

Soon You Will Be No One

A Review of

Creatures of a Day: And Other Tales of Psychotherapy


by Irvin D. Yalom

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Reviewed by

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How does psychotherapy work? Should we be teaching our students only “empirically validated” methods? Can therapy be reduced to a series of manualized techniques, or will aspects of it forever elude our attempts to corral it into scientific categories?

That psychotherapy reduces suffering seems increasingly clear. Meta-analyses indicate that typical clients emerge from therapy in better shape than almost 80% of those untreated (Wampold, 2007). What accounts for these effects, however, remains shrouded in mystery. Many have proposed that the alliance between therapist and client contributes substantially (Horvath, Del Re, Fluckiger, & Symonds, 2011), as do a host of other common factors that transcend theoretical camps (Laska, Gurman, & Wampold, 2014). However, robust disagreement continues about whether the role of specific techniques is major (Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012) or relatively trivial (American Psychological Association, 2013; Wampold & Imel, 2015).

There’s no question where existential psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom stands on these questions. In *Creatures of a Day: And Other Tales of Psychotherapy*, he writes, “The one thing I’ve come to know with certainty is that if I can create a genuine and caring environment, my patients will find the help they need” (p. 81). In his view, the relationship is the firm rock on which therapy rises, far more important than any technique: “We delude ourselves if we think some specified action, be it an interpretation, suggestion, relabeling, or reassurance is *the* healing factor” (p. 209, italics in original).

Indeed, one of Yalom’s principal goals in this highly engaging book is to confront the notion that therapy is reducible to anything. The book’s structure is simple: 10 chapters, each devoted to a single clinical case, followed by an afterword summarizing the author’s perspective. In each case, Yalom believes his approach was singular, rooted in the idiosyncrasy of the person he saw and in his own intuition. And the book offers much evidence for this view. One client revolutionizes his life when Yalom refers him to a household organizer; another gains deep insight from reading Marcus Aurelius. A third client finds solace when Yalom validates the respect he once earned from a brilliant mentor—and yet the client, while satisfied, refuses to confirm or deny this interpretation. In the face of

such complexity Yalom muses, "My mind swirled with thoughts of the impossibility of ever learning how psychotherapy works" (p. 80).

Whether Yalom has figured out how therapy works will probably be less important to most readers than his brilliant writing, deep insight, and candid sharing of occasional clinical errors. As he's done in popular offerings such as *Love's Executioner: And Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (Yalom, 1989), the author employs colorful prose and a practiced eye to make each client full bodied. One client is so old that Yalom tells us he's "almost able to hear his joints creaking" (p. 1). Another he describes as so "choked by self-doubts, recriminations, and guilt" that he "always perspired when he saw a police car on the highway" (p. 15). Whether he's doing a one-time consultation or years of depth therapy, Yalom demonstrates a consistent ability to offer each individual something useful, perhaps even life-changing.

One of the book's finest features is Yalom's willingness to admit to his own petty reactions, clinical confusion, and minor blunders. Now in his mid-80s, he finds it irritating when those who wish to work with him ask not *whether* he's taking clients, but whether he's *still* taking them. He counsels himself not to overidentify with a client who is a talented writer. Or in the midst of a session, he'll admonish himself, "*Stop trying to think of something wise and clever to say . . . Your job is simply to offer her your full presence*" (p. 158, italics in original). Many readers will likely be reassured to see a therapist of such obvious talent lay bare his own fallibility.

By sharing his fascinating interior monologues from the clinical hour, Yalom also offers a master class in how to do good therapy. This is one of those rare books of equal interest to beginning therapists, advanced practitioners, and nonprofessionals curious to learn what goes on behind closed doors in the sanctity of the therapy chamber. Yalom delivers valuable observations left and right: "It's not so much *what* I say (to my clients) about my thoughts that is important but rather *that I am willing to express them*" (p. 22, italics in original), or "I've observed again and again that the amount of death terror experienced is closely related to the amount of life un-lived" (p. 73). Reading the book feels like spending a sunny summer afternoon hanging out in lawn chairs with an eloquent, sagacious uncle.

Despite his skepticism about whether specific techniques account for the power of therapy, Yalom employs many of them; dream interpretation, free association, self-disclosure, reframing, promoting self-compassion, correcting client misperceptions, employing the corrective emotional experience, and encouraging risk-taking all play significant roles in his therapeutic work. Though he certainly explores his relationship with the client extensively, one can find aspects of several models in his work, including psychodynamic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and Gestalt therapy.

In keeping with his existential orientation, Yalom emphasizes authenticity, presence, and exploring fear of death. The specter of mortality haunts the majority of cases and is the centerpiece of several. It is even implied in the book's title, taken from a quote by Marcus Aurelius that ends in the somber warning that "soon you will be no one, and nowhere" (p. 191). Yalom also discloses how 40 years ago he himself was "buffeted by storms of death anxiety" (p. 163), sought therapy for it with Rollo May, and still hasn't overcome it.

Here was the one place I parted ways with the author. Is terror of death inevitable? Yalom states that he "can't imagine a disembodied consciousness" (p. 69). Why not? I found myself wishing he might seriously entertain the arguments of William James, Max Planck,

Erwin Schrodinger, and other reputable scholars that consciousness is fundamental rather than epiphenomenal. For example, Jung (1975, p. 12) termed the idea that reality must be solely physical “an almost absurd prejudice,” given that “the only form of existence of which we have immediate knowledge is psychic.” We can only speculate how Yalom’s therapeutic approach might expand if he were open to evidence from physics, biology, and elsewhere that consciousness is nonlocal (e.g., Dossey, 2014) and transcends the strictures of physical embodiment (Carter, 2010; Kelly et al., 2007).

That said, *Creatures of a Day* will interest a host of readers eager to observe a great therapist in action. In the epilogue, Yalom worries that the increasing focus in clinical education on diagnosis and brief “empirically validated” therapy “will ultimately result in losing sight of the whole person and that the humanistic, holistic approach I used with these ten patients may soon become extinct” (p. 210). Hopefully, this book will help ensure that such a dark day never comes.

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