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Seeking Survival, Justice, and Recovery: Citizen Critics' Therapeutic Interpretation of Alice Sebold's *Lucky*

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Abstract

This essay explores reader reviews of Alice Sebold's memoir, *Lucky*, which describes her rape in college while simultaneously employing and confronting dominant rape scripts. Even so, reviews of the memoir on Amazon.com employ a therapeutic interpretation of the story that emphasizes Sebold's ability to survive, seek justice, and recover. I argue that readers' reliance on therapeutic rhetoric reinforces the myth that rape is a problem for individual women, rather than society as a whole, and reflects an ongoing barrier to the success of feminist anti-rape efforts.

Keywords: Narrative, Violence against women, Therapeutic Rhetoric, Victim, Survivor, Reader Response

**Seeking Survival, Justice, and Recovery:
Citizen Critics' Therapeutic Interpretation of Alice Sebold's *Lucky***

In the tunnel where I was raped, a tunnel that was once an underground entry to an amphitheater, a place where actors burst forth from underneath the seats of a crowd, a girl had been murdered and dismembered. I was told this story by the police. In comparison, they said, I was lucky (Sebold, 1999, p. 3).

This brief but jarring account in the prologue of her memoir, *Lucky*, introduced Alice Sebold to the reading public. In the memoir, Sebold offered an unflinching narrative of her rape, her escape, and her life afterward. While Sebold is now “a household name for her bestselling novel *The Lovely Bones*,” bestselling author Karin Slaughter (2004) explained, “back in 1999 when she wrote *Lucky*, a memoir detailing her brutal rape in college . . . no one wanted her to talk about her experience.” Slaughter argued that, “because the crime against her was of a sexual nature, the implied message was that she should keep it to herself” (p. 26). Unfortunately, Sebold’s forced silence is all too common. Even though one in five women have experienced rape in their lifetime, and more than one-third of female rape victims experience their first rape between the ages of 18-24 (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2012), women are not encouraged to talk about these experiences. The barriers to reporting are cultural. They are the “attitudes, judgments, and experiences” that surround the victim and influence her beliefs about the experience (Williams & Holmes 1981, p. 125).

A significant body of feminist work takes seriously the call to analyze rape narratives (Hengehold, 2000; Higgins & Silver, 1991; Horeck, 2004; Kappler, 2012; McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2011; Ostrowski, 1996; Ovenden, 2012; Shugart, 1994; Sielke, 2002). However, these studies do not address the ways that readers take up these narratives and use them as resources for deliberation about rape in society (Worthington, 2008). Feminist scholars have used reader response theory to examine the implied position of the reader in rape texts (Tanner, 1994), and

reader responses to different ways of representing rape in literature (Koopman, Hilscher, & Cupchik, 2012), but do not analyze readers' collective interpretation of the books. Instead, reader response scholarship has tended to focus on readers' individual experience of encountering sexual violence in a text. Feminist rhetorical analysis, thus, offers an opportunity to understand rape narratives and the way that citizens learn and deliberate about rape as a result of reading those narratives. To examine this phenomenon I analyze reviews of Sebold's memoir, *Lucky*, on the website Amazon.com. Following Rosa Eberly's (2000) approach in her book *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres*, this study examines the creation of a space where readers come together around a piece of literature to understand and deliberate about a socially significant matter.

Sebold's memoir is an appropriate starting place for illuminating public understanding of sexual violence because the details of her story reflect common cultural stereotypes regarding rape. However, her telling of the story exposes those stereotypes and calls attention to the ways that they constrain public acceptance of certain rape narratives. She aims to "put it out there on the table, 'this is what rape can look like,'" in hopes that educating people about rape will make them less "afraid of saying something really stupid because maybe they're more educated about what the crime is" (Gross & Sebold, 2002, p.5). Sebold's memoir offers insight into the complexity of the crime and questions dominant assumptions about rape by sharing her experience.

Through a close textual analysis of 252 Amazon.com customer reviews of *Lucky* over a ten-year period,¹ I examined both how readers come together publicly to deliberate about rape and the themes that emerge as individuals share the interpretive process through online reviews of the memoir. My analysis leads me to argue that, rather than focusing on those elements of the story in which Sebold questions dominant assumptions regarding rape, readers tend to rely on

what Cloud (1998) has described as therapeutic rhetoric in their reviews to emphasize Sebold's individual response to the crime. Therapeutic rhetoric focuses on the individual and their psychological, rather than physical or social, status as the source of both problems and solutions within society (Swan, 2008). Cloud (1998) explains that therapeutic rhetoric celebrates individuals who take personal responsibility for the adversity they face, and masks social and structural inequalities out of which individual pain can arise. I contend that Amazon.com reviews of Sebold's memoir reflect a therapeutic interpretation of the narrative which perpetuates the depoliticization of rape by imagining it as a personal problem that can be dealt with by an individual rape victim.

In this essay, I begin by describing rape narratives and highlighting prominent myths about the crime that recur in popular discourse. I then examine *Lucky* and point out the ways that Sebold addresses these myths. Next, I have chosen here to analyze a representative selection of readers' reviews of the memoir and show how they invoke a therapeutic rhetoric of rape reliant on themes of survival, justice, and recovery. I conclude by considering the implications of the therapeutic reading of the memoir as a social process that reinforces dominant assumptions regarding rape and undermines efforts to address rape as an issue of social and political concern.

Dominant Rape Narratives

As a result of feminist consciousness raising efforts, rape narratives have made their way into public view and spurred ongoing debate about women's place in society. Still, Shugart (1994) points to "mainstream rape literature" as a site that continuously privileges men and sanctions the threat of rape. McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance (2012) argue that rape narratives are "regulated by hegemonic discourses that individualize and depoliticize women's experiences" (p. 52). The mere availability of narratives does not necessarily effect change, particularly because

many of those that receive widespread attention adhere to cultural rape scripts (Shugart, 1994). The most prominent narratives advocate that women are primarily responsible for rape prevention and maintain a focus on the male rapist. Dominant depictions of the crime tend to reinforce the myth that rape occurs on the margins of society as well as “obscure the need to attend to culturally sanctioned gender oppression” (Worthington, 2008, p. 362). These stories perpetuate deeply engrained cultural assumptions regarding race, class, gender, and responsibility for sexual violence (Hengehold, 2000).

While feminists tend to focus on the political nature of these narratives, popular culture has seen an increase in rape narratives used for entertainment. News, television, and movie depictions of rape foster public perceptions of who rape victims are, what perpetrators look like, and how sexual crimes are committed (Alcoff & Gray 1993; Ostrowski, 1996; Weaver, 2004; Worthington, 2008). Mediated rape narratives tend to feature graphic stories to shock and titillate audiences by playing on their fascination with the crime (Alcoff & Gray 1993; Hengehold, 2000). These narratives rely on myths, including the docile woman, the male bully, the “black beast,” and “rape as seduction” (Taslitz, 1999, p. 33), and influence people’s evaluations of individual rape narratives (Taslitz, 1999; Sielke, 2002). Despite the broad diversity of ways that rape tends to occur, both cultural and legal representations reinforce the notion that only a very specific form of rape is legitimate (Anderson, 2005).

When a case appears in the media it is generally the victim, not the accused perpetrator, who is scrutinized (Ardevini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Flanders, 1991). Audiences have been conditioned to believe that women cry rape for many reasons, including regret over a sexual experience, a need for attention, or even financial gain. Those victims who appear innocent, sexually inexperienced, offer a consistent story, and bear the scars of physical

violence are more likely to be believed (Anderson, 2005). When a rape case appears in court, prosecutors know that scenarios falling outside of these commonly accepted stereotypes are more difficult, if not impossible, to successfully prosecute (Taslitz, 1999).

A *Lucky* Rape Narrative

In many ways, Sebold's memoir resembles dominant rape scripts. Her story about a young, white, female virgin who was forced into a dark amphitheater by a black man she did not know is consistent with common assumptions about rape. However, the way that she narrates the experience calls attention to the fact that stories like hers are not the norm. Starting with her title, *Lucky*, Sebold acknowledges that, despite enduring a terrible attack, she was fortunate to survive. She was also fortunate to have a story that fits with cultural assumptions regarding rape.

"This is what I remember," the first chapter begins. Sebold vividly recounts being attacked in a tunnel among broken glass, where the rapist threatened to kill her and forced her to take off her clothes and perform oral sex. While Sebold's account of the rape employs the graphic descriptions that are typical in mediated depictions of the crime, by narrating the crime from her embodied perspective she simultaneously confronts both the voyeuristic media portrayals and overly-sanitized accounts typical of some rape literature. In an interview about her work, Sebold told a reporter that, "[she] becomes irritated with rape memoirs that slide into euphemism instead of describing its harsh reality." Many literary accounts of rape, she claims, are far too pleasant: "I looked up and a song bird flew over the crest and I realized that I would never be the same again." (Wheelwright, 2003, p. 4). The euphemism implies that a woman's mind can escape as her body is raped. Instead, Sebold's unflinching account of her attack affords the reader insight into what she experienced physically, mentally, and emotionally. Two pages into her account of the rape she says,

I was on the ground on my stomach. He sat on my back. He pounded my skull into the brick. He cursed me. He turned me around and sat on my chest. I was babbling. I was begging. Here is where he wrapped his hands around my neck and began to squeeze. For a second, I lost consciousness. When I came to, I knew I was staring up into the eyes of the man who would kill me. At that moment I signed myself over to him (p. 6).

Over the course of another eight pages Sebold describes not only the physical nature of the crime, but also the ways that her mind wandered through different trains of thought and emotions, which influenced her behavior.

As Sebold narrates the experience of being photographed by police after the incident, she comments on the misdirected emphasis placed on the victim's appearance and sexual history in dominant rape narratives. She explains,

The cosmetics of rape are central to proving any case. So far, I was two for two: I wore loose unenticing clothes; I had clearly been beaten. Add this to my virginity, and you will begin to understand much of what matters inside the courtroom (p. 23).

Here she again points to the fact that she was fortunate to have a case that aligned with dominant assumptions. She highlights the importance of a victim's clothing, physical appearance, and virginity, in determining whether or not she would be believed.

After looking at mug shots and filing her affidavit, Sebold returns to her family's home in suburban Pennsylvania. In this section of the book she makes two important moves with regard to confronting dominant rape scripts: she demonstrates that she is a person, not simply a rape victim, and she recognizes a sociopolitical implication of the event, that she is now forced to share her life with her rapist. First, she humanizes herself by offering anecdotes about her home life. She recounts stories from her childhood, family fights, and playmate admonitions that her family was "weird" (p. 37).

During her time at home, Sebold comes to the realization that she now shares her life with her rapist, and his action affects how she relates to society. Driving through a

predominantly black section of Philadelphia with her mother to pick up her sister from the University of Pennsylvania, Sebold begins to panic as she looks at one man after another, knowing they did not rape her, but still feeling fearful. Although her mother dismisses her fear, Sebold acknowledges that it is “an early nuance of a realization it would take years to face . . . I share my life with my rapist. He is the husband to my fate” (p. 53). This realization demonstrates the sociopolitical significance of rape. Philosopher Louise du Toit (2011) contends that “in rape, like torture, there is, phenomenologically speaking, a collusion of two worlds—that of the rapist with that of the victim” (p. 86). She describes the way that rape systematically dismantles and appropriates “the victim’s world or frame of reference,” and convinces the victim that she does not matter (p. 86). This move, she argues, erases a woman’s “voice, agency, and sexual and bodily integrity” (p. 86), and is undoubtedly political in that it is the extreme exertion of power, “mostly by a man or men over women and children, more rarely than over men” (p. 88). Sebold illustrates du Toit’s point further when, upon arriving at her sister’s dorm, she enters the elevator and encounters “vivid graffiti,” depicting the gang rape of a girl named Marcie. She explains that, like her, Marcie had filed a complaint and charges, “but the fraternity members and their friends made it impossible for her to stay in school” (Sebold, 1999, p. 55). By the time Sebold is in the elevator staring at the drawing, Marcie has withdrawn from school and Sebold stands there wondering “where she [is] and what would become of her” (p. 55). With this scene, Sebold highlights the all too common way that the culture of many college campuses disempowers women by silencing and sanctioning those who report sexual assault.

Upon her return to Syracuse University, poetry professor Tess Gallagher becomes Sebold’s mentor after encouraging her to write about the rape. In this portion of the memoir Sebold confronts the assumption that writers can cure themselves by working through a

traumatic experience on paper. “The writing cure” is sometimes used to empower an abuse survivor to regain individual strength by imagining new possibilities (Harris, 2000; Montalbano-Phelps, 2004). In the memoir, when Sebold writes a violent poem to her rapist beginning, “*If they caught you . . .*” (p. 98), she trembles, and then becomes angry when she shares it with the class and they struggle to understand how such a “beautiful girl” could be so “filled with hate” (p. 101). In a later interview about her work, she explained that while she appreciated Gallagher’s assignment, “therapy is for therapy, and [though] writing can be therapeutic, therapeutic writing should not be published” (Gross & Sebold, 2002, p. 8). In this portion of the memoir Sebold distinguishes between writing for therapy, which is private, and writing to convey meaning, which is public. She also demonstrates the polysemic nature of texts by describing the strong, yet varied, responses she received from her classmates.

One week after the poetry workshop, Sebold is shocked to run into her rapist on the street. After police apprehend him, she meticulously describes the path to trial and provides an often overlooked account of the victim’s experience. Television shows like “Law and Order: SVU” condense rape trials into 30 minutes or less, making them unable to demonstrate complexities of a victim’s courtroom experience. Sebold describes the preliminary hearing and the defense attorney’s attempts to discredit her story by walking her back through every graphic detail of the rape and her behavior afterward. She discusses the difficulty of participating in a police line-up in which the defendant is permitted to have a similar looking friend stand next to him to confuse the witness. The defense attorney in the case employs legal tactics to prevent her support network from being present in the most difficult moments. He closes the lineup so that the rape crisis advocate cannot be present when Sebold must identify her rapist, then at trial he requests a closed court so that she cannot have anyone there when she has to testify in front of

her rapist. The details of her testimony take up 26 pages of the book and provide a clear picture of the crime and the trial. In describing the trial and conviction Sebold educates the reader regarding judicial process and the many hurdles victims face, even after their rapist is caught.

In her senior year, Sebold's best friend, Lila, is raped by a stranger in their apartment. Sebold tries to help Lila, but throughout the process it becomes painfully clear that there will always be a rift between her case, one of the "few convictions in a rape case in recent years" (Sebold 1999, p. 215), and Lila's, in which an arrest, let alone successful conviction, is unlikely. In this last part of the book she highlights the ways in which her rape will continue to influence her relationships, and the fact that the majority of rapes are like Lila's in that they will never be prosecuted.

In the epilogue, titled "Aftermath," Sebold demonstrates that the effects of rape linger long after the crime itself. In a 2003 interview Sebold said, "I don't like the term rape survivor, it came in with the crop of PC language that veils over true experience" (Wark, 2003, p. 2). Her comment points to the decade just before her memoir was published, when feminists backed away from victim terminology as they faced backlash from the political Right (Cole, 2007; Orgad, 2009). At the time, feminist research on rape was criticized for exaggerating the extent of women's victimization as critics charged that studies demonstrating the frequency of rape, particularly on college campuses, were simple fear mongering (Leisenring, 2006; Roiphe, 1993). Sebold wanted the world to know that, "There's nothing to be ashamed of in being a rape victim. It's an experience that you have, not a definition of who you are" (Wark, 2003, p. 2). In her memoir Sebold confronts the oversimplified victim/survivor dichotomy by recounting the suffering she endured long after the successful conviction of her rapist. Sebold's epilogue describes her downward spiral after graduating from college. She writes about snorting heroine

just as her story is picked up by *The New York Times Magazine* and *Oprah*. She talks about failing to complete graduate school and instead seeking out random sexual encounters after which she “cried in hysterical trills that no one understood, least of all me” (Sebold, 1999, p. 233). After years of wandering, experimenting, and living in poverty, Sebold ends the book in an ambiguous moment “later” when she concludes, “I live in a world where the two truths coexist; where both hell and hope lie in the palm of my hand” (p. 243). In the end, she is both victim and survivor.

While Sebold controls the telling of the story and details the complexity of her experience, she cannot control the interpretation of her story. Once rape narratives are shared, “they must interact with the world, thus requiring conversation and debate, which in turn require interpretation and analysis” (Haronian, 1996, p. 34). Amazon.com provides one platform for these conversations. In its reviews section readers offer their interpretation and evaluation of Sebold’s narrative. The readers reacting to Sebold’s narrative on Amazon.com represent the community from which both support networks and potential juries for rape cases are drawn. Analyzing their shared interpretation of Sebold’s work offers insight into how these groups take up a narrative that simultaneously adheres to and challenges dominant assumptions regarding rape.

Reviewing Rape

The following examination of Amazon.com reviews of Sebold’s memoir relies on close textual analysis, a method which highlights the way that significant features within a text, or set of texts, interact to create meaning (Leff, 1986). Rather than starting from a theoretical construct, this process begins with a detailed examination of the nuances of the text in order to identify major themes. By unraveling the details within the text, the critic can uncover the precise way

that textual elements combine to foster persuasion in and through public discourse (Burgchardt, 2005). My analysis of the Amazon.com reviews of *Lucky* reveals that readers of Sebold's memoir relied primarily themes of survival, justice, and recovery to guide their interpretation of her story. I argue that these themes come together to provide a therapeutic interpretation of the book. The emphasis of therapeutic rhetoric tends to be on "healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of an existing order" (Cloud, 1998, p. xvi). Framing issues therapeutically functions rhetorically to persuade people to focus on individual/private solutions to social/public problems (Cloud, 1998; Rockler, 2006a).

Legitimizing a survivor. Despite Sebold's emphasis on her victimization, many critics label her a "survivor."² Reader Henry Muller (2005) offered his "male perspective" saying, "this book is a tribute to a true survivor." The label "true survivor" begs the question: is there such thing as a phony survivor? Muller's remark, the depictions of rape in popular media, and the struggles lawyers face when trying rape cases indicate that the American public believes there are phony survivors. Survivor or not, the emphasis on Sebold's ability to endure the trauma of rape and participate actively in bringing her attacker to justice led many critics to admire Sebold and her book.

Both victim and survivor are "metaphors which construct hegemonic linguistic categories" (Spry, 1995, para. 3) and bracket out women's stories of sexual violence by denying them the agency to express the complexities of such an experience. These labels simplify the outcome of the narrative—the victim is to be pitied while the survivor is celebrated for strength and courage. Whereas feminists have used survivor as a political category (Orgad, 2009), readers employ a therapeutic interpretation of the term in which a survivor, through personal strength and bravery, endures individual struggle to bring about a conviction of the rapist. This

therapeutic reading discourages collective action by “dislocat[ing] political energy, anger and activity into the realm of personal life, where oppositions to systems of oppression and exploitation can do little damage and exert minimal long term influence on relations of power as they exist” (Cloud, 1998, p. 104). Therapeutic rhetoric moves people away from political action and turns their attention inward, focusing on what they can do for themselves to cope with their individual challenges (Rockler, 2006b).

Readers recognize Sebold's suffering, yet interpret the story as one of bravery and individual triumph. Many of them commend Sebold for her courage in sharing the experience. Reader Joanna Sero (2003) explains,

The reader learns much about so many aspects of a survivor's experience, including the impact on relationships with family and friends, the challenges within the legal/criminal justice system, the emotional/psychological ramifications, and just what it takes to truly SURVIVE such an experience.

Sero acknowledges that there are nuances and challenges in Sebold's story, but her comment is representative of the way readers gloss over these nuances to emphasize Sebold's survival. In doing so, readers make two important moves with regard to a public understanding of sexual violence: they legitimize Sebold's story and they focus the discussion on her individual ability to survive.

Consistent with other contemporary public discourse on survivors, readers use Sebold's personal trauma to emphasize her legitimacy as a rape survivor by identifying the stranger rape she endured as the one true form of rape. The most ringing endorsement comes from a review titled “Conversion of a Mysogynist” in which the critic writes:

I picked up this book (Audio Version) by mistake. . . . For the first time ever I understood what rape is really about. It certainly is not the date rape stories I heard about in college, nor the threats from women using sex for leverage “Do this or I'll yell rape, and no one will believe you.” For years if not most of my life, I was decidedly unsympathetic and

even a little suspicious of “rape” allegations. All that changed after Ms. Sebold's narrative (Douglas 2003).

Despite reading the memoir by mistake, Sebold's narrative not only rang true for Douglas, but her story was so believable that it overcame the large numbers of questionable or manipulative rape stories that he claims to have heard. He goes on to recommend that all potential jurors read Sebold's book to learn what real rape looks like. Despite Sebold's attempt to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of rape experiences, by labeling hers as a representation of “what rape is really about” readers reinforce the view that there is only one “true” form of rape.

Both male and female readers indicate that the narrative rings true to them based on the initial excruciating details and the later courtroom fight for justice. Female critics, however, sometimes go a step further. They look for Sebold to help them understand what rape is like and they take comfort in the courage she had to fight back during the attack and later in court. For example, reader Susan Schwartzman (2003) explains,

It's hard to truly imagine what it's like to be raped, but after reading Alice Sebold's searing memoir I have an all-too vivid picture of its brutality, the emotional toll it exacts, and the impact it can have on one's relationships with family, friends and lovers. . . . Alice's rape was her initiation into sex. She was a virgin when she was raped, making the crime against [her] all the more cruel. But Alice is lucky in a way. She has true courage and prevails in this searing story that includes a gripping court room drama, complex characters and writing at its finest.

Like Schwartzman, other female critics mention their attempts to “imagine what it's like to be raped,” and some recount stories of their own rape. Some women focus on the criminal conviction while others refer to it in passing, like Schwartzman's comment about the “gripping courtroom drama.” For female critics, the brutal nature of the crime, combined with Sebold successfully facing her rapist in court, legitimize her survivorship. Schwartzman's comment also demonstrates the way that readers understand Sebold's survival therapeutically. They emphasize

the personal nature of the crime, referring to the “emotional toll” and effect on personal relationships, and go on to celebrate her individual “courage” which helped her “prevail.”

For many readers, the rapists' conviction provides evidence of Sebold's strength as a survivor. Reader gerrie (2003) writes, “The steely conviction with which she placed her perpetrator behind bars now translates into a tool of empowerment for readers by way of her profound insights: You save yourself or you remain unsaved” (gerrie 2003). The final line of gerrie's review is a comment that Sebold makes when trying to explain how to relate the experience to her family. However, the line reoccurs throughout readers' reviews legitimizing Sebold's story and celebrating her strength. Readers repeatedly interpret this line as the moral of Sebold's story. Shortly after the memoir's release, A Customer (Sept. 1999) comments, “The message of this book, save yourself, is a good one . . . especially since empathic ‘help’, not pitying or egotistical help, is hard to find.” Other readers go on to echo this interpretation of the book.

What emerges is the story of an indomitable spirit, one who fought to win healing and wholeness. Her victory is not only an inspiration but a lesson to all. In Ms. Sebold's own words: “You save yourself or you remain unsaved” (Cooke, 2003).

Of primary importance is Sebold's insistence that despite the intervention (often bungled or unsuccessful) of police, family and friends, a rape victim essentially shoulders the responsibility for her own redemption. “You save yourself or remain unsaved.” A corollary emerges to complement this isolative requirement. Rape victims inhabit a different physical and moral universe (Wasser, 2003).

Some readers, like gerrie and Wasser, acknowledge in their reviews that Sebold confronts myths and addresses issues of social power. For example, gerrie (2003) mentions that “[Sebold] exposes common misconceptions about rape victims such as their purported wish to be sexually assaulted,” and Wasser (2003) highlights the way that “[Sebold] learns that there is ‘power to be had in sharing my story.’ Bearing witness . . . giving voice to pure, seething rage permit Sebold

to shed her weakness, isolation and self-blame.” These acknowledgements indicate that some readers are picking up on some of the ways that Sebold addresses public misconceptions of rape, but even these reviews join the overwhelming chorus of readers who emphasize her individual triumph over the experience. Positing “save yourself” as the moral of the story, readers (whether they acknowledge additional factors in the process or not) ultimately frame rape as something that an individual must work to survive on their own using their “steely conviction” (gerrie, 2003) and “indomitable spirit” (Cooke, 2003) to “shoulder the responsibility for [their] own redemption” (Wasser, 2003), rather than recognizing their experience as a shared social reality influenced by larger structures of social power.

Celebrating justice. Throughout the memoir Sebold highlights the relationship of her story to well ingrained cultural rape scripts. She acknowledges that her case stands a better chance in court because it features a quiet, white, virginal victim, and an aggressive black male perpetrator (Taslitz, 1999). In addition to the details of her story, she also acknowledges multiple people who helped her along the way. Despite her attempts to demonstrate the cultural myths undergirding public understanding of rape, and collective effort necessary to seek justice, readers more often focus on her individual role in resolving the case.

While some readers deliberate about the quality of Sebold’s writing in the courtroom scenes—some characterize the scenes as gripping while others lament the slow pace that takes away from the excitement at the beginning of the book—most focus heavily on her individual struggle and triumph in the case. For example, *A Customer* (Oct. 1999) calls the book a “must read for attorneys in the field of criminal law” because,

Sebold takes us back stage, where the real battle is fought, and puts the court room drama in perspective. . . . The author tears herself apart from the world of professional witnesses that seem to take center stage in today's trials, and shows us first hand what determination and a deeply rooted sense of decency and fair play can accomplish. Horray for the human

spirit that can not only confront but also survive in an often times wicked system, and help breath life into our collective concept of justice.

Reader Cathy A. Belben (2000) writes more simply, “she was able to identify the man who robbed her of her virginity and left her physically and emotionally damaged, and to testify at the trial that sent him to prison.” Comments like this one, combined with the emphasis throughout the reviews on the need to “save yourself,” reinforce the interpretation that there was something about Sebold as an individual that led to justice in her case. These comments suggest courtroom justice is the ultimate goal, and individual strength and determination are the keys to getting there.

Even readers who acknowledge structural elements at work in Sebold’s case point to her individual accomplishment in seeking justice. A Customer (Oct. 2002) recognizes the difficulty rape victims have in testifying about the crime explaining, “One in nine women who have been raped have the emotional strength to go through the system and get a conviction for their rapist.” This reader does not speculate about the reason for the low number, yet goes on to say that Sebold’s story proves, “it can be done, and must be done to stop the violence against women.” While comments such as this one point to a larger social problem of violence against women, they use Sebold’s memoir as evidence that the problem ought to be addressed through the “emotional strength” of individual victims seeking justice in their own case.

By focusing on Sebold’s emotional strength, these comments rely on therapeutic rhetoric to emphasize her individual psychological status over any potential social or political implications of the crime. They further the therapeutic interpretation by characterizing Sebold’s pursuit of justice as “not only awe inspiring, but a public service” (dallas 2003). Combined with those who praise her for “courage and bravery in pursuing the man who raped her and seeing the judicial process all the way through conviction” (Decker, 2004), these comments frame rape as a

crime that can, and should, be addressed by individual victims and survivors rather than society as a whole.

Combined with the comments heralding Sebold as a true rape survivor, these remarks reinforce the assumption that some rape stories are more worthy of attention than others. Readers reviewing *Lucky* demonstrate an interest in particular visions of rape survivors as heroes seeking justice within the legal system. They comment on “the heroism of her testimony and the heroism of her tenacity in committing herself to ultimate victory” (Schwartz, 2003), and sometimes frame the reading process as one in which they were “rooting for this heroic woman throughout the book, hoping that she would find whatever justice that she could and pick up the pieces of her life” (Carey, 2000). The reviews of Sebold’s narrative demonstrate a prevailing misperception that rape is a random crime committed against individuals who ought to be cheered on as they seek justice for themselves, rather than a larger social ill that ought to be addressed by a collective cultural shift. This therapeutic interpretation of rape acts as a barrier to rape prevention and understanding.

Seeking recovery. Following her rape, Sebold was unable to find a narrative that resonated with her experience. She wrote *Lucky* to fill that void (Long, 2003). When the book was first distributed in Barnes and Noble in the United States, it was placed in the “recovery-and-addiction section.” Sebold recalls receiving a “very pissed-off” letter from someone who purchased the book and was angered that she had not explained how to recover from such an ordeal. Long (2003) argues, “she did, but not in the manner of recovery-and-addiction literature.” Sebold told Long (2003) that, “if anyone says that being raped ruins your life that's a load of shit. I am not saying that everyone can get past it, but it is possible, and that should be more publicly known” (p. 15). This straight-forward tone is praised in many readers’ comments about Sebold’s

writing. Whether readers praised or condemned Sebold's work, they often did so on the basis of her ability to demonstrate that she had recovered. It was unclear whether some of the readers approached the books under Barnes and Noble's original assumption that Sebold's work was "self-help" but the span of time between the reviews suggests that most did not. Regardless of when or where they encountered Sebold's narrative, readers' repeated emphasis on recovery further demonstrates their reliance on therapeutic rhetoric as a mechanism for understanding the aftermath of rape.

One defining feature of therapeutic rhetoric is the tendency for it to emerge "as a response to social conflict with regard to issues of race, class, and gender" (Cloud, 1998, p. 4). In these moments where society has the potential to recognize collective harm and organize against it, therapeutic rhetoric reframes the problem as something to be addressed privately. This shift is made possible when "medical or psychiatric metaphors [are] used in a political context" (Cloud 1998, p. 4) to individualize the harm that has occurred. In addition to the individual focus on Sebold's survival and successful prosecution of the crime, therapeutic metaphors such as healing and recovery point to readers' desired outcome for the memoir, and the criteria they used to evaluate the book.

Many readers praise Sebold's memoir as a story of individual empowerment through personal recovery. Reader Tiffany Jorgensen (2003) writes,

This novel truly stounded [*sic*] me! Alice's ability to recover from her tragic experience and keep going with her life . . . was absolutely remarkable. Of course, Alice did receive a little help from her friend Tricia at The Rape Crisis Center, and her lawyer Gail, whom was sort of like Alice's role model. I believe in order for Alice to go on she must first find a place inside of herself to shine again. . . . In the end all of Alice's hard work and will pays off when she can finally sleep at night knowing that she has sought justice and is finally at peace with herself.

This review is unique in its acknowledgement of the assistance provided by community support mechanisms like rape crisis centers, and the importance of well-trained legal professionals. Yet, it is representative of the way that, regardless of the factors a reader considered, they emphasize Sebold's individual recovery. These readers express appreciation for the way "Sebold brings us into her world of extreme trauma and recovery. She tells about this period of her life not as a victim but as someone of extreme integrity who commands our respect" (Sandell, 2003). They suggest that instead of collective efforts, internal strength is the key to recovery, and society should respect individuals for telling their stories of recovery.

Many of the readers who praise the book focus heavily on Sebold's ability to make peace with, or recover from the experience. Often these reviews ignore, or at least gloss over, the epilogue. For those that do address the "Aftermath," their evaluation of the book turns on whether they hold on to the "hell" or the "hope" in Sebold's final statement, "both hell and hope lie in the palm of my hand" (p. 243). Either way, their evaluation relies on their interpretation of recovery. Those who focus on "hope" see her last sentence as a sign of personal triumph writing,

At the end of the novel it seems that she has finally come to terms with what happened to her and she holds 'both hell and hope in the palm of her hand.' . . . Alice Sebold overcame and became a successful and famous author, giving hope to those who have similar experiences while giving countless readers an engaging and intricate map of her personal life (Felske, 2005).

Others praise the concluding statement as "a triumphant realization" (Weber, 2003), or characterize it as an indication of both the "struggles and triumphs" that Sebold "will have to cope with later" (Katie, 2004). Much like the readers who praise Sebold's ability to survive and seek justice, these readers appreciate the book as a story of individual empowerment.

Not all of the reviews on Amazon.com praised Sebold's memoir. Some readers disliked her writing style and found her to be melodramatic. However, those who disliked all or part of

the content often warranted their arguments with disapproval of the “Aftermath.” Some cite the end of the memoir as a “MAJOR fault” (Michigan Jean, 2002) because it did not fit with their perception of how the story ought to be resolved. Either Sebold’s actions in the last part of the book did not ring true with how the reader imagined the story should end, or she did not properly address the healing and recovery process. Whereas readers who appreciated the memoir seemed to omit the epilogue or emphasize hope for recovery, readers who complained about the memoir highlighted a disconnect between Sebold’s epilogue and their understanding of the healing that rape victims ought to experience. For example, one reader who appreciated the graphic nature of the rape narrative and the courtroom drama early in the memoir did not appreciate the later part of the book. He explains,

In telling of her last three years of college and the decade of debauchery (heroin and indiscriminate sex) that follows, Miss Sebold uses the same techniques that make the first half of the book so powerful, but they fall flat here and just don't have the ring of “truth” or any sense of urgency (runsgood, 2001).

This comment not only reflects distaste for Sebold’s destructive behaviors, but the critic reads these events as lacking “truth” or “urgency.” For this critic, and others, the epilogue does not match up with their perception of what a rape narrative ought to look like.

Observations regarding the “truth” of the epilogue, which emerged in multiple reviews, demonstrate readers’ expectation that someone ought to recover from rape and exhibit a predisposition toward the appropriate manner in which to recover. A Customer (Nov. 2002) argued,

Anyone can describe the brutality of a rape, but to communicate to women everywhere that to be strong and of good humor and maybe use a few drugs to numb the pain along the way is the method for mentally, emotionally and physically handle being raped is not being honest . . . Maybe Ms. Sebold could write another book about recovery.

Contrary to the majority of critics who praised Sebold's strength, this critic offers Sebold's drug use at the end of the book as an indictment of her strength because of her inability to "mentally, emotionally, and physically handle being raped." Another reader explains,

For the most part *Lucky* struck me as an inauthentic, clumsy, and occasionally clichéd reporting of an event that Sebold has yet to deal with and recover from emotionally . . . I felt cheated by Sebold's lack of emotional engagement with her ordeal. The fact that she eventually resorted to heroin and a series of emotionally-detached serial sex partners makes me wonder how she could characterize this last section of the memoir as the "Afterword." Clearly she was still in the grips of PTSD, which was, from my perspective, where the memoir should have begun. . . . how did she recover . . . (TechMom, 2009)?

In this review, TechMom not only emphasizes recovery, but goes so far as to diagnose the disorder from which Sebold ought to recover. Taken together, these remarks make explicit some readers' perception that a true rape narrative will conclude with a discussion of a particular type of individual recovery, and that Sebold's narrative is flawed because she failed to adhere to that culturally dominant rape script.

Other readers that disliked Sebold's conclusion criticized her for not teaching them enough about recovery. After helping them imagine what it might be like to be raped, readers were expecting her to also explain what it would be like to heal. Shortly after the memoir was released, *A Customer* (Dec. 1999) said,

I really didn't learn much from it. Sebold talks plenty about her own life and her family, but the reader sees very little of her recovery process. . . . Given that there are other memoirs by rape survivors out there, Sebold just doesn't give us enough of a reason to read hers.

The implication here is that the only reason to read a memoir about rape is to see how someone might recover. Reader Angela Linton (2004) explains, "I felt cheated at the end of the book—at the beginning I felt that I would be with Alice throughout her every step of her journey to find justice and recover from the trauma she suffered but somehow this connection was lost." Other readers similarly described feeling cheated or angered by the lack of recovery at the end of the

book (*A Customer*, Nov. 2002) and were disturbed wondering, "if her life is good now, or if she's depressed, alone, and suffering from substance abuse problems" (KellyJo, 2003). Such comments ignore Sebold's recognition that the trauma continues to reappear.

Sebold's epilogue points to the long term effects of rape. Readers' emphasis on recovery in their interpretation of this portion of the book demonstrates that in addition to preconceived notions regarding the crime, society holds rigid perceptions of how rape ought to be addressed. Whether they glossed over the "Aftermath" to impose a hopeful view of Sebold's recovery, or focused on it to condemn the destructive nature of her behavior, each of these critics evaluated the narrative based on its implications for the individual. The overwhelming concentration on individual recovery as the ultimate outcome of rape precludes any consideration of social or political implications of the crime.

Conclusion

Readers reflect publicly on literature not only to evaluate the quality of an author's work, but also to deliberate about socially significant issues. Eberly (2000) contends that throughout history readers have come together in literary public spheres to deliberate about texts in a manner that "reflects common concerns about the consequences of the news of literary and cultural texts for their collective lives" (p. 9). Amazon.com provides a space in which readers come together publicly to discuss their thoughts regarding what they have read. Their comments about a given book demonstrate not only what issues readers consider salient, but also how their practices of reading inform their participation as citizens. In their responses to *Lucky*, Amazon.com reviews demonstrate that readers understand rape as an important issue in many women's lives. However, if Eberly is right that "cultural texts have some role to play in reinvigorating

participatory democratic practice” (p. 1); the emphasis these reviews place on individual action should be cause for concern.

Throughout *Lucky*, Sebold uses her somewhat stereotypical experience to highlight common misperceptions of rape and interrogates dominant rape scripts that depoliticize sexual violence. Rather than focusing on her critique of the “cosmetics of rape” (p. 23), or on her criticisms of treating a rape victim’s life “as if it were a movie” (p. 25), on Amazon.com readers tend to emphasize the parts of the story that are more consistent with dominant rape scripts and, I argue, their reviews demonstrate the persistence of a therapeutic interpretation of sexual violence. The recurring therapeutic rhetoric apparent in reviews of Sebold’s memoir serves to highlight the persistent cultural myth that rape is an individual problem. Communication scholars have demonstrated that therapeutic rhetoric is commonplace in America’s popular, social, and political discourse (Cloud, 1998; Hay & Garrett, 2001; Wood, 2003; Rockler, 2006a; Rockler, 2006b; McCann, 2007). This way of explaining social problems prevents them from being seen as shared, material, or political, and instead frames the problem as a personal “dis-ease” that can be cured through emotional performances (Rockler, 2006b; Swan, 2008). Reviews of *Lucky* reveal that people tended to read Sebold as a survivor, rather than a victim, which led them to focus on her courtroom triumph and celebrate that, in her case, justice was served and recovery appeared imminent.

In reviewing Sebold’s memoir, the majority of readers emphasized the personal implications of her rape, but did not consider the broader sociopolitical implications of her story. The therapeutic rhetoric evident throughout the reviews leads readers to conceive of rape as a random and inevitable crime that ought to be addressed by individual victims after the fact. Shortly after the publication of *Lucky*, A Customer (Aug. 1999) praised the book saying,

Sebold's wrenching story is told with such wit and style that it's hard for the reader to remember that it's a true story and not a great work of fiction. It is not just one woman's story, but also a searing commentary on a society that chooses to ignore rape and its consequences all too often. A handbook for any woman who has been assaulted and asks "now what?" I'd suggest it for every first-year law student and every 18-year-old heading off for college.

A Customer boldly argues that "society chooses to ignore rape and its consequences," yet the solution that this reader (and many others) offer is to have young women read the memoir to learn what to do after being raped. While it is possible this reader intends for the "first-year law student" and "eighteen-year-old heading off for college" to read the book with an eye toward societal ignorance, the critics who join this refrain frame it as a guide for individuals recovering from rape, rather than a reflection of a larger social concern. This interpretation, combined with the emphasis on the individual survivor seeking justice and recovering in socially acceptable ways, perpetuates the myth that rape is a problem for individual women, rather than society as a whole. Readers see Sebold as a true survivor based on her tenacity in seeking justice in court and her ability to heal. They paint a clear picture of the culturally acceptable rape victim as one who takes it upon herself to transform into a survivor, engage in successful legal battles, and demonstrate that she has recovered. Even those who criticize Sebold's "Aftermath" contribute to this picture because their criticisms hinge on her failure to demonstrate a socially acceptable form of recovery.

Therapeutic rhetoric individualizes the effects of "broader conditions of human alienation, exploitation, and oppression that are in reality social and political," and in doing so discourages collective public responses to these issues (West, 2000, p. 43-44). However, West (2000) argues that by striving to understand suffering, anger, and healing within the broader context of social and political conditions, it is possible to channel collective "affective energy . . . toward the development of alternative perspectives and thoughtful social action" (p.44). Readers

of Sebold's memoir express concerns over the prevalence of rape in society, and offer affective responses to her account of the crime. This is a good starting place for change. A better understanding of therapeutic interpretations of rape may help bridge the gap between those who are concerned about the issue, and anti-rape activists working to collectively to change rape culture.

Understanding reader reactions to Sebold's narrative can help feminist activists, academics, and legal professionals move beyond assertions regarding "what the public thinks and/or what it will tolerate" (Williams & Holmes, 1981, p. 18) and toward a clearer understanding of public attitudes regarding rape. If the reactions expressed in reviews of Sebold's work could be channeled toward the development of an alternative perspective on rape, one that recognizes its relationship to social and political conditions, readers like Sebold's could contribute to a marked change in our rape culture.

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¹ This period begins with the first review after the book was released in 1999, and ends in July 2009. In August 2009 the trailer for *The Lovely Bones* was released and Amazon began using stills from the film to promote Sebold's books. Reviews after this point indicate that the film (seeing or even hearing about it) reflect the influence of the film on reviewers' interpretations of the book. This is an element of the discussion that I do not have space to account for in this essay.

² Some readers do recognize that Sebold identifies as a victim. For example, one reader explains, "Sebold has no difficulty identifying herself as a "victim," and goes on to explain that she can legitimately claim that status because she was "an innocent victim assaulted by an unknown attacker" (Taylor, 2009). However, the vast majority of reviews label her a survivor.