

ROOM BY LENNY ABRAHAMSON

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Room is a story of staggering resilience and offers a deeply honest depiction of the psychological sequelae of trauma. It charts the harrowing experiences of a young woman (Joy) and her son (Jack) who live within the confines of an 11-by-11 foot shed, a space they come to refer to as ‘room’. We learn that Joy was abducted as a teenager and has spent the past seven years encased within room’s physically and psychologically taut interior. There is no contact with the outside world apart from a tiny skylight, a perennial

reminder of the infinitely vast and boundless exterior which Joy so desperately yearns to return to. 'Room' contains a bed, TV, sink, toilet, cupboard and a few other basic amenities that facilitate life. Joy's captor, 'Old Nick' ensures that 'room' is kept stocked with a slight supply of food, water, toiletries and other necessities. Most life affirming within this otherwise dull and deeply defiled space is Joy's 5-year-old son, Jack. 'Room' truly comes to life with Jack; its objects are animated with his burgeoning imagination, curiosity and most poignantly, his innocence. This is surely the most powerful testament to Joy's unwavering resilience and love for her son: the fact that he retains even a semblance of innocence in what the audience knows is an ultimately sordid space. In a series of exchanges reminiscent of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, Joy carefully and ingeniously crafts out of 'room' a world hospitable for a little child. Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* was set within the horrors of a Jewish concentration camp during World War II. The parental figure in the film, Guido, creates an imaginative world for his son, Joshua, in which the Holocaust is a game and the grand prize is winning a tank. In *Room*, Joy too fashions a series of noble lies in an effort to psychologically and emotionally protect Jack. Jack is told that 'room' sets the coordinates for his reality and that anything outside of 'room' is not 'real'. He is put to sleep in a cupboard adorned with posters of his favourite cartoon characters when 'Old Nick' arrives for his nightly sexual exploitations of Joy. In *Room* however, the war is an internal one. Joy endures daily rapings by her captor, physical pain as a consequence of her neglected health, severe stimulus deprivation and most agonizingly, the painful realisation that she can no longer continue to delude Jack. In this sense, the confining atmosphere in 'room' serves as a powerful metaphor for Joy's psyche. Joy realises that Jack's curiosity is beginning to transcend 'room's' constrained realm of reality and his growing awareness of 'Old Nick' compels him to cross the threshold of his cupboard. The ensuing exchange is yet another painful realisation for Joy that the reality she has fashioned for Jack will irrevocably unravel.

Joy slowly and sensitively begins to disturb Jack's partial perspective of reality by alluding to the possibility of there being more than simply 'room'. She brings his attention to the autumn leaves that have collected on 'skylight' and informs him of their origin. She tells him about all that exists beyond 'room' and encourages his sense of wonderment. Joy also begins to paint a less ambiguous picture of 'Old Nick'. Consequently, Jack realises that he must assist his mother in escaping from 'room' and together they develop an ingenious albeit precarious plan. In their desperation to execute their escape, Joy scalds Jack's face with a hot cloth to create the impression that he has fallen sick and is burning up with fever. Surely his deteriorating health will compel 'Old Nick' to take Jack to hospital, at which point Jack will be able to inform hospital staff of the plight he and his mother currently endure. When 'Old Nick' instead insists on going to get antibiotics, Joy's desperation escalates and their escape plan contorts into a terrifying turn of events. Jack feigns his death and is rolled up in a carpet. Joy begs 'Old Nick' to take Jack somewhere far away from 'room' so she will not feel his presence.

She wants him to be buried where there are trees and beautiful scenery. 'Old Nick', in a rare moment of empathy, places Jack in the back of his pickup truck and goes in search of an appropriate place to bury him. At this point, the film peaks with an emotional crescendo, thanks in large part to the rapturous score compiled by Stephen Rennicks. As Jack struggles to release himself from the carpet in the back of the pickup, haunting *This Will Destroy You's* haunting 'Might Rio Grande' soars in the background and reaches a climax at the moment that Jack frees himself from the carpet. The sky could not be vaster in this moment. It engulfs everything and Jack can only stare in utter wonderment. The tension at this point in the film is bordering on unbearable for the audience and the construction of this scene potentially marks a technical highpoint for Irish filmmaker, Lenny Abrahamson. A series of events unfold which culminate in the reuniting of Jack with his mother, another moment of almost certain emotional collapse for the audience. At this point in the film, there is an expectation of some respite from what has been an undeniably harrowing and emotionally distressing journey for the viewer. Yet we know that this cannot happen. While we are allowed to briefly celebrate in Joy's reuniting with Jack and their reuniting with the outside world, intuitively, we know that their painful journey will only now be entering into another gruelling phase. From a psychological standpoint, the film offers some extremely powerful insights into the lingering effects of traumatic stress. These will be briefly reflected in the section to follow.

Perhaps paradoxically for the lay audience, Jack yearns to return to 'room' shortly after his release. The sense of psychological security he has attached to this delimited world is painfully disrupted by the sheer vastness and unremitting stimulation of the outside world. Joy is perplexed by his response and her confusion is an early indicator of her fraying psychological state. All the tell-tale signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are evident in Joy. Here, the film very honestly engages with the issues of depression and suicide that may follow a traumatic event. Joy's meaning-making framework is radically widened once the drudgery of her existence within 'room' becomes disturbed. In a very poignant sense, the film suggests that life outside of 'room' may also be extremely difficult to endure for an infinitely complex set of reasons. Joy is devastated by her father's inability to reconcile himself with the origins of Jack. For Joy's father, Jack is simply the spawn of a sexual predator. The audience too is briefly challenged with notions of nature vs. nurture when reflecting on Jack's genealogy. We see in him a selflessness and sensitivity that could only have surfaced through the tender shaping of his mother. At the same time, we are forced to reflect through Joy's father on the notion of heredity and behaviour and whether the genealogical trace of Jack's father may one day come to the fore.

Another classical symptom of PTSD is Joy's re-traumatisation when recounting aspects of her experiences in 'room' during an interview with a broadcasting network. Most devastating in this exchange is a series of 'interpretive acts' that become imposed upon Joy's experience. The interviewer questions Joy's decision not to selflessly remove Jack from 'room' at an earlier point. This line of enquiry is deeply damaging in two

ways. Firstly, it instils a sense of shame within the victim which serves only to isolate and cast her further into an already unbearable state of psychological turmoil. Secondly, by dint of the fact that Jack was Joy's only hope of reuniting with the outside world, the interviewer's line of questioning perhaps inadvertently renders her life worthless. It loses sight of the fact that she too is still only a child, robbed of her innocence and any prospect of a normal life at a time when her contemporaries were enjoying one of life's most exhilarating developmental phases. As a practicing psychologist, this aspect really stood out for me. I have seen first-hand the enormous damage left by 'interpretive acts' which lack empathy, humility and the deep awareness that one simply cannot truly know the complexity and nuance of another person's journey. This should compel us to simply listen and learn to be conformable in the agonizing silence sometimes befitting of another person's story of suffering. The interviewer fails to do this and the effect on Joy in terms of the exacerbation of underlying psychological sequelae of PTSD is devastating. Not long after the interview, Joy experiences a complete psychological collapse. Overwhelmed by the sheer terror of her experience and the seemingly unempathic response of those around her, she decides to overdose on medication and take her life. In a turn of events utterly devastating but consistent with the theme of Jack as 'saviour', he enters into the bathroom to find his mother lying on the floor foaming at the mouth. Joy is admitted for psychiatric care which marks a turning point on her road to recovery. It is clear that she has long journey of healing ahead, but propped up with the requisite psychological support, the audience is left hopeful.

But what of Jack, surely the sight of his mother foaming on the floor is yet another trauma too much for this young boy to endure. In this sense, the film enters into another line of reflection that warrants specific commentary from a psychological point of view. With Jack, trauma is conceptualised somewhat differently. There is an assumption with Joy that the neural pathways implicit in the etiopathogenesis of her illness are more robust and will likely take a chronic course. With Jack however, the prospect of neural re-hardwiring and recovery is tentatively suggested. In a somewhat comical exchange with the paediatrician, Jack's brain is referred to as 'plastic', an assessment that Jack refutes, vehemently insisting that he is real. Of course, we know that the paediatrician is referring the fact that the child's brain evinces a degree of neuro-plasticity which allows for a potentially better recovery following psychological assault than that of adults. Some studies (see Anderson, 2006) have even revealed evidence of the ability of the child's brain to reorganise itself following traumatic brain injury (TBI). For instance, in left hemispheric injuries with young children, there is evidence to suggest that the right hemisphere is able to assimilate components of speech thereby compensating for the neuropsychological deficits left in this domain. Such a recovery is rarely seen or documented in adults. Getting back to Jack, we see this bounce back ability come through in him. Jack forms a close attachment with his grandmother and her partner and also begins engaging in developmentally normative play with other children. This is a

huge leap for Jack and a strong suggestion to the viewer that he will settle in and thrive within this new ‘reality’.

To conclude, *Room* is at turns a heart-breaking and deeply inspiring narrative of the resilience of the human psyche to endure the most unthinkable horrors. The film’s real value to those within the profession of psychology lies in its honest portrayal of the psychological sequelae of trauma. The film resists the temptation to tack on a happy Hollywood ending, and in this way, stays true to what the clinical corpus on trauma would tell us. In the closing scene, Joy and Jack return to ‘room’ in the hope of finding some closure. As the frame locks in on Joy’s face, she whispers ‘goodbye’ to ‘room’. We hear in her voice a sense of relief but her face tells us a different story. In her eyes, we see the blank, unfocused gaze of someone taken to the outer limits of psychological suffering, that unmistakable trace of trauma.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



DR RYAN BOTHA is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the Pearson Institute of Higher Education (PIHE) and a Research Fellow at the Law, Science and Justice Research Niche Area (RNA) at the University of Fort Hare (UFH). Ryan is also a registered Counselling Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). After completing his Master of Social Sciences degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of Fort Hare (UFH), Ryan completed his PhD research in a forensic psychology stream at the University of the Free State (UFS) under the

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