

Seminars in the Psychotherapies

(2nd edn) Edited by Rachel Gibbons and Jo O'Reilly. Cambridge University Press. 2021. £39.99 (pb). 414 pp. ISBN: 9781108711838

In their Preface to this important book, Rachel Gibbons and Jo O'Reilly draw our attention to the significant shifts that have occurred in psychiatric practice over the past few decades. There is now a renewed curiosity about the person behind the presentation, and recent neuroscientific and psychoanalytic developments have emphatically underlined the importance of early relationships to brain development and future mental well-being and illness. All this, too, when society at large is undergoing a major flux in its fundamental precepts in a way that inevitably trickles down to our day-to-day practice. The importance, then, of psychological ways of understanding the mind cannot be emphasised enough at this present moment, and it is a message that this book underscores to great effect.


Trainee psychiatrists will find chapters from leading clinicians on the major psychotherapeutic modalities as seen in practice today. There are also enormously useful de-mystifications around the process of referral, and the indicators and reasons for caution, when thinking about psychological therapies as a whole. More experienced clinicians might turn towards the latter parts of the book that explore organisational dynamics and more contemporary developments in research, such as in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapies.

It is a full and wide-ranging book that can be used for reference or quiet study, or indeed for its very clear and concise explanations of theoretical concepts that might otherwise seem hard to grasp; but it also includes throughout its pages a rich seam of personal reflection, literary quotations, on-the-hoof clinical anecdotes and case studies that help bring things to life.

This creative approach comes together beautifully in the final chapter written by William Burbridge-James, which marks a trail across time from Keats' sonnet 'The Human Seasons', where the easy span of man's 'lusty Spring' has by nature to eventually wrinkle and fold, to the seven stages of psychosocial development as put forward by Erik Erikson. In this meditative and moving ending, the reader comes across the idea that an identity within psychiatric practice has to be individually discovered and lived through and allowed to evolve, and how a deep understanding of the mind can help facilitate this process.

This takes us back again to the book's beginning and Kate Lovett's assertion in her Foreword that therapy training was key in helping her to understand and make sense of the complex interactions that occur between staff, patients and the organisations that house us all. She draws on a quote from Joan Erikson that acts as an illuminating encapsulation and talisman for this fine book as a whole: 'The more you know yourself,' she says, 'the more patience you have for what you see in others.'

Hopefully many psychiatrists in the years to come will discover this book and find their own way towards and through these important ideas.

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