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Unresolved Trauma And The Possibility Of Recovery In Anna Quindlen's *Every Last One*: A Study Through Judith Herman's Trauma And Recovery

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Abstract

Judith Lewis Herman is an American psychiatrist and author who observes that traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and identity. This study focuses on examining the representation of unresolved trauma in Anna Quilndlen's *Every Last One* through the character Kiernan Donahue and his emotional isolation as a teenager into a violent individual. Kieran Donahue comes from a troubled and broken family but finds comfort with the Lathams, his girlfriend Ruby's family. His attachment to the Lathams is not merely a romantic attachment to Ruby but an attachment of family bonding and identity with the Latham family. By understanding Judith Herman's theory in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, this study explores how unprocessed psychological trauma disrupts Kiernan's sense of self, relationship, and capacity for emotional recovery. His traumatic experiences produce a profound disruption within the family structure, transforming his need for attachment and belonging into an obsessive dependence that manifests through violence. In Trauma and Recovery, Herman frames three stages of recovery: Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection. This study examines Kiernan's traumatic disruption of the family and his subsequent inability to negotiate the stages necessary for psychological recovery. A comparative study is drawn between Kiernan and Mary Beth, Ruby's mother, who survived Kiernan's violent disruption. Through this comparison, this study demonstrates how Quindlen presents trauma not merely as an isolated psychological wound but as a force capable of reshaping identity and relationships.

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Introduction

Anna Quindlen is an American novelist and opinion columnist who writes about the direct issues of readers that are concerned with politics, especially gender specific ones. Quindlen's novels chart the reactions of her characters to serious life challenges, which sometimes leads critics to say that she writes about "issues"("Anna Quindlen on a Writer's Life"). One such novel is *Every Last One,* in which she narrates an obsessive love, relationships between parents and children, and the emotional strength of a mother named Mary Beth Latham as the first-person narrator in the face of loss through her eyes. Mary Beth is a landscaper and mother of three: their eldest child, Ruby, is a teenager, and their fourteen-year-old twins, Alex and Max. This study focuses on the most important secondary character, Kiernan Donahue, son of Mary Beth's closest friend, Deborah Donahue, and Ruby's longtime boyfriend. Kiernan's parents are divorced, and their family carries the tragedy of losing his two-year-old brother who drowned in the backyard pool. Kiernan, being a lonely teenager, essentially made Latham his surrogate family. He is deeply attached not just to Ruby but to the bounds of the Latham household. Quindlen brings out the dark side of Kiernan's unresolved trauma upon the Latham family. Mary Beth's family is massacred by Kiernan, who felt deeply betrayed by the family when Ruby broke up with him. (Khemlani). This study relies on the Trauma theory of Judith Lewis Herman, an author, psychiatrist, researcher, and teacher whose contribution dealt with understanding and recovering from the effects of traumatic stress and incidents ("Judith Lewis Herman"), to analyze the two characters who have experienced trauma, Kiernan and Mary Beth. Herman states that helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma, which reflects Kiernan's life, as well as empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery, which shows Mary Beth's life. This study tends to claim that traumatic events disrupt basic human relationships and fragmented identity. To reclaim relationships and identity, Herman's three stages of recovery are essential for understanding and treating trauma.

Theoretical Framework: Judith Herman's Trauma Theory

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* establishes a significant theoretical framework to understand the psychological disruptions of traumatic experiences and the ordered way of possible recovery. Herman observes in her work that the book Trauma and Recovery is about "restoring connections" between individuals and communities that did not want to show the darkness

of sexual and domestic violence in society(Dell'Omo). The book is aimed at contributing to bridging the existing gap between personal suffering and public awareness, providing a new framework for understanding and treating traumatic events. Traumatic events interfere with fundamental relationships, leaving the victim feeling helpless, insecure, and isolated from others. She argues that traumatic experiences do not simply remain confined to the past; when they are unresolved, they can continue to shape an individual's emotional and psychological life. Herman's theory of recovery is structured around three interconnected stages: establishing safety, remembering and mourning the traumatic experience, and reconnecting with ordinary life(Carlyjs). The first stage emphasizes the restoration of physical and emotional security, while the second involves confronting and processing traumatic memories rather than suppressing them. The final stage focuses on rebuilding relationships, agency, and a meaningful sense of life after trauma. This framework is particularly relevant to *Every Last One*, as Quindlen portrays the devastating consequences of sudden loss and the protagonist's struggle to comprehend and live with trauma. In related to the secondary character Kiernan Donahue, whose unresolved trauma has been carried into his relationship, resulting in the devastation of the Latham family. Through Herman's theory, the novel can be examined not merely as a narrative of suffering but as an exploration of the complex and often non-linear process through which an individual attempts to confront unresolved pain, mourn loss, and gradually reconstruct a sense of self and connection. Herman's emphasis on safety, remembrance, mourning, and reconnection therefore offers a useful lens for understanding both the persistence of trauma and the possibility of recovery in Quindlen's novel. Quindlen narrates the fragmented identity of Kiernan Donahue from a lonely teenager to a violent figure, which asserts the statement of Herman's theory that prolonged trauma results in a "fragmented identity" in an individual. Kiernan's disruption in his relationship shattered the sense of safety, trust, and connection, leading to disconnection from himself.

Kiernan's Unresolved Trauma

In Anna Quindlen's Every Last One, Kiernan Donahue is portrayed as an important character whose experiences shift the ordinary domestic life of Latham's family into a darkened household. Quindlen has narrated the character not as an antagonist but as an individual whose emotional responses are shaped by the traumatic circumstances surrounding his life and relationships. Kiernan's parents are divorced: his father, Kevin, is unreliable, and his mother has a mental health condition. The Donahue family carries a specific tragedy. Years earlier, Deborah's two-year-old son Declan drowned in the backyard pool and died. Quindlen shows how its effects can continue to influence an individual's emotional stability, relationships, perception of security and sense of self. Kiernan's

character is important to examine the unresolved trauma because his experiences demonstrate the difficulty of returning to an ordinary sense of life after disruption. In the novel the character shift of Kiernan from lovable companion to unstable person is noticed after Ruby grows away from him and ends their relationship. His inability to accept the end of their relationship turns to obsession, emotional instability, family violence and the illusion of self. For Kiernan, Latham is his surrogate family where he has created an identity away from his family. His emotional condition can be examined productively through Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, in which trauma is understood as an experience that can produce fear, helplessness, disconnection, and a disruption of the survivor's relationship with both self and others. Herman argues that psychological recovery requires a gradual movement through three interconnected stages: establishing safety, remembering and mourning the traumatic experience, and reconnecting with ordinary life and relationships. In this novel, Kiernan fails to acknowledge the stages of recovery which has led to unresolved trauma. His difficulty in processing or integrating painful experiences illustrates the way trauma may become embedded in an individual's emotional life, particularly when grief and loss have not been fully acknowledged. His character also demonstrates that unresolved trauma is not always expressed through dramatic or visible symptoms; it may appear through emotional withdrawal, difficulty communicating, altered relationships, insecurity, or an inability to regain the sense of identity that existed before the traumatic experience. In Herman's view, these responses can be understood as the consequences of the rupture of trauma, in which the survivor's prior assumptions of safety, trust, and continuity have been disturbed. Kiernan's characterization is therefore significant not simply because he suffers, but because his suffering raises questions about the reconstruction of a meaningful life in the aftermath of trauma. His unhealed emotional state suggests that healing is not only a matter of time but also requires acknowledging the traumatic event, working through grief, and slowly rebuilding relationships with people. Kiernan allows Quindlen to depict trauma as a mental event that has long-term consequences rather than a one-time crisis. Herman's theoretical framework provides a useful way of understanding the mental processes involved in facing and perhaps moving beyond such trauma. Kiernan can thus be read as an example of the continuous struggle between the resilience of traumatic memory and the human ability for emotional reconstruction as well as self-identity.

Mary Beth and the Possibility of Resolved Trauma

Mary Beth can be examined in *Every Last One* as a character who represents the possibility of moving beyond traumatic experience toward psychological recovery. Mary Beth being a mother of three children, failed to notice the underlying state of her children.

Ruby has confronted Mary about Kiernan's behavior but she didn't acknowledge it to him. Later, Mary feels guilty for not standing up for her children and losing her family. But then she decides to move on with her son who was left behind in the murder of her family. Unlike a character such as Kiernan, whose experience can be interpreted through the persistence of unresolved trauma, Mary Beth demonstrates the importance of gradually confronting painful experiences and restoring emotional connection. Her characterization can be read through Judith Herman's three-stage model of trauma recovery: the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. For Herman, recovery does not mean erasing the traumatic experience or returning completely to the person one was before the trauma; rather, it involves integrating the experience into one's life without allowing it to completely determine the present. Mary Beth's response to suffering therefore illustrates the possibility of developing a renewed sense of stability and agency after emotional disruption. Her ability to acknowledge painful experiences, negotiate their emotional consequences, and maintain meaningful relationships suggests movement from isolation toward reconnection. This process is particularly significant because trauma often disrupts an individual's sense of trust and security, making relationships difficult to sustain. Mary Beth's gradual capacity to reconnect with others can consequently be understood as an important indication of recovery in Herman's framework. Her experience demonstrates that healing is neither immediate nor absolute but develops through the difficult processes of acknowledging suffering, mourning what has been lost, and reconstructing a meaningful relationship with the present. In this sense, Mary Beth functions as a counterpoint to Kiernan: while Kiernan represents the continuing psychological effects of trauma that remain insufficiently processed, Mary Beth represents the possibility of integrating traumatic experience and regaining a degree of emotional stability. Through this contrast, Quindlen emphasises that trauma does not have a single outcome; individuals may remain psychologically caught within traumatic experience, or they may gradually develop the resources necessary to reconnect with themselves, with others, and with life after trauma.

Conclusion

The novel *Every Last One* by Anna Quindlen provides a deep insight into the theme of trauma and its aftereffects on an individual's mental health. In addition to this, the novel also implies the possibility of overcoming trauma despite the fact that it is not an easy process at all. It is narrated through the experiences of Kiernan and Mary Beth. Through the contrasting experiences of Kiernan and Mary Beth, the novel demonstrates that individuals respond to traumatic experiences in different ways. Kiernan can be understood as representing unresolved trauma, in which painful experiences continue to influence emotional life and prevent the complete restoration of security, identity, and connection. His

experience illustrates how trauma can remain psychologically present even after the immediate crisis has passed. Mary Beth, on the other hand, can be interpreted as representing the possibility of recovery through the gradual acknowledgement of suffering, mourning of loss, and restoration of meaningful connections. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* provides an important theoretical framework for understanding this contrast. Herman emphasizes that recovery is a gradual process involving the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with life and relationships. Quindlen's characters examined through this framework demonstrate that healing is about learning how to incorporate the trauma into one's life without letting it control one's identity. The contrast between Kiernan and Mary Beth therefore reinforces the central argument of this study: unresolved trauma can continue to fragment an individual's emotional world, whereas confronting pain and rebuilding connections can create the possibility of recovery. In *Every Last One*, Quindlen presents trauma not as an experience with a single or predictable outcome but as a deeply individual process. She focuses on how traumatic experiences can be ongoing and that people have the ability to live through them and rebuild their lives.

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