

Trauma in girl at war



In the novel *Girl at War*, Sara Nović incorporates the theme of trauma throughout the story from the Yugoslav Wars that impacted most of the characters' lives. Readers get to experience the characters during the war and many years later as they are recovering and learning to deal with the trauma. Ana Jurić, the main character, is who the readers are lead to sympathize with the most from her role in the novel, how the book is set up, and what she experiences throughout her life.

Since *Girl at War* is about Ana, the main character, and told from her point of view, the audience stays with Ana throughout her life. During this time, we also get to know her deepest thoughts and feelings, from the time she was a ten-year-old living in Croatia to when she is in her 20s in New York City. At the beginning of the book, when she is young during the war, we can tell by her thoughts that she is not sure of the state of her country: "I didn't understand why the Yugoslav National Army would want to attack Croatia, which was full of Yugoslavian people, but when I asked my father he just sighed and closed the paper" (Nović 19). Ana continues to ask her father questions about the war, about the JNA and the Četniks, about the bearded men cutting down trees to block roads, but her parents continued to keep her in the dark about what was really happening all around them (20). From the beginning we are sympathizing with her because we feel sorry for her ignorance to the situation, whether it was the fault of her parents or not. The author uses human nature to bring sympathy to her character; naturally readers would want to explain to Ana what the war is and what it means, to not only provide her the knowledge she desires, but also help to protect her. Later, when she's in America attempting to cope with her trauma, the

audience continues to feel remorse for Ana since she is not sure how to deal with the trauma left from her childhood. She shows how little she has revealed about her true past to not only her peers but also her boyfriend, “ Brian and I had been dating for a year, but he didn’t know anything about who I really was. I’d told him, as I had everyone else at college, that I was born in New Jersey,” (106-107). Refusing to discuss her troubles with others displays how unsure Ana is about discussing everything that she went through during the war. She mentions how when she first arrived in America, she would tell the truth of where she was from and adults would react with “ concern and nosiness.” When Ana answered their questions truthfully, her answers “ were often met with an uncomfortable shifting of eyes.” Eventually, Ana morphed into an “ American,” trying to not raise any questions, because “ it was easier for them,” (99-100).

The way in which we get to experience both her as a young child and as a twenty-year-old significantly helps with how much the readers sympathize with her. Not just being with her throughout the war and part of her time in college trying to deal with the memories, but also how the parts are not in chronological order like a majority of novels are. First, we meet Ana when she is ten years old, before the war; the audience gets a glimpse of what her life was like before. We see how she and her family were happy:“ That night the adults were engaging in their regular debate about exactly how long they’d known each other. They had been friends since before they were my age, they liked to say, no matter how old I was, and after the better part of an hour and a bottle of FeraVino they’d usually leave it at that. Petar and Marina had no children for me to play with, so I sat at the table holding my

baby sister and listening to them vie for the farthest reaching memory. Rahela was only eight months old and had never seen the coast, so I talked to her about the sea and our little boat, and she smiled when I made fish faces at her" (5). And up to when the war starts to affect her life, " Do you want Serbian cigarettes or Croatian ones?" (6). Next, the novel jumps ten years to when she is living in America with her foster parents; from her thoughts and actions we know she is attempting to deal with the trauma. One way in which she tries to cope is by attending the presentation about child soldiers at the UN headquarters so that she could talk to Sharon Stanfeld, " I was realizing now, the chance to talk to someone who'd known me even briefly in Croatia had been the real reason I'd come. Maybe she could tell me something about what happened to the people I'd left behind" (105). Other ways in which she tried to deal with what happened to her include finally telling Brian the truth of where she was born and what happened to her, and also talking about minor details of what happened with Rahela (158, 146). This juxtaposition of jumping from her early childhood to later in her life emphasizes how Ana feels about the sudden moving to America and away from her home. It also leaves a gap in the time line that readers will not know about until a later part; this gives the plot suspense, leaving the readers wanting to know more about her struggles in Croatia during the war. We desire to know more about her life so we can more fully understand how and why she does the things she does, and therefore, sympathizing with her further.

We follow Ana throughout her life during the war when she experiences her childhood trauma. Besides what the audience knows from what characters

tell each other, most of the trauma is Ana's, and affected her directly. Her baby sister Rahela almost died and had to be sent to a different country for medical help, her parents were executed in front of her and climbed out of a pit of bodies: "Tata,' I said. I knew already, but inched closer against him anyway, nudged his shoulder with mine. ' Wake up.' His eyes were clamped shut tight, as if he were counting for a round of hide-and-seek, but there was blood—at his neck, on his lips, in his ears. ' Wake up!' It was impossible to take a deep breath... my hands were still bound and I struggled to sit. Then using the dead as step stools, I climbed out of the ground" (282). She was a child soldier soon after and possibly killed a man, and after it all Ana also was sent away from her home to live with a couple she had never met before (80, 90, 242). With as focused as the book is on Ana, the audience has limited options for who to give sympathy too, and with as much trauma as Ana has been through, both how much and the severity of it, we automatically sympathize most with her.

Using the structure and plot of the book to drive the audience sympathize with Ana the most was wise of Nović. Not only is she the main character and obvious choice, she also experienced the most trauma and the readers were able to experience it all with her as the book navigated through her life starting when she was ten. Nović made it easy to sympathize with Ana. If we had not been able to know as much about her life and experiences from the war, we would not have cared as much, and therefore *Girl at War* would not have the same emotional impact as it does have on readers.