fiction approach to exploring that mindset has led to the development of the Emerging Hero Process as outlined by Figure 1 above.

The process model in Figure 1 recognises the victim's (or fictionalised protagonist's) existing relationships with abuse, spaces and the perpetrator, and the threat they pose to block the victim from progressing through the process. While these relationships change as the victim moves to embrace a survivor mindset, these relationships also remain with the survivor in some form throughout their lifetime. The survivor's relationship to domestic spaces (houses or specific rooms) is also altered due to the abuse she has suffered – that geography of fear that adapts her view of safe spaces.

As the protagonist embarks on the process, she experiences oscillating emotional and external behaviours as she interacts with her existing relationships with abuse, spaces and perpetrator. Heightened emotions such as hopelessness, sadness, and naivety and external behaviours such as submission, not recognising manipulation and repeating negative behaviour patterns fluctuate as the victim struggles to reformulate her internal mindset. By slowly questioning behaviour motives, analysing emotional outcomes and observing both behaviours and emotions within those threatening spaces, the victim adapts her mindset into an internalised survivor narrative. This narrative incrementally allows her to visualise her own survival from the constraints of IPV and the heroic act that she needs to take to secure her survival.

Underpinning the Emerging Hero Process framework is the acknowledgement that full recovery from trauma cannot exist as the traumatic events themselves have become major event/s that become enmeshed with the individual's master narrative. In short, while a victim's heroism ensures their survival, the ongoing negative repercussions of the traumatic experience negate the full recovery of the protagonist. It is vital to acknowledge the word "survivor" at the end of the process, rather than "recovery", as research demonstrates the ongoing nature of trauma and its effects on the sufferer's brain (Costa & Botelho, 2021, p. 1–2; Lagdon et al., 2014, p. 1–3).

Writing the Emerging Hero

The biggest challenge in testing this process fictionally is transmitting the effects of the complex trauma experience upon the protagonist, Ness, while embedding insights into the internalised change of the Emerging Hero Process she is undergoing. Using staccato sentences (beats, rhythms, pace) and a variety of analepsis – flashbacks – throughout the narrative develops the tension and insight needed into the victim-to-survivor experience. Similarly, Ness's journey through the Emerging Hero Process relies on creating vignettes of experience that continually strengthen through a cyclic movement between emotions and behaviours before reaching her heroic action point.

The creative process of applying research through the refining of writing isolates the emerging, incremental steps and changes taken by IPV victims to gain their survival. *Sunflowers and Survival* (the creative element of a Master's dissertation) provides a support network of Ness's sister and psychologist friend as the external reflections on her fluctuating emotions and behaviours. Ness successfully emerges from her internal victim narrative due to the combination of external support encouragement and her emotional and behaviour reconciliation, acknowledging her internal narrative of survival. Realising her capability to take action, the final attack by her husband which threatens Ness's life depicts her capacity for heroic action as evidence of a survival mindset beyond the IPV cycle of abuse: "“You are a murderer! There is no holding me back now. YOU are an ABUSER!”" (Harris, 2021, p. 94).

Gasping for breath, I fight the dark and reach for something – anything – that can help me break free of his grip. I try to arch my back as he squeezes my throat, my fingers stretching out as far as I can. He's grunting, hardly noticing anything other than his manic throttling. My fingernail taps something, I stretch further, and my fingers wrap around something cold. The blackness closes over me as I plunge the metal pen into his neck. He reels back, screaming in pain, crashing into the door frame behind him. Wheezing, I fill my lungs. The blackness fades. He's unconscious on the floor, blood pouring from his neck and the wound on his head. (Harris, 2021, p. 95)

The reliance on an unreliable narrator (Ness) is a deliberately chosen strategy, as it mimics the unreliability of the traumatised mind – where clear thinking, blackouts, flashbacks and panic attacks are common (Costa & Botelho, 2021; Lagdon et al. 2014). An established trope of the domestic noir genre, the unreliable narrator epitomises the negative impacts that trauma can cause to internalised narratives. Trauma impacts and changes the internal stories (narratives) that individuals use to identify themselves as they battle the oscillating, often conflicting, emotions (such as diminishing self-worth and capability) and behaviours that trauma causes.

Reaching for the service booklet on the bench, I perch myself softly on the edge of a stool. Staring at the photo of my beautiful sister, I just can't believe she is gone. Small snippets surface... Dan ... forcing tablets ... veiled blackness. Dan telling everyone that I was too upset to speak, hugs from strangers ... family ... my mind blurred from the effort to recall.

The bruises on my stomach have turned a pumice-yellow colour and the belt-buckle welt shines as it stretches across my back. Every step at the funeral was agony, at times causing me to double over to regain my breath. Outwardly, to all of Mel's mourners, Dan proclaimed grief as the cause of my stooped appearance; inside I stumbled through the haze. (Harris, 2021, p. 66)

Fragmentation is another important strategy applied through a non-linear narrative that allows the reader a textual experience of the effects of trauma and seeks to disrupt the reality of the character's time and self (Goldsmith & Satterlee, 2004, p. 45). This fragmentation experiments with the dissociative effects (Dodd, 2018, p. 5) of the fragmented memory trauma suffered in

the non-fictionalised world (Van der Kolk et al., 1995, p. 280). Fragmentation throughout *Sunflowers and Survival* clearly shows the vacillations that a victim contends with as they move between their emotions and behaviours when adjusting to their new recovery/survivor narrative. The addition of a layer of intertextuality in the form of first-person, text-based messages between characters serves to strengthen the fragmentation experience of the storyline and the textual traumatic experience by association.

NessMess: I don't know how to tell you this ... you and Mel have always been so close even with the distance ... Mel has passed away

HudsonPsych: What? How? Are you sure? I mean, I just spoke with her...

NessMess: Yes Jill. I'm sorry ... it's just been... (Harris, 2021, p. 69)

The second example below indicates a more flowing dialogue using FaceTime, but with similar issues of fragmented memory and response. Textual gaps allow the text to textually share the space and connection with Ness's emotional and behavioural struggle for internalised narrative change. For it is in the absence – the silence – of textual gaps that rational thought can be filtered to the forefront of the victim's mind and given air.

The bag, Ness. You have to leave. Go, please.

Jill, I'm thinking about it, I am...

The time for thinking has passed. Dan's clearly trying to control you. Please, Ness, grab that bag and run.

It's not that easy... I don't know... What do I do?

The police might be the best answer – they'll know a safe shelter... I can transfer you money?

No, it's okay, I have some ... he won't find it.

Please, Ness, just leave him.

I'm... I'm almost... I just need to ... find the right time. (Harris, 2021, p. 90)

Textual analysis of *Sunflowers and Survival* reveals the defined steps that a victim must pass through to emerge as a survivor of the traumatic experience and directly informs the development of the Emerging Hero Process. The process is interrogated within the creation of *Sunflowers and Survival* with the oscillating, often conflicting emotions that protagonist Ness demonstrates with her behaviours within her everyday life. Applying the steps from within the process to *Sunflowers and Survival* starts with acknowledging and textually layering into the narrative the fractured cyclic connection between abuse, perpetrator and spaces, juxtaposed with the help that external supports give to the individual, assisting them to move from victim to survivor.

Further application of the Emerging Hero Process in the text includes the targeted inclusion of the cyclic nature of emotions and behaviours oscillating against and around each other before rebuilding into a survivor narrative and transitioning into emerging hero capability.

Conclusion

How can writers fictionalise trauma authentically while managing the vicarious trauma of the process? This paper suggests that domestic noir is particularly relevant as a way of fictionalising trauma while managing the vicarious trauma of IPV, positioning the trauma within a seemingly safe space to subvert. This puts the female protagonist's experience at the centre, developing the survivor narrative of the domestic noir genre. To lessen vicarious trauma of the writer in creating the authenticity of the experience, the Emerging Hero Process outlined here demonstrates the movement from victim to survivor to hero through cyclic repetitions of emotional and behavioural responses to a perpetrator's abuse in a seemingly safe space. Through the anchoring of the story (and the writer) in the knowledge of survival that the Emerging Hero Process demonstrates, an individual protagonist can become their own hero in order to survive. This internalisation of survival experiences builds into a repository which writers can draw on to provide the insight needed to construct an authentic narrative and give some form of filtering of residual trauma.

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