

Traumatic Events in *A Children's Bible*

by Destiny Schlesinger

To people going through a devastating event, they may not see this as trauma, but as another event they have to get through for their life to continue. In Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* a group of teenagers, children, and their parents go through a series of natural disasters brought on by climate change. The parents of the kids have never been the type to support and care for their children, so when this disaster strikes, the kids leave the vacation home they are at and try to get through the disaster on their own. The kids, along with a few adults that have been found on the way, go through more trauma when a group of men come to the farm they are staying at and hold everyone hostage for all of their supplies. Further, each child individually has already been through some type of trauma with their own parents separate of what we see from Eve's, the storytellers, point of view. Lydia Millet crafts a story to help readers understand trauma and how it affects the underdeveloped minds of young children.

Beginning, in the story the teenagers and their younger siblings are introduced to the readers: Evie, also known as Eve, is the storyteller, Jack (Eve's younger brother), Sukey, Terry, Rafe, Juicy, Low, David, Val, Dee, Jen, Shel (Jen's younger brother), and, later in the story, the infant (Sukey's younger sibling). The children and teens start the story with describing the game they play that's desired effect is not wanting the other children to find out which child belongs to which parent (Millet 3). Not wanting to be surrounded by parents who immerse themselves in alcohol, the children pack some belongings and paddle to a sandbar. After being on this sandbar a few days, a storm starts to roll in and the children all go back to the house. Jack and Shel go out to save animals from the storm in a treehouse, where Jen and Eve are first to follow. When the parents start to indulge in alcohol and illegal drugs, the other children soon follow to this

treehouse and try to wait out the remaining storm there. Soon after the water recedes, the children come up with the idea to leave the parents behind and go seek their own shelter at one of the boy's mansions. Burl, a man they find on a raft in the storm, drives one of the cars and quickly reroutes them to a farm after they cannot cross any roads to get to the mansion. Sukey's mother arrives at the farm and gives birth to a baby girl with three trail angels, Luca, Darla, John and Mattie, helping her, but the mother would not stop bleeding and dies soon after giving birth. The parents tell the children it is not safe for them to come back to the house, as they are very sick and whatever the disease may be is possibly contagious. Eve convinces a few of the others to go give blood to the parents. After returning, the children are eating one morning when a man walks in with a gun and demands to take all of their provisions. When he takes everything, he believes that there is more at the farm that the children and adults are not telling him about, so he lays Mattie's hand down and puts a nail through it with a nail gun. The parents show up with nothing to offer other than the law (Millet 176). The owner of the property shows up and lights the barn on fire with the gunmen still inside. The families make their way to the children's first destination, which was the mansion. The kids try to get the parents on a routine of what they need to do throughout the day without being knock-out inebriated. This routine works for a while, until the parents start to drink and do drugs again. The readers end the book with the parents completely abandoning the children and Jack getting sick.

Rebecca Frey defines trauma as, "The English word *trauma*... is used to refer to both physical and psychological injuries... In psychiatry, the term refers to damage to the psyche and emotions resulting from a single event or series of experiences that overwhelm a person's ability to cope or to integrate the memories and feelings associated with the traumatic event(s)." There are many different types of traumas that are seen throughout this novel. The trauma that we see

to start the novel off with is emotional neglect from the parents. This is seen in the game the children play, but after the children tell the parents about the game, the parents seem to not care and go back to talking amongst themselves. Dr. Timothy J. Legg defines emotional neglect as a failure of parents or caregivers to respond to a child's emotional needs. This type of neglect can have long-term consequences, as well as short-term, almost immediate ones. Legg also states, "While emotional neglect can be an intentional disregard for a child's feelings, it can also be failure to act or notice a child's emotional needs." The readers are able to see this multiple times throughout the novel. While the children are going to the sandbar in the ocean, only two parents shout their concerns while the rest simply gaze at the children going to live off of what they have for a few days.

The storm that follows the return of the children from the sandbar brings another type of trauma. Natural disaster trauma has different effects on different children. Dr. Susanne Babbel states that the first reaction to such a disaster is shock, denial, or numbness. While the storm is raging, the parents are trying to patch up holes within the house, because they may not get their security deposit back (Millet 89). This is not the first case, though, that shows such a denial from the parents about what is happening in their world. When the children ask the parents if they need to worry about what is happening throughout the news, the parents brush off their concerns as if the children have no idea what they are talking about. That is not only a sign of neglect, but also a sign of denial. Denial is also seen in the children after the owner of the farm rescues them from the gunmen that invaded the farm. None of the children talk about what happened at the farm or ask Sukey how she is doing after having to care for her sister and watching her mother die, instead it is understood that the traumas the children faced are not to be talked about.

Eve is the narrator and main character in *A Children's Bible*. The story is told through her eyes, her thoughts, and the assumptions she makes on other characters feelings. By applying the psychoanalytic theory to Eve, readers are able to see into her mind and possibly the way that she acts as a person. Lois Tyson states, "For psychoanalytic theory, our adult personality is the result of the emotional experiences we had while growing up. And the family is the most important source of our early emotional experiences—both those that affirm our being and those that harm us psychologically—because it is in the family that our sense of self and our way of relating to others are first established" (84). It is hard to judge Eve, and all of the other characters, as children or adults, simply because they are children having to make adult decisions. While they are technically children by law, how long have the characters had to act as parents to their siblings? We see in the novel, between Eve and her mother, the first time the readers truly grasp just how emotionally distant the parents are. As soon as Eve's mother sees Eve, she starts by asking about her drink and Eve responds by asking if her mother should be thinking about her son instead of her drink. Her mother goes on to say that, "Even your kindergarten teacher said you were extremely precocious. Mentally *and* emotionally. They wanted to put you in fourth grade! When you were six years old!" After her mother states this, Eve asks if she is resorting to flattery to avoid responsibility (Millet 84). One can tell before this incident that Eve helped to care for Jack, physically and mentally, but how far back does Eve taking care of Jack go? It is hard to say, but this is the first time any of the characters have confronted their parents about the actions that have led them all to the summer house.

Later in the novel, readers learn that Eve stopped showing affection towards her parents after they refused to explain a protest that was happening. This revelation is based off of the observation that Jack seems withdrawn from the parents, but is still trying to show them some of

his old affection. Eve thinks, “Myself, I’d never expected much. Not since I was even younger than him, anyway. I’d stopped holding their hands when I was seven” (204). Legg states that some signs of trauma from emotional neglect are, “Substance misuse, withdrawing from friends and activities, appearing uncaring or indifferent, and shunning emotional closeness or intimacy.” One is able to see the timeline Eve stopped seeking physical affection from her parents to seem uncaring, but readers are able to tell that the lack of supervision or uncaringness from the parents still bothers Eve when she confronts her mother about her nonchalant attitude towards Jack. It seems as if Eve is either jealous or somewhat sad for Jack and the affection that he is attempting to show their parents at that age, because he has seemingly received an extra two years of their affection compared to Eve, which is why she wants to be seen as uncaring.

Another topic that is to be explored throughout these signs is Eve’s shunning emotional closeness or intimacy with her peers. It seems that when she plays spin the bottle, the kiss she shares with Low was not up to her standards. She does not say whether it was a good or bad kiss, just neutral and goes on to describe his breath/what his lips tasted like. She does not get close with any other peer her age either. Throughout the teens, there is no talk of another’s likes or dislikes, hopes, dreams, or even what makes them happy. Tyson also states that, “Fear of intimacy will probably not keep us from making friends or falling in love, but it will keep us from enjoying the kind of friendship and love that comes with the ability to trust our own, and another’s, feelings” (86). It seems that this is the way with all of the teens. The same cannot be said for Jack and Shel, though. They grow closer throughout the story keeping the animals in the treehouse and the gunmen at this farm. Their closeness may be attributed to the fact that Jack does receive emotional care from Eve; she answers all his questions, reads him stories, listens to him, and cares for him physically as well. Jack is receiving all of his emotional support from Eve

as a caretaker role and a parental role, and is able to connect with another that is in his age group. Eve, along with the other teens her age, seems to have a fear of intimacy based off of a traumatic response to emotional neglect. Aside from the fact that they are all with one another throughout a multitude of traumatic experiences, making it harder to connect with those their own ages.

Furthermore, as stated previously, natural disasters can be sudden and overwhelming, leading to states of shock, numbness, and denial. With most of the characters being young teenagers, readers may come to the conclusion, through Eve's eyes, that they are in a constant state of numbness. The children are constantly doing actions that provoke themselves to feel something, whether that is freedom, an escape, fear, etc. Being at the summer house, the children let the parents take care of the necessities, while they pursue the freedom from stress that the treehouse, sandbar, and exploration gives them, all the while participating in illegal acts: sex and alcohol/drug use. The children want to feel something other than the numbness that has settled upon themselves after not receiving any emotional support or guidance throughout the series of natural disasters. After the children are made to start packing their things to leave the farm, they blame the parents for what is happening in the world. It makes sense that the teens want and need someone to blame with the traumatic experiences that have led up to this point. The children have a natural trauma-induced reaction, with their aggressive remarks, telling the parents that they had failed them (193). The teens have no choice but to try and navigate the world on their own after the parents leave all responsibilities to them when they vanish. Eve states, "We waited for them to come back, but they never did" (222).

Lydia Millet released this story one year before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. While the world is also experiencing troubles with climate change, the idea to relate this book to the recent past and present seems acceptable. Millet wrote about how towns were getting turned inside out,

buildings being burned, and places being robbed. These events have all occurred throughout the pandemic, especially in the beginning, going into nationwide lockdowns. After Sukey's mother dies, the adults do not know what exactly to do with the body, and one of them says they may need the body for the state to do an autopsy, but the other replies, "'They've got bigger fish to fry. CNN said *thousands*'" (115). From the context of the reading, readers are able to assume that the thousands they mention are the bodies of the dead. This is seen as a parallel to today's death rates. The pandemic hit older generations and those with medical disabilities hard.

According to *Our World Today*, there have been around seven-hundred-eighty-six thousand deaths from COVID, in the United States alone. Some people have been perfectly healthy, contracted COVID, and have, sadly, passed away. The trauma that this pandemic has caused is insurmountable, similarly to the trauma that the parents and the natural disasters caused the teens throughout this novel.

Millet writes about the struggles of teens with parents who are absent while going through a tragedy. The teens in this novel have a hard time navigating what to do, who to listen to, and how to proceed with what options they are given. Teenagers now have the struggle of which parent, relative, news, or social media source to listen to, along with what their future may hold. Many teens are changing their dreams and hopes for the fact that they do not know what their future holds. According to *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, "Anxiety and depression are on the rise among America's youth and, whether they personally suffer from these conditions or not, seven-in-ten teens today see them as major problems among their peers...When it comes to the pressures teens face, academics tops the list: 61% of teens say they feel a lot of pressure to get good grades...The pressure teens feel to do well in school is tied at least in part to their post-graduation goals. About six-in-ten teens say they plan to attend a four-

year college after they finish high school, and these teens are more likely than those who have other plans to say they face a lot of pressure to get good grades.” This being said, children and teens are not attaining the same education that they once had, pre-pandemic. The trauma children and teens are facing, between losing family members, social interaction, and their schooling, have depression rates at an all-time high and have them questioning where the rest of their lives are headed.

In conclusion, Lydia Millet constructed a novel that is able to educate readers on some of the traumas that teens may be going through today and how it is affecting them. Trauma comes in all different forms, and one that most people tend to gravitate to is numbness or denial. The teenagers in this novel have experienced emotional neglect and a handful of other traumatic events, all-the-while being in the presence of another, but never truly together. The trauma that the parents and natural disasters cause have the children acting out in numerous ways, which is able to lead to the children repeating the same cycles with the next generations, or more dangerous results, such as their own death. As seen in *Eve*, the emotional neglect she received from her parents tends to show in her uncaringness and lack of intimacy in any way. The same can be said for our generation now. Many teens appear to be uncaring, but are going through their own struggles mentally, because they have no true unbiased source to help them get through this pandemic and other natural disasters. Going forward, the world today needs to deal with the issues of climate change and teen depression in order to have a better environment and society in the future. Gilda Frantz importantly states, “The impact of trauma, whether collective or individual, never leaves one entirely, and often it is felt day and night—as the contributors to this issue vividly demonstrate” (244).

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