**[Review - Pillar of Salt](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0813528372/themetapsycholog)**
Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back
by Janice Haaken
Rutgers University Press, 1998
Review by John Sutton, Ph.D.
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I hope that this wonderful book, written with a passionate and sympathetic intelligence, reaches a wide audience. It's not an easy read, for Janice Haaken deliberately spins a dense web of reference, pursuing paths across the contemporary psycho-political landscape. But her scholarship is marvellously diverse and well-directed, and her writing easily shifts between sad or playful fantasy, and insistently engaged political or empirical analysis.

Around two central themes, gender and memory, Haaken plays a dizzying set of interconnected melodies, spanning psychoanalytic theory and experimental cognitive psychology, biblical interpretation and the history of science. Haaken's analysis of our current confusions about memory, as wisely pragmatic as that of Ian Hacking's [*Rewriting the Soul*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/069105908X/themetapsycholog)*,* gains credibility and depth by being embedded in rich, nuanced historical and cultural detail. In Part I, 'Frameworks for Looking Back', after introducing her take on the 'recovered memory vs false memory' controversies of the 1990s, she extracts key points from psychological theories of memory, the current 'trauma model' driving much current clinical practice, and various forms of psychoanalytic feminism. The three chapters of Part II, 'Recovering Historical Memory', then pull back to reveal larger historical dynamics behind these controversies, discussing in turn legends and folktales of incest, the history of hypnotism, and the label 'hysteria'. Haaken pulls the threads together in Part III, 'Clinical Storytelling and Contemporary Social Dilemmas', offering increasingly resolute critical analyses, both psychological and political, of the sexual abuse recovery movement, of diagnoses of multiple personality and dissociation, and of satanic ritual abuse narratives. The book is rounded off with case studies exploring her own positive, subtle approach to questions of truth in memory, and with a powerful reinterpretation of the biblical story of Lot's wife which gives the book its title.

This simple description reveals the range of Haaken's ambition: the vast scope of the book might lead some to expect some superficiality or naivete in these difficult areas. But Haaken, a professor of psychology and a clinical psychologist in private practice, is scrupulously sensitive to complexity. Her tendency swiftly to see both sides of many debates initially gives a misleading impression of caution. But there are very strong, very clear views expressed at key points across the mosaic. I'll try to extract four central claims or warnings.

Firstly, Haaken notes the danger, for clinicians and for women, of locating the causes of all mental conflict outside the individual. A simplistic use of the dissociation model, for example, 'overexternalizes conflict, stripping women of psychological complexity'. But this is definitely not a one-sided attack on therapists, for she complains that the views of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation too are often misguided in placing total responsibility for allegedly false, 'suggested' memories of sexual abuse firmly on a single source, the therapist. As Haaken puts it, 'both defenders and critics of recovered memory share the assumption that women are not capable of generating disturbing sexual imagery on their own, nor are they assumed to be inclined toward rebellion without the assistance of an outside agitator.' From Haaken's own, more classically psychoanalytic point of view, both 'sides' in these disputes are defensively reifying and externalizing what may be ordinary but 'disturbing forces that inhabit the human mind'. Swift declarations in religiously-charged contexts that alleged perpetrators are simply dedicated to evil should often be taken less as literal accusations than as signs of cultural anxieties. So fantastical conspiracy-laced narratives of satanic ritual abuse transport real but mundane 'social crisis into the metaphysical realm, enlisting believers in a displaced struggle against fantastically elaborated and reified enemies'.

Haaken's second cautionary theme is that, even when it's accepted that psychological and emotional disruption might be internally generated, too many contemporary movements still construct monocausal explanations of such conflict. This drives the common, dangerous rush to find a *single*truth in memory. It's just too easy to identify a single moment in a woman's history of expulsion and transgression, 'a momentous rupture of innocence when the girl was cast out of the kingdom'. Feminist trauma therapy (Haaken discusses a number of books and clinical cases in detail) is marred by a desire to stabilize and concretize the activity of the mind, where 'the call to remember is a call for certainty'. Such 'emphasis on singular causes of disturbing states', argues Haaken, offers women only 'an impoverished view of mental life'. Moralistic horror at violent sexual imagery, or at ambiguous fantasy material which arises in therapy or in women's groups, drives the assumption that such complex psychological material could only have derived from childhood abuse. In Bass and Davis' *The Courage to Heal,* for instance, this results in a 'pervasive infantilizing of female sexuality', as if women had 'no history or sexual knowledge to draw on beyond that of the trauma memory'.

It's incumbent on Haaken, then, at least to sketch an alternative, multicausal picture of female remembering. She does so both by drawing on models in cognitive psychology which see memory as reconstructive rather than reproductive, models which leave our access to truths in memory, and thus control of the personal past, radically uncertain. Haaken's use of the sciences of memory is far from uncritical, if occasionally overoptimistic, as in her claim that scientific 'memory discourse broke loose from its moorings in the Western ideal of the imperial, unified mind' in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The core lesson she elicits is about source amnesia: 'the source of a remembrance may not be readily or immediately located in discrete events in an individual past but rather may be found in the complex web of converging group experiences'. This justifies Haaken's excursions into the fields of collective memory. Her discussions of folklore and spellbinding cultural narratives of daughters and fathers, of hysterics and mystics, delineate some of the 'forces that shape the storytelling conventions available for creating an internally coherent narrative out of fragmentary imagery and disturbing states of mind'. These are forms of women's cultural memory which must be rendered explicit to be put to emancipatory use.

Finally, in two linked warnings, Haaken worries at the ease with which feminists are enticed into thinking there's a single hidden self within. The tacit beliefs she's attacking assume there is some core innocent in each woman, perhaps rudely and violently abused long long ago, but who can be recovered and restored in full spiritual bloom if only the memory-enhancement techniques are applied with due vigour. Such an 'enchanting notion of concealed knowledge' inside is too often the tool of over-confident therapeutic authorities. Haaken reports on isolated intrusive therapists, romantically certain of their own increasing insight and goodness, whose abuses in search of abuse parallel anything Daddy ever did; but just as compelling is her more general theoretical wariness about the seductive charisma of the therapeutic scenario, in which professionals insensitive to their own power and ability to mobilize tacit longings too easily lead women down 'the dead-end street of a messianic psychiatry'.

All that Haaken has to offer in place of such worrying, 'quite decisive convictions concerning the locus of the trouble', is a preparation and encouragement back from the hysterical misery or overblown moralizing of the victim, into ordinary unhappiness. Her slightly underdescribed positive concept of 'transformative remembering' is intended to help women 'confront the genuine but mundane problems of everyday existence'. Even if she's slightly nostalgic for the 'insistent, insurgent female voice' of an earlier, more politicized generation of feminist activism, for the 'cultivated matter-of-factness and outrage' of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Haaken's canny optimism in trying to unearth difficult routes towards 'yet-to-be-realized possibilities for human freedom' is infectious.

Even if I'm half right in pulling together these urgent take-home messages distributed across the book, let me close by reiterating the sheer slow pleasure of following Haaken's work. I've said nothing about her careful and inevitably illuminating accounts of such a variety of individuals as Virginia Woolf, Alice James, Pierre Janet and Jean-Martin Charcot, 'Sybil', and Gertrude Stein: do have a look for yourself.

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