



The Syntax Of Affliction: Adversity And Narrative Witness In Dave Pelzer's *A Man Named Dave*

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ABSTRACT

Witness literature, along with narratives that function as modes of healing, has long occupied a distinctive place within the literary tradition. This paper examines *A Man Named Dave* as a work of witness literature that transforms personal affliction into a shared narrative space of ethical and emotional engagement. Moving beyond readings that frame the text solely as an adversity memoir or autobiographical testimony, the study foregrounds Reader-Response Theory to argue that meaning in Pelzer's narrative emerges through the active participation of the reader. Drawing on theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, the paper conceptualizes reading as a transactional process in which embodied distress is not only narrated but received, interpreted, and emotionally processed by the reader. The memoir's narrative voice positions the reader as a listener and moral witness, inviting empathy while resisting voyeurism. Through gaps, repetitions, and affective intensity, the text activates readerly response, compelling the reader to bear witness to suffering and to participate in the work of remembrance. This dynamic interaction enables the narrative to function as a mode of healing, not through prescriptive self-help strategies but through relational engagement and recognition. The paper further argues that such readerly involvement transforms the memoir into a form of bibliotherapeutic literature, where healing is enacted through identification, ethical attention, and reflective interpretation. By situating *A Man Named Dave* at the intersection of interdisciplinary inquiry into adversity studies, witness literature, and reader-response criticism, this study highlights how affliction finds language not only through narrative voice but through readerly reception. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the healing potential of trauma narratives lies in their capacity to create a dialogic space where suffering is acknowledged, shared, and meaningfully engaged.

Keywords: Adversity memoir, Narrative witness, Life writing, Reader-response theory, Bibliotherapy, Narrative voice.

Introduction

To live is to interpret, to assign meaning to suffering, joy, failure, and hope. Long before self-help became a genre, literature served as humanity's earliest guide to inner transformation. Through stories, poems, and reflections, we learned that understanding the self is not an act of correction, but of attention. This book stands in that tradition. It offers no shortcuts, only insight; no commands, only invitations, to pause, to reflect, and to recognize that growth begins not when we fix ourselves, but when we finally understand what we have endured. Reader-response theory provides a crucial framework for understanding how meaning is generated through the interaction between text and reader rather than residing solely within the narrative itself. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, particularly articulated in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, conceptualizes reading as an event in which meaning emerges from the dynamic relationship between reader and text. Similarly, Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach emphasizes the role of textual gaps and indeterminacies that invite readers to actively participate in meaning-making. These perspectives are especially relevant to

trauma memoirs, where what is unsaid or fragmented often demands readerly engagement to complete the narrative experience. Within trauma and testimony studies, scholars such as Cathy Caruth argue that trauma resists full representation and is often marked by belatedness and silence. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth underscores the paradox of trauma narratives: they must speak what is fundamentally unspeakable. This insight is extended by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, whose work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* reframes testimony as an ethical act that requires a responsive listener. Laub's notion of "bearing witness" foregrounds the responsibility of the listener or reader in receiving traumatic narratives, making reader-response theory particularly apt for analyzing witness literature. "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener as an active participant." (p. 58)

Anne Whitehead further bridges trauma theory and reading practices by emphasizing the role of the reader in processing traumatic narratives. Her work suggests that trauma texts demand a different mode of critical reading one marked by attentiveness, empathy, and ethical restraint. This aligns closely with reader-response criticism, which allows scholars to analyze how readers are positioned emotionally and morally by trauma narratives, rather than focusing solely on representational strategies. The intersection of reader-response theory and bibliotherapy has also gained scholarly attention. Studies on therapeutic literature argue that life writing can function as a mode of healing, not through direct instruction but through recognition and identification. Such scholarship supports the claim that adversity memoirs enable readers to reflect on their own experiences through narrative encounter. In this sense, the reader becomes not a passive consumer but an active participant in a shared space of meaning and recovery. Together, these theoretical strands reader-response criticism, trauma studies, witness theory, and bibliotherapy provide a robust framework for reading *A Man Named Dave* as an adversity memoir that transforms personal affliction into narrative witness. By foregrounding readerly engagement, the memoir's significance lies not only in its testimony but in its capacity to invite ethical witnessing, thereby allowing affliction to find language through both narration and reception. Pelzer's memoir enacts narrative witness by transforming private affliction into a shared space of reception, where meaning is completed through readerly engagement. When Pelzer asserts that he was "determined that [his] past would not control [his] future," the statement functions not merely as personal resolve but as an invitation to the reader to recognize survival as an ethical achievement. From a reader-response perspective, such moments position the reader as a moral listener who actively participates in the articulation of meaning. Similarly, Pelzer's claim that he shares his story so that "others may know they are not alone" explicitly acknowledges the reader's presence, confirming Louise Rosenblatt's view of reading as a transactional act between text and reader. Trauma in the memoir is not rendered as spectacle; instead, its partial articulation "some memories never fade; they only change their shape" creates interpretive gaps that demand readerly attention and emotional responsiveness, aligning with Wolfgang Iser's concept of textual indeterminacy. Through this process, the reader becomes a witness rather than a voyeur, ethically engaged in receiving testimony. Consequently, *A Man Named Dave* functions as an adversity memoir in which affliction finds language not solely through narration but through the reader's active role in listening, interpreting, and acknowledging suffering. Healing, therefore, emerges as a relational process enacted in the encounter between narrative voice and readerly response. "The reader is compelled to construct the meaning of the text out of the material supplied by it." (p. 287)

This readerly positioning further allows the memoir to operate as a form of bibliotherapeutic literature, where healing is mediated through recognition rather than instruction. As readers encounter Pelzer's articulation of adversity, they are invited to reflect on their own responses—empathy, discomfort, or moral awareness—thereby becoming participants in the text's meaning-making process. Reader-response theory helps illuminate how such affective engagement transforms testimony into a dialogic experience: the narrative does not merely recount suffering but requires an ethical listener to complete its significance. In this sense, *A Man Named Dave* exemplifies how adversity memoirs extend beyond self-representation to cultivate shared understanding. The act of reading becomes an encounter with affliction that demands attention and care, reinforcing the idea that narrative witness is sustained not only by the survivor's voice but also by the reader's willingness to receive, acknowledge, and remember. Through this reciprocal process, affliction finds language in the space between narration and reception, affirming literature's enduring capacity to engage suffering as a mode of ethical and emotional healing. Viewed through this lens, *A Man Named Dave* demonstrates how adversity memoirs reshape the ethical responsibilities of reading within contemporary literary studies. Reader-response theory makes visible the way such texts depend upon an engaged readership to prevent trauma from being reduced to spectacle. The memoir's restrained narrative voice, repetition of survival motifs, and moments of reflective distance discourage sensational consumption and instead cultivate attentive witnessing. Meaning, therefore, is not exhausted by the act of narration but unfolds through the reader's interpretive labor and emotional responsiveness. This shift from representation to reception foregrounds literature as a relational practice, one in which affliction is acknowledged through shared attention rather than resolved through closure. By situating Pelzer's memoir within this framework, the paper underscores how readerly engagement becomes an ethical act, transforming the reading process into a space of care, remembrance, and responsibility. In doing so, the text affirms the enduring relevance of witness literature in articulating adversity and reinforces the role of narrative as a mode through which suffering is not only expressed, but meaningfully received. Ultimately, foregrounding reader-response theory reveals how *A Man Named Dave* stages the moment when affliction finds language through the relational act of reading. Adversity in the memoir is not fully resolved by narration

alone; rather, it acquires meaning through the reader's role as a narrative witness who receives, interprets, and ethically responds to testimony. By positioning the reader as a listener rather than a spectator, the text resists voyeuristic consumption and transforms adversity into a shared ethical encounter. In this dialogic space, affliction is articulated not as isolated suffering but as lived experience made intelligible through narrative voice and readerly engagement. This study thus demonstrates that the enduring significance of Pelzer's memoir lies in its capacity to convert personal adversity into narrative witness, affirming literature's ability to render suffering meaningful through acts of attentive and responsible reading. "The reader is not a passive recipient of trauma narratives but an active participant in the construction of meaning and emotional response." (p. 281) Affliction finds language gradually rather than all at once, emerging through reflective narration that transforms lived adversity into testimony. Pelzer repeatedly signals the difficulty of articulation by acknowledging that certain memories "never fade," even as their form changes. This recognition points to trauma's resistance to complete representation and underscores the memoir's reliance on narrative voice as a means of partial expression. Meaning here is not fixed in the statement itself; instead, it unfolds through the reader's engagement with what is remembered, reshaped, and selectively disclosed. From a reader-response perspective, such moments invite the reader to participate in the work of interpretation, completing what trauma itself cannot fully articulate. The memoir further foregrounds narrative witness by explicitly situating storytelling as a relational act. When Pelzer reflects that he shares his story so that others might know they are "not alone," the text directly acknowledges the presence of a reader-listener. On the unspeakability of trauma, "Trauma is not simply an event that is remembered, but an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor." (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4). Affliction thus finds language not merely as self-expression but as communication addressed outward. The reader is positioned as an ethical witness whose recognition validates the testimony. This aligns with reader-response theory's emphasis on reception, demonstrating how the narrative depends upon readerly attention to realize its full significance. Equally important is Pelzer's insistence that survival itself constitutes meaning. His assertion that he would not allow the past to "control" his future transforms suffering into reflective self-understanding. Language here does not erase adversity; rather, it reframes it through narrative agency. The reader's response—empathy, moral recognition, or reflective identification—becomes central to this transformation. Through such interactions, the memoir resists voyeuristic consumption and instead cultivates attentive witnessing. Taken together, these narrative moments illustrate how *A Man Named Dave* enacts the process suggested by the title: affliction finds language through testimony that is completed in reception. Adversity becomes meaningful not solely because it is narrated, but because it is heard, interpreted, and ethically received, confirming the memoir's place within witness literature and reader-response-oriented trauma studies. Dave blurts, "I was determined that my past would not control my future" (369) This statement marks a decisive moment in Pelzer's narrative where affliction is translated into ethical agency. Rather than denying the reality of trauma, the line acknowledges the past while refusing its authority over the present. The verb "*determined*" signals an active, self-conscious choice, emphasizing will and moral resolve rather than passive endurance. In this sense, the sentence articulates a shift from being defined by suffering to asserting narrative control over one's life story. From a reader-response perspective, the line functions as an invitation rather than a declaration. The reader is positioned as a witness to this moment of self-assertion and is encouraged to recognize agency as something achieved through struggle rather than given in advance. Meaning emerges not solely from the statement itself, but through the reader's ethical engagement with its implications. The sentence thus transforms private resolve into shared significance, allowing readers to interpret survival as a form of resistance. Moreover, the line encapsulates the memoir's broader movement from silence to articulation. By framing the past as something that *could* control the future—but ultimately does not—the narrative acknowledges trauma's enduring presence while affirming the possibility of narrative reorientation. Affliction here does not disappear; it is reconfigured through language. As such, this sentence exemplifies how *A Man Named Dave* enacts the process suggested by the title: when affliction finds language, it does so through the articulation of agency that invites readerly recognition and ethical witnessing. Affliction does not end in silence; it is shaped into language through the ethical act of narration and the attentive presence of the reader. Pelzer's memoir reveals that adversity becomes meaningful only when it is received as testimony rather than consumed as spectacle. By foregrounding reader-response theory, this study shows that narrative witness is a shared labor, completed in the space between voice and listening. Ultimately, the text reminds us that literature's most vital work is not to resolve suffering, but to ensure that it is heard, held, and remembered. By foregrounding the reader's role as a witness, the memoir transforms personal suffering into a shared interpretive space where meaning emerges relationally. This study affirms that the enduring power of witness literature lies in its capacity to render lived adversity intelligible and ethically resonant through acts of attentive reading.

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