

Psychotherapy as Fiction

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Abstract

This past year, two major psychotherapists each published a novel. Struck by this coincidence, I decided to explore the historical relationship between novels and psychotherapy, focusing on psychotherapy by novels, psychotherapy in novels, and psychotherapists as novelists. Particular attention is given to Slavoj Žižek's theories of the detective story as an analogue for psychoanalysis.

One subject that seems to get little attention among New Zealand's psychotherapy community is how psychotherapy influences, and is influenced by, the contemporary arts. We have an active sub-community of art and dance therapists of course, including the pioneering work of Jennifer de Leon. But the generally unaddressed question amongst us is how deeply the arts and culture affect our work with clients in our therapy rooms. From time to time, clients seem to assume that I have seen the same movies they have, or read the same best-sellers (recent examples include *The Da Vinci Code*, Mitch Albom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God*, the recent biography of David Lange, and—horrors!—*Desperate Housewives*). When our clients want to discuss books or film with us, are they attempting to seduce us, twin with us, compete with us, fight with us, or to avoid their own work? These are not questions easily answered, but they seem to touch on the complexities of the interface between authoring a novel and authoring a life.

For the past few years, I've had a growing interest in the relationship between fiction and psychotherapy. On investigation I discovered that the conversation between these two arts takes on three forms: psychotherapy by novels, psychotherapy in novels, and psychotherapists as novelists.

I began to think more intentionally on this topic when I noticed that in 2004, two particularly influential psychotherapists—Christopher Bollas and Neville Symington—had each published a novel. Of course all psychotherapists could claim a place as novelists, because we write case studies, which, because they are countertransference, are actually works of fiction. Slovenian analyst and philosopher Slavoj Žižek has explored detective stories as an analogue of

psychoanalysis, beginning with the observation that the very scenario of classic detective fiction is one in which “normality” is itself a lie, carefully constructed to efface the traces of “the criminal’s” activity (his pertinent works in this area are included in the Reference List below; see also Mead: 2003).

French feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva also understood well the interplay between fiction and creative psychodynamics, and indeed herself wrote detective stories as a break from her brilliant work as a psychoanalytic theorist. Discussing the detective novels of Julia Kristeva, Colin Davis also references Žižek (2002: 294-95):

Like the detective novel, psychoanalysis is an invention of the late nineteenth century, and it is now almost commonplace to compare the detective and the psychoanalyst. Both search out the relevant clues that point to a hidden truth. However, while noting the similarities between the Sherlock Holmes-type detective and the analyst, Slavoj Žižek insists on their essential difference. A crime has been committed, and we may all be murderers in the unconscious of our desire; but by reconstructing the true story of the crime, the detective guarantees ‘that we will be discharged of any guilt ... and that, consequently, we will be able to desire without paying the price for it’ (1992:59).... Whereas psychoanalysis confronts us with the price that has to be paid for access to our desire, the detective novel lets us off the hook. A crime has been committed, but not by us.

Žižek’s comments seem to resemble Aristotle’s argument about why people go to the theatre. For Aristotle (*de Poetica*: 1448b), the pleasure of attending a tragic drama in the theatre is that it prompts us to imitate the ultimate good, and then to experience the reward of self-respect when we recognize the results of that good within ourselves. This imitation becomes possible only through the clear depiction of the tragedy that has befallen another, such as “the forms of the lowest animals, and dead bodies”. To the insightful, such depictions yield catharsis as opposed to pride, that is, a firmer resolve to rededicate oneself to higher values. In other words, a tragedy that is someone else’s allows us to disassociate ourselves and rededicate ourselves to the higher good (“A crime has been committed, but not by us”). However, in psychoanalysis, we are left with the realization of our complicity in the murder of our own desire—a corrective to narcissism, and a “welcome home” to the human condition.

Psychotherapy by novels

When I did my initial interview panel with the NZAP several years ago, I had been reading about “bibliotherapy,” and so listed it on my application as one of my interests. A panel member declared that she’d never heard the term. When I explained it to her, I sensed a strong negative reaction, which I was in turn too nervous to pursue. But bibliotherapy is a recognized supplement to face-to-face counselling in the US, and to a lesser degree in England.

Janice Maidman Joshua and Donna DiMenna, the authors of *Read two books and let’s talk next week*, write:

The road to recovery and healing is not only based on what happens in an hour-long session in our office; it is also based on what happens between sessions....[B]ibliotherapy is the clinical technique of recommending books to clients for guidance in solving their problems. It is often used as an adjunct to standard therapy techniques. Counseling is a collaborative process with therapists acting not only in the therapeutic role, but also as coaches and teachers...The goals of bibliotherapy are not to replace counseling, but to assist the helping professional to enhance and increase the resources available to the client. (2000: xxxiii-iv):

Joshua and DiMenna go on to point out three potential problems with bibliotherapy: that reading must never become more than an adjunct to face-to-face work; that clients may intellectualize what they read and thus avoid its transformative potential; and that not all clients are comfortable reading. I would add a fourth—perhaps a question, rather than problem: bibliotherapy seems to assume that books consciously chosen can effect changes, or at least increased awareness, in one’s unconscious world, but can they? Psychotherapy, like detective stories, seeks to bring the unconscious “into the light”, but do things work the other way too? Again, a question not easily answered. Ethicist Wayne Booth (1988) claims that choosing a novel to read is actually an ethical choice: will reading this book make me more healthy or less healthy? Who we are, who we will be tomorrow, depends, Booth claims, on our ability to read critically (1988:484).

Twenty years of teaching at tertiary level have taught me that some books are too toxic for students to engage with in the normal course of academic expectations. In the US, I eventually had to stop using Samuel Osherson’s *Finding our fathers: The unfinished business of manhood* because of the way it disturbed the internal defenses of my students. The male students in particular told me that the book repeatedly reduced them to tears. Here in New Zealand, I’ve had to stop using

Alice Miller's *The drama of the gifted child* for the same reasons. More than one of my female students told me that she threw Miller's book out the window in a fit of rage. Perhaps had these been therapeutic relationships instead of academic ones, such strong reactions could have been put to constructive use. Personally I am disappointed when students are resistant to letting assigned readings speak to their unconscious. I believe that both ministry training and psychotherapy training are formative disciplines, rather than straightforward academic ones, and that part of that formation occurs through cathartic reactions to texts. It may be that some texts actually can encourage health.

In retrospect I can understand better the apparently-negative reaction of the NZAP panelist to my interest in bibliotherapy. The psychodynamic psychotherapy so privileged in the NZAP would possibly consider that for a therapist to suggest a book to a client is a form of "leading," and I appreciate the truth of such an argument. However, my clinical experience tells me that not everyone who walks through the door of my counselling room is able to afford, or capable of engaging in, long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy, and for those who are seeking a more short-term counselling relationship, bibliotherapy might have something to offer as an augmentation of the direct personal work.

Perhaps a subset of "Psychotherapy by novels" would be books produced by novelists who have been offended by psychoanalytic interpretations of their fictional work. A classic and early example is D. H. Lawrence's response to the psychoanalytic criticism of his novel *Sons and lovers*. Artistically (narcissistically?) wounded by Freudian interpretations of his novel, Lawrence responded by writing two books on Jungian psychology: *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922). The first is a popularization of basic Jungian concepts. The second is a more serious attempt (though some of Lawrence's worst writing!) to combine the empirical neurology of Kundalini Yoga with Lawrence's own interpretation of Jung's psychology and with a theory of sexuality which may be either his own or derived from popular, occultist, esoteric texts.

Psychotherapy and psychotherapists in novels

As with television (*The Sopranos*) and film (*Analyze This*), so with American and British fiction: psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and their practitioners seem almost ubiquitous. After an internet search, I was left wondering why our profession seems so absent in New Zealand fiction other than the writings of Janet Frame. A brief selection of overseas novels in which a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist plays a role includes:

A Mind to Murder, a very early P. D. James, in which Dalgleish of Scotland Yard is called in to investigate the murder of a psychiatrist;

August, by Judith Rossner, which even has a Freudian couch on the cover!;

Freud's megalomania, by Israel Rosenfeld, in which a lost sequel to *Moses and Monotheism* is discovered, wherein Freud retracts his theory of unconscious drives, stating that the greatest force in human nature is self-deception;

In the Floyd Archives, by Sarah Boxer, a cartoonist's parody of many of Freud's most famous case studies;

Pilgrim, by Timothy Findlay, in which Jung is the doctor who treats a visionary schizophrenic;

Portnoy's complaint, by Philip Roth, an insanely comic novel about the American Jewish experience, virtually all of which takes place on the analyst's couch;

Running with scissors, by Augusten Burroughs, who was a guest of the Auckland Writers' Festival this recent May (as a child, Augusten's mother couldn't cope, so she simply gave him to her therapist in payment for her bill);

The bell jar, by Sylvia Plath, a semi-autobiographical novel of a young woman's therapy for depression and suicidal ideation;

The fig eater, by Jody Shields, in which Freud's famous patient Dora is found dead in a Viennese park;

The white hotel, by D. M. Thomas, a truly brilliant fictionalization of Freud's analysis of Frau Anna G.;

The world is made of glass, by Morris West, in which Jung becomes the therapist for a wealthy woman with demoniac fantasies;

Therapy, by David Lodge, the story of an aging British sitcom writer's discovery of his primitive self.

After compiling this list, I found myself designing a new course in my head, and I fantasized about calling it "The Fictional Psychotherapist".

Psychotherapists as novelists

If novelists write about psychotherapists, then it should come as no surprise that psychotherapists themselves write novels. Yet it keeps surprising me anyway: try

as I might, I can't rid my busy head of that caricatured therapist who says little beyond "Um-hmm" and "Tell me more." After some investigation, I discovered that some therapists do indeed have a fictional voice, and just like non-therapist novelists, produce fiction that is sometimes brilliant, and sometimes not.

I have already mentioned French feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. Thus far she has three novels to her credit. Her first novel, *Les Samourais* (1990; published in English translation as *The Samurai*) in which Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan all appear as characters, is a tale of sex and excess, picturing French intellectual revolutionaries "as modern counterparts of the Japanese warriors who also were poets and calligraphers and who were completely willing to face death in order to experience everything." Her second novel, *Le Vieil Homme et les loups* (1991; published in English translation as *The Old Man and the Wolves*) is an experimental novel about murder and grief which one reviewer described as "an iridescent gem glinting with psychoanalytic speculations, shards of myth and classical lore and musings on death, hate, love and the imagination." Her third novel, *Possessions* (1997; published in English translation under the same title), begins with a woman's beheading following a dinner party. The woman's friend must then sleuth out who committed the murder, by interviewing the dinner guests. A reviewer has described the novel as "a gripping mystery as well as a philosophical novel, full of sensuality and psychological insights, especially relating to the mother/child relationship." Interestingly, none of the novels has sold very well, and all three have been described by various reviewers as an exercise in Kristeva's own narcissism—a point to which I will return.

Existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom has authored a great many works, five of which are frequently classified as novels, though with Yalom, the line between a case study and fiction is a fine line indeed. *Love's Executioner* (1989) and *Momma and the Meaning of Life* (1999) are both described as part memoir, part fiction, and are often compared to the work of Oliver Sachs. These two books are funny, insightful, and honest about the fact that therapy doesn't always work. The therapist is very human in both cases, which may be a comfort to us all. In *When Nietzsche Wept* (1991), Freud's mentor, Josef Breuer, attempts to cure Friedrich Nietzsche of suicidal despair in the clinics, cemeteries, and coffeehouses of 19th-century Vienna. The young Sigmund Freud also wanders through these pages. *Lying on the Couch* (1996): in Yalom's fictional world, the relationship between therapist and patient is a tricky one indeed, and it's sometimes hard to tell who needs advice and counselling more—the patient lying on the couch or therapist sitting nearby. Nor is it easy to tell who is "lying". In *The Schopenhauer Cure* (2005), a successful older therapist agrees to supervise a younger therapist-in-

training, if the younger man will both join the older man's therapy group, and teach him Schopenhauer as means of facing impending death. Interestingly, Yalom's most recent novel has not been as critically acclaimed as his previous work, and one reviewer described *Cure* as "self-referential and narcissistic". There's that word again.

Which brings me to the reason I started this essay in the first place: the publication of new novels by two of psychotherapy's most prominent theorists.

Sydney-based Neville Symington is well known to us in New Zealand. *Narcissism: a new theory*, *The making of a psychotherapist*, *Emotion and spirit: Questioning the claims of psychoanalysis and religion*, *A pattern of madness*, *The blind man sees*—these and so many others are an honored part of the theory base which shapes us. Perhaps that's why I was so disappointed in Symington's new novel, *A priest's affair*.

On the surface, I know what this novel is about: an older backward-looking Catholic priest, a younger forward-looking Catholic priest who is sent to train with the former, and a beautiful but delusional grief-stricken widow. Each of the three characters is devious, and each, like each of us, carries the seeds of his or her own destruction. But what is this novel "about"? The publisher's blurb on the back cover says "By way of this multi-faceted exploration, the author describes processes which find parallels in many contemporary institutions". But the connection between the novel's plot and any other contemporary institution is thin, even at an allegorical level.

Ironically, I was reading this novel as a new pope was being elected in the Vatican. Is the novel about the recent struggle of the Catholic church over whether to elect a traditional or a moderate Pope? Possibly, since it was published before the election of Benedict XVI, and since Symington himself studied to be a Catholic priest earlier in his life. Or is it perhaps about our struggle within psychodynamic psychotherapy over whose theory base will prevail? Or is it a parable about what happens in psychodynamic groups—some look backwards and some look forwards? Is it a parable at all? In Greek "para-bole" means "something thrown alongside something else", with the intention that when the two things are seen together, both can be understood in a new light. If Symington's book is a long parable, then I'm not sure what its being "thrown alongside of" was intended to illuminate.

As much as anything, I was troubled by the successive waves of negative countertransference I experienced while reading this novel. There was no character I liked, nor one that I could significantly identify with. (I hope that

doesn't say more about me than it does about the characters!) Certainly it is the case that human beings are riddled with narcissism. For most of us, we disguise that relatively well. These characters—the priests in particular—were so caught up in the competitiveness of their doctrinal rigidity that their narcissism was too blatant for me to tolerate. I kept remembering a woman I knew once, whose narcissistic delusion was that if she could just get a priest to fall in love with her, it would prove (to herself) how special she was in God's eyes. In the end, try though I might, I could not warm to this novel. Ironically, for an honoured expert on psychodynamic theory to publish such an amateurish novel is an act of narcissism. And there's that word one more time.

Like Symington, Christopher Bollas is the author of any number of books which form our theory base as New Zealand psychotherapists—*The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*; *The mystery of things*; *Cracking up: The work of unconscious experience*; *Being a character: Psychoanalysis and self experience*—these and so many others. Unlike Symington's novel, Bollas' novel, *Dark at the end of the tunnel*, is superbly written, perhaps because in addition to being a psychotherapist, he is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts.

Bollas' book is actually four short novellas, related through the conceit of a central character and an overshadowing event. The central character is “the psychoanalyst” who, because he is nameless, could be any one of us—“something of a comic hero, always a bit behind in coming to terms with the issues he considers and the context in which he lives,” and a bit slow in tracking his clients! The overshadowing event—The Catastrophe (ever present but never defined)—has changed something in the world, so there are suddenly bigger questions for the psychoanalyst to ponder, such as the meaning of life, or what happens when we die.

Bollas' novel is about how “the psychoanalyst” thinks outside of sessions, during a cancellation, on a morning walk, over a cup of coffee, at the fish market, during a dinner party conversation. Though each novella is constructed around one of the analyst's clients, there are no case studies in the book, and no resolutions. But the “wondering” is delightful, challenging, and a model of the sort of questioning mentality that rightfully marks our trade. *Dark at the end of the tunnel* is, among other things, a brilliant fictional example of how important spirituality and the existential meaning of life are to the therapeutic process.

(As an interesting aside, it should be noted that British psychoanalyst Janet Sayers (I use her book *Mothers of Psychoanalysis* in the classroom) published a book

recently, entitled *Divine therapy: Love, mysticism and psychoanalysis*, described as a series of love stories. Sayers' book draws on the philosophical and psychological writings of William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Sabina Spielrein, Simone Weil, Erich Fromm, Paul Tillich, Viktor Frankl, Melanie Klein, and D. W. Winnicott. She ends with insights from Christopher Bollas, Neville Symington and Julia Kristeva—ironically, three of the novelists under review here. Sayers reveals how strongly she is influenced by Christian theology—a theme that also pervades these novels of Symington and Bollas.)

Wrap up

Near the beginning of this essay, I asked: “When our clients want to discuss books or film with us, are they attempting to seduce us, twin with us, compete with us, fight with us, or to avoid their own work?” Surely, the same questions should be applied to the unconscious agenda of every book reviewer as well. Perhaps I was “seduced” by the normalcy of Symington's novel: after 35 years in ordained ministry, the *todeskampf* between a conservative older priest and an iconoclastic younger priest looked just like “a normal scenario” to me, and I missed all the clues that a better detective would have caught (or maybe, because I've spent so much of my life being iconoclastic, I was avoiding my own work, the “traces of my ‘criminal’ activity”). Maybe I wanted to fight with Symington. Reading Bollas, on the other hand, was a defensible ethical choice for me: I thought differently after reading the book, just as I would like my students to learn to do in their formation.

On my way out of the country in mid-April for a beach holiday, I picked up a copy of *Therapy*, Jonathan Kellerman's latest pot-boiler. Kellerman is a child psychologist who, in addition to novels, has written three academic books on violent children. The plot revolves around a patient and his female therapist, both of whom get murdered in seemingly unrelated incidents (why are there so many novels about therapists who get murdered, and what sort of subliminal wish is that?). The book is, however, not about psychotherapy, though it is generously sprinkled with therapeutic language, such as parallel process, sublimation, projection, and an anxious fantasy about how corrupt we can become when insurance schemes dictate what we offer to clients.

My recommendation? Read Bollas by a cold night's fire as soon as possible; take Kellerman on your mid-winter-Christmas beach holiday; and skip Symington. I suspect Symington has a good novel in him somewhere, but *A priest's affair* isn't it.

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