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The Conversation

Opinion and ideas.

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In Defense of Trigger Warnings

Trigger warnings are in the news. College students—mostly young women—are requesting pre-emptive warnings about material that might upset them, that might, in some cases, cause symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. It's no surprise, then, that the backlash has begun. Writers and commenters—the majority appear to be male—are decrying this latest surrender to political correctness. Many assume that the call for trigger warnings must be a parody, so ridiculous is the premise that students should be protected from great literature.

As a scholar of African-American and LGBT literature, I often teach the kind of material that advocates have in mind when they call for trigger warnings. The works I assign portray, with some regularity, rape, gay bashing, and lynching, and they do so with a visceral power.

I first became acquainted with trigger warnings about 15 years ago, when I was teaching a course on LGBT literature. We were studying Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy*, which explores a father's sexual abuse of his son. The writing is so subtle that it takes a number of pages before readers know that terrible things lurk beneath the surface, and several more pages before we know what those terrible things are. The effect on the reader is uncanny, as if she is gradually coming to know things that happened a long time ago, things she has worked hard not to know.

Reading this novel put one of my students in a psychiatric hospital. She was an incest survivor, and the novel reproduced her trauma so

perfectly that she experienced it anew. When she was released from the hospital a week later, we met, and, feeling entirely responsible for the ordeal she had gone through, I apologized to her. She wanted to continue with the course, so we worked out an arrangement in which she would never have to write or think about this novel again. I wouldn't include it on the exam, and I would waive the assigned paper. Had I issued a trigger warning about this novel, we could have negotiated these terms in advance, avoiding the trauma that sent my student to the hospital. I've warned students about the emotions this novel might trigger every time I've taught it since.

In the same course I teach Ann Bannon's *Women in the Shadows*, a pulp novel from the 1950s in which a butch lesbian fakes her own gang rape in order to get her ex-girlfriend back. When this character recounts her rape, however, the reader doesn't yet know that she's making the whole thing up. This raises a tricky question: Do I issue a trigger warning about a novel that contains a rape that isn't really a rape—in other words, a representation of a representation of a rape that never happened? I do, because the reader's experience of the “rape” is real. She doesn't know that the character is making this up, even though she knows that the author is.

But what about the course I recently taught on 20th-century African-American novels? How do I issue a trigger warning for specific plots and scenes when every novel in the course portrays the horrors of African-American history? From slavery, to lynching, to the lesser slights that black folks in this country endure on a daily basis, what isn't a trigger?

Which raises a similar question about my course on LGBT literature. Isn't the whole course a trigger for those of us who have endured the violence and discrimination aimed at sexual minorities? For example, every time I teach Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, I'm deeply disturbed by the scene in which the lesbian character's mother tells her she's no longer her daughter,

that she's no longer welcome in her home. This scene painfully recalls a moment in my own life, and though my students are increasingly spared such moments, there are always a couple who feel what I feel. Does this novel deserve a trigger warning?

It doesn't, and here's where I draw the line. Though I might be disturbed by that scene—might find it very difficult to read and to contemplate—I'm not traumatized by it. The difficulty I experience is part of the difficulty of life, the difficulty many queer people experience, and have to learn to endure. Likewise, the black students who sign up for my courses in African-American literature know what they're signing up for. They're there not to avoid difficulty, but to learn from it.

But survivors of rape, sexual assault, and incest don't seek out these sorts of difficulties, and for very good reason. They're unlikely to experience them as teachable moments. In fact, they may find them, as my student did, literally traumatizing.

Those who oppose trigger warnings like to lambast the millennial generation for being whiny and sheltered, so afraid of life that it must be protected from it. But this is to conflate difficulty with trauma, to miss the distinction between that which helps us find our place in the world, and that which removes us from it.

Surely a trigger warning in certain instances isn't too much to ask. If the cost is a spoiler, that's a price well worth paying.

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