

Witnessing the Stars: Trauma, PTSD, and Narrative Healing in Glendy Vanderah's where the Forest Meets the Stars

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.876

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

[**www.alladvancejournal.com**](http://www.alladvancejournal.com)

Received: 05/Sep/2025

Accepted: 05/Oct/2025

Abstract

This article offers a trauma-theoretical analysis of Glendy Vanderah's *Where the Forest Meets the Stars*, exploring the novel's nuanced portrayal of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex trauma through its central characters. Drawing on foundational trauma theorists Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Cathy Caruth, and recent scholarship on post-traumatic growth, the essay examines how the novel embodies trauma's psychological, relational, and narrative dimensions. By analyzing the characters' fragmented identities, dissociative coping mechanisms, and gradual pathways toward healing, the article highlights Vanderah's ethical and empathetic approach to trauma representation. The forest setting and themes of relational witnessing underscore the possibility of recovery through safety, storytelling, and human connection, making this work a significant contribution to contemporary trauma literature.

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Keywords: Trauma theory; post-traumatic stress disorder; PTSD; trauma recovery; post-traumatic growth; Glendy Vanderah; *Where the Forest Meets the Stars*; narrative healing; Judith Herman; Bessel van der Kolk; Cathy Caruth; trauma literature

Introduction

Glendy Vanderah's debut novel, *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* (2019), presents a poignant and psychologically layered story that explores the intersection of trauma, identity, and healing. Set in rural Illinois, the narrative follows Jo Teale, a scientist recovering from personal loss and illness, Gabriel Nash, a socially withdrawn neighbor with a history of mental illness, and Ursa, a mysterious and gifted child who appears with a fantastical story of being an alien observing humanity. Beneath the novel's lyrical and almost magical tone lies a powerful exploration of psychological trauma, particularly how survivors of abuse, loss, and mental illness navigate the aftermath of suffering. Through the use of trauma theory and the clinical framework of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Vanderah's novel offers a narrative of relational healing in the wake of profound psychological wounding.

To analyze this work within a trauma studies context, it is essential to engage with foundational theorists in the field. Judith Herman's seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) laid the groundwork for understanding how trauma disrupts the individual's sense of safety, identity, and connection to others. Herman explains that "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control,

connection, and meaning," noting that trauma is not just an individual experience, but a social and relational wound. Similarly, Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) emphasizes that trauma is defined not only by the violent event itself but by the inability to integrate or narrate the experience coherently: "The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time."

These ideas are vividly embodied in Vanderah's characters. Each protagonist suffers from a form of traumatic rupture: Jo is dealing with the compounded grief of losing her mother and surviving cancer; Gabriel is a survivor of childhood neglect and emotional trauma linked to his mental illness; and Ursa, the child around whom the story centers, has survived extreme physical and sexual abuse. None of them articulates their trauma directly at first. Instead, they embody the very narrative fracture Caruth describes—each inhabits an incomplete story, suspended in silence and emotional isolation.

The narrative structure of *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* echoes trauma's rhythms: repetitive, nonlinear, often resistant to full disclosure. As the characters slowly form bonds with

one another, their stories begin to surface, demonstrating what Herman refers to as the importance of a “restorative relationship” in trauma recovery. Through this framework, Vanderah’s novel can be read not only as a work of contemporary fiction but also as a narrative enactment of trauma theory—where healing emerges not through forgetting or transcending the past, but through bearing witness, trust, and relational care.

This article will examine the novel’s treatment of PTSD and trauma through a detailed exploration of its three main characters, focusing on how each embodies a different facet of psychological survival. Drawing on trauma theorists such as Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, and Bessel van der Kolk (*The Body Keeps the Score*, 2014), it will argue that *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* offers an important literary representation of trauma’s complexity—and the quiet, persistent work of recovery. Through intimate acts of witnessing, a shared life in nature, and the slow restoration of trust, Vanderah’s characters begin to rebuild the narrative continuity that trauma had once shattered.

Of the three central figures in *Where the Forest Meets the Stars*, Ursula is the most enigmatic and symbolically charged. She enters the story suddenly, barefoot and bruised, claiming to be an alien who has come to Earth to witness five miracles before returning to the stars. Her intelligence, peculiar speech, and mysterious origins immediately mark her as unusual. But beneath her fantastical narrative lies a harrowing truth: Ursula is a child survivor of severe sexual and physical abuse. Her insistence on being from another world is not merely imaginative play—it is a psychological survival mechanism, one that aligns closely with trauma responses described in both clinical literature and trauma theory.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), PTSD in children is often accompanied by dissociation, emotional numbing, hypervigilance, and an impaired capacity to trust. Ursula’s behavior throughout the novel—her wariness of strangers, difficulty with authority figures, resistance to hospitals and police, and reliance on fantasy to explain her presence—all point toward a classic post-traumatic response. Her story, as it unfolds, reflects the challenges trauma places on the construction of a coherent identity and narrative. As Judith Herman states, “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others.” Ursula has severed ties with her own history in order to survive.

Her alien persona functions as what trauma theorist Cathy Caruth would call a “belated response” to trauma—a symbolic retelling of an experience that cannot yet be processed directly. Caruth argues that trauma involves “a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world.” Ursula’s claim that she is not from Earth is not simply a lie or a metaphor; it is a manifestation of this very breach. Her experience has become unlivable in its original form, and so it is reconfigured in mythic terms. “I’m from the stars,” Ursula tells Jo early in the novel. “I came to Earth to see five miracles. When I do, I’ll go back.” The language here signals a longing for distance and transcendence, but also for meaning—trauma has made her life unintelligible, and the only way she can continue existing is by imagining herself as part of a larger, cosmic mission.

Jo, herself grieving and emotionally guarded, is initially skeptical of Ursula’s story but allows her to stay, providing food, shelter, and basic care. Gradually, their relationship becomes a foundation of trust.

As Jo observes Ursula’s brilliance and sensitivity, she also sees signs of distress: nightmares, flinching at touch, avoidance of questions about her family. When asked about her real parents, Ursula deflects, saying, “They were good to me before they died in a spaceship crash.” This constructed story allows her to speak indirectly about abandonment and violence, echoing Bessel van der Kolk’s insight that “trauma is encoded in the body and the subconscious, often without verbal access.” For Ursula, the truth cannot be spoken until safety is assured.

This need for safety before disclosure is emphasized in Herman’s three-phase model of trauma recovery: (1) establishing safety, (2) remembrance and mourning, and (3) reconnection. Vanderah’s novel closely follows this arc. Ursula’s healing does not begin with therapy or legal justice; it begins with stable shelter, consistent care, and emotional containment—elements that Jo, and later Gabriel, gradually provide. The forest, where much of the novel takes place, is more than just a setting. It becomes a space of psychological safety, a neutral ground away from the environments of harm. Nature, often used in trauma literature as a site of organic rhythm and renewal, here functions as a buffer that allows Ursula to begin repairing her internal world.

Importantly, Vanderah avoids turning Ursula into a symbol of innocence or purity. She is intelligent, opinionated, sometimes manipulative, and psychologically complex. Her trauma does not define her, but it informs every aspect of how she navigates the world. When the truth of her abuse finally comes out—after she collapses and must be hospitalized—it is not presented as a climax, but as a moment of narrative re-integration. “I didn’t want to remember what he did to me,” Ursula tells Jo. “But it’s like the stars wouldn’t let me forget.” Her use of cosmic language even in this confession shows how closely her fantasy and trauma are intertwined—her imaginary identity allowed her to survive until her real self could be safely remembered.

This mirrors what Herman and van der Kolk have both emphasized: that memory of trauma is not initially narrative—it is sensory, fragmented, and embodied. Children, especially, may express trauma through stories, drawings, or behaviors that are symbolic rather than literal. Jo’s willingness to believe in Ursula’s story “just enough,” without forcing the truth before Ursula is ready, is what ultimately facilitates the child’s recovery. This aligns with trauma-informed care principles, which emphasize control, choice, and emotional regulation as prerequisites for healing.

Moreover, Ursula’s story highlights the critical role of bearing witness in trauma recovery. Caruth and others have argued that trauma is essentially a crisis of witnessing—something that occurs but cannot be seen or heard by others, which isolates the victim in unspeakable pain. Jo and Gabriel, by simply staying present with Ursula, by refusing to abandon or pathologize her, become the witnesses she never had. Their belief in her—even when they don’t understand everything—provides the relational scaffolding needed for integration.

Toward the end of the novel, Ursula’s transformation is subtle but clear. Though she will continue to carry the scars of her trauma, she begins to speak her truth, accept her name, and imagine a future that is not defined by the past. Her insistence that she came to Earth for five miracles is fulfilled, not because supernatural events occur, but because small, deeply human acts—of kindness, protection, and love—reshape her sense of the world. As she tells Jo, “Maybe the miracles weren’t what I thought they’d be. But maybe they were still miracles.”

In this way, Vanderah does not offer a simplistic recovery arc. There is no final resolution or promise that the trauma is “over.” Instead, she presents a model of ongoing healing, rooted in connection, trust, and the gentle reconstitution of narrative. Ursula’s journey—from alien to child, from dissociation to identity—is one of the most compelling literary illustrations of trauma theory in contemporary fiction.

While Ursula embodies the raw, dissociative experience of childhood trauma, Jo and Gabriel reflect subtler, more internalized forms of psychological wounding. Their traumas are not immediately visible; they are embedded in behaviors, silences, and the careful distancing they both maintain from others. In *Where the Forest Meets the Stars*, Glendy Vanderah does not present these adult characters as heroes who heal the wounded child; rather, she portrays them as survivors of their own invisible battles, each navigating the long-term effects of grief, shame, and emotional injury. Their arcs parallel and enrich Ursula’s, emphasizing trauma’s varied manifestations and the communal process of recovery.

Jo Teale, an ornithologist and academic, has returned to her research field in the wake of two major life disruptions: her mother’s death and her own survival of breast cancer. The trauma she experiences is complex, comprising anticipatory grief, unresolved mourning, and the existential fear that accompanies serious illness. “When you’re grieving, the world moves on without you, and you’re left behind, trying to catch up,” Jo reflects—a line that captures the dissociative disorientation trauma can produce. This statement aligns with Judith Herman’s notion that trauma “shatters the sense of connection between the individual and the community,” leaving the sufferer outside the flow of ordinary time and belonging.

Jo’s trauma manifests in over-functioning—she clings to her research, avoids emotional intimacy, and distrusts her capacity for long-term relationships. “I was alone,” she admits. “And I liked it that way.” However, as trauma theorist Cathy Caruth explains, trauma resists full integration into the self: it returns in fragments, dreams, and persistent affective states. Jo’s solitude is not pure preference—it is a defense, a carefully maintained structure that keeps the unprocessed pain of loss and illness at bay. In trauma theory terms, Jo exists in a “frozen present,” unable to fully inhabit her life because her past experience has not yet been emotionally metabolized.

Her isolation begins to shift only after Ursula’s arrival. In choosing to let Ursula stay—even without legal clarity—Jo steps into a nurturing role that challenges her avoidance tendencies. Caring for the child forces her to tolerate vulnerability, to re-engage with emotions she had compartmentalized. “She made me feel something I haven’t let myself feel in a long time,” Jo says. These moments echo Herman’s recovery stages: first, establishing safety; second, remembrance and mourning; and third, reconnection. With Ursula, Jo begins to experience the emotional closeness and co-regulation that allow trauma to be safely revisited.

Gabriel Nash’s character offers another distinct portrait of trauma—his rooted in chronic mental illness, childhood neglect, and family-based emotional abuse. Once an accomplished graduate student, Gabriel now lives in social isolation, withdrawing from the world out of fear and shame. His trauma is not event-based but relational and cumulative. As Bessel van der Kolk describes in *The Body Keeps the Score*, developmental trauma—especially from neglectful or invalidating caregivers—disrupts a person’s ability to self-regulate emotions and to trust others. “I’m not good for people,” Gabriel tells Jo. “I break things.” This self-

perception reflects the internalized shame that trauma survivors often carry: the belief that they are inherently damaged, unlovable, or dangerous.

Gabriel’s behavior reflects classic PTSD avoidance patterns. He avoids relationships, avoids talking about his past, and even resists medical intervention, fearing re-traumatization. Yet, as trauma theorist Laurie Vickroy notes, trauma fiction often reveals that “the survivor’s symptoms are not signs of weakness but expressions of an injured attempt to find coherence.” Gabriel’s hesitations, his rituals of daily life, and his careful distance are not cowardice—they are coping mechanisms, shaped by years of trying to manage overwhelming internal chaos.

What is notable about Gabriel is that his healing does not begin in dramatic confrontation but in small, repeated gestures of trust. His involvement with Jo and Ursula begins hesitantly—he helps fix a door, brings groceries, offers quiet companionship. These acts may seem mundane, but in the trauma recovery framework, they are critical. Herman writes that “recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.” Gabriel, through these steady engagements, begins to reconstruct the relational scaffolding necessary to feel safe again.

One of the most revealing passages in the novel comes when Gabriel finally tells Jo about his hospitalization: “My parents put me in a place and walked away... they said it was for the best, but it felt like they were throwing me away.” The abandonment he describes is not only physical but emotional. The trauma is not just that he was sick, but that his vulnerability was met with rejection. Jo’s response—not of pity, but of calm attention—becomes an act of witnessing. She does not try to fix him; she simply stays present, allowing his story to be heard without judgment.

This moment of mutual disclosure is pivotal for both characters. Jo, in turn, opens up about her own struggle: “There were days I thought dying would be easier. But I couldn’t say that to anyone... not even myself.” By giving voice to their previously hidden pain, they move closer to what Caruth calls the “awakening of another’s trauma in the listener.” This form of empathic witnessing allows both Jo and Gabriel to begin integrating their pasts into a coherent narrative—something trauma had once prevented.

Importantly, Vanderah does not present recovery as a linear or complete process. Both Jo and Gabriel continue to struggle with fear, distrust, and self-doubt. Yet their willingness to engage with each other, to co-parent Ursula and to care despite their fear, marks a significant shift. As Vickroy suggests, trauma narratives often illustrate that healing comes “not from forgetting or overcoming trauma but from forming a new relationship to it.” By the novel’s end, Jo and Gabriel are not cured—but they are changed. Their new roles as caregivers, partners, and witnesses have reshaped their sense of identity and purpose.

The role of the natural setting—particularly the forest and Jo’s research cabin—cannot be overlooked. As in many trauma recovery narratives, nature serves here as a safe, nonjudgmental space where re-integration can occur. The forest, with its rhythms and silences, mirrors the inner processes of the characters—slow, uneven, but alive. “There’s something about this place,” Gabriel says. “It doesn’t ask anything of me.” The forest offers a sanctuary where healing can begin—not because it offers answers, but because it allows safety and stillness.

Through Jo and Gabriel, Vanderah challenges traditional models of resilience. They are not triumphant or heroic in

conventional ways; rather, they are quiet, persistent, and deeply human. Their recovery arcs demonstrate that trauma does not erase the capacity for love, trust, or joy—it merely renders those things more difficult to access. With time, safety, and connection, those doors can reopen.

In the interplay between Jo, Gabriel, and Ursula, *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* becomes a novel not only about surviving trauma but about forming a community of survivors. Each character carries pain that would overwhelm them alone. But together, they create a new narrative—not one that erases the past, but one that includes it and still moves forward.

Glendy Vanderah's *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* is more than a compelling narrative of mystery and emotional connection—it is a layered literary exploration of trauma, memory, and healing. By weaving together the perspectives of a traumatized child (Ursula) and two emotionally wounded adults (Jo and Gabriel), Vanderah constructs a story deeply embedded in the psychological truths articulated by trauma theorists such as Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and Cathy Caruth. Each character reflects a unique expression of trauma's aftermath, and together, they form a micro-community of care that illustrates the relational nature of healing. Through its careful attention to inner states, avoidance behaviors, dissociation, and narrative reconstruction, the novel becomes an emotionally intelligent trauma narrative—one that does not merely depict pain but ethically participates in what Herman calls the “restoration of the survivor's voice” (Herman 155).

At its core, *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* aligns closely with Herman's three-phase model of trauma recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. Ursula, Jo, and Gabriel move through these phases at different paces and from different entry points, yet all three find ways to reconstitute meaning and selfhood through relationship and storytelling. Ursula's alien narrative, for example, functions as what Caruth refers to as a “traumatic latency”—a narrative substitute for an unbearable truth (Caruth 17). As she begins to feel safe with Jo and Gabriel, the fantasy dissolves, and her real memories emerge. Jo's willingness to meet Ursula in that space of imaginative dissociation is not just kind—it is trauma-informed. “I wanted her to feel safe,” Jo reflects. “Even if that meant pretending the stars had sent her” (Vanderah 83). This act of patient belief offers Ursula the emotional scaffolding necessary for eventual disclosure.

The concept of witnessing—so central to trauma theory—also plays a critical role in the novel. Herman emphasizes that trauma often occurs in the absence of a witness and that healing requires a compassionate listener who does not flee from the horror of the survivor's story (Herman 178). In this narrative, witnessing is enacted repeatedly and in layered ways: Jo bears witness to Ursula's story, Gabriel witnesses Jo's emotional vulnerability, and together they provide a containing presence for one another. Importantly, Vanderah avoids sensationalizing trauma or relying on it for shock value. Instead, trauma is revealed gradually, often through dialogue, dreams, or symbolic play—mirroring the way traumatic memory typically resists conventional narration. Caruth argues that trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly” (Caruth 4). Ursula's insistence on being from another planet is precisely such a repetition—a displaced echo of an unspeakable past.

Ethically, Vanderah also makes important choices in how trauma is represented and resolved. One of the risks in trauma fiction, as Vickroy warns, is the tendency toward narrative closure that simplifies or erases the complexity of survivors' experiences (Vickroy 50). Vanderah resists this trap. Although the novel ends with a sense of hope and safety, the scars of trauma are acknowledged as ongoing. Ursula is not “fixed” by love; she remains a complex child with deep emotional needs. Jo and Gabriel do not “save” her; rather, they create a space where her agency and voice can emerge. Similarly, Jo and Gabriel do not overcome their own histories in a Hollywood-like transformation. Their intimacy is cautious, uncertain, and tender-marked by mutual awareness of their limitations. “We're still figuring it out,” Jo says near the end, referring to their makeshift family. “But maybe that's okay” (Vanderah 301).

The novel's ethical stance is further strengthened by its refusal to isolate trauma as an individual pathology. Instead, trauma is presented as something that shapes, and is shaped by, relationships. As van der Kolk writes, “Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body” (van der Kolk 21). Ursula's behavioral signs—startle responses, nightmares, controlling behavior—are understood within this framework, not as problems to be corrected but as symptoms of a nervous system overwhelmed by repeated danger. Gabriel's reclusion and Jo's emotional detachment are similarly treated with empathy, illustrating trauma's pervasiveness and the diversity of its expressions.

Furthermore, Vanderah's choice of setting reinforces the novel's trauma-informed structure. The rural Illinois forest functions symbolically as a liminal space, outside of traditional social structures, where trauma survivors can begin to reshape their narratives. The natural world—silent, rhythmic, and nonjudgmental—echoes van der Kolk's advocacy for body-based healing and the importance of safety and sensory regulation in trauma recovery (van der Kolk 203). “The forest didn't ask anything of me,” Gabriel says. “It just let me be” (Vanderah 122). The land itself becomes a co-witness, holding space for grief, fear, and transformation without pressure or timeline.

Where the Forest Meets the Stars can also be seen as an act of narrative repair, a term used by both Herman and Vickroy to describe the way storytelling can re-integrate fragmented experience. Vickroy explains that “writing and reading trauma fiction allows access to emotional truth in ways that traditional historiography cannot” (Vickroy 8). Vanderah's novel participates in this literary tradition by using fiction to illuminate psychological and emotional realities that often remain hidden. By portraying the slow, nonlinear process of healing—one that involves backsiding, ambivalence, and moments of joy—the novel honors the messiness of recovery and rejects simplistic redemption arcs.

Another ethical strength of the novel is the way it restores agency to the trauma survivor—particularly in Ursula's case. Although she is a child, Ursula is portrayed as intelligent, autonomous, and resourceful. Her trauma does not render her voiceless or passive; rather, it highlights her resilience and creative capacity to self-narrate. When she finally tells Jo about her abuser, she chooses the moment and the words. “I didn't want to remember what he did to me,” she says. “But it's like the stars wouldn't let me forget” (Vanderah 235). Her invocation of the stars in this moment is both poetic and psychologically revealing—indicating that her fantasy helped her survive long enough to begin speaking the truth.

In conclusion, *Where the Forest Meets the Stars* stands as a nuanced and emotionally honest exploration of trauma and recovery. Through its careful attention to psychological realism, ethical representation, and relational healing, the novel embodies the principles outlined in contemporary trauma theory. Jo, Gabriel, and Ursa are not heroic in a conventional sense; they are survivors whose paths intersect to form a new model of community—one built on witnessing, empathy, and mutual repair. As Herman so eloquently writes, “The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience” (Herman 214). Vanderah’s novel illustrates this principle in action, reminding readers that while trauma may fragment lives, it is through shared presence and narrative reconstitution that wholeness becomes possible again.

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