

e-Interview



Irvin Yalom is an author of fiction and non-fiction, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford University, USA, an existentialist and accomplished psychotherapist. After graduating with a BA from George Washington University in 1952 and as a Doctor of Medicine from Boston University School of Medicine in 1956, he completed his internship at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and his residency at the Phipps Clinic of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He completed his training in 1960. After 2 years of army service at Tripler General Hospital in Honolulu, Yalom began his academic career at Stanford University. He was appointed to the Faculty of Psychiatry in 1963. Over the next several years he was promoted and in 1968 granted tenure. Soon after this period he made some of his most lasting contributions by teaching about group psychotherapy and developing his model of existential psychotherapy.

His writing on existential psychology centres on what he refers to as the four 'givens' of the human condition: isolation, meaninglessness, mortality and freedom, and discusses ways in which the human person can respond to these concerns either in a functional or dysfunctional fashion.

In addition to his scholarly, non-fiction writing, Yalom has produced a number of novels and also experimented with writing techniques. His new and unique view of the patient–client relationship has been added to curriculum in psychology programmes.

The American Psychiatric Association awarded Irvin Yalom the 2000 Oskar Pfister Award for important contributions to religion and psychiatry.

What are you working on today?

Currently, I'm working on a series of stories drawn from some of my psychotherapy experiences.

Which psychiatrist, living or dead, do you most admire?

I have to say Freud, who too often comes under great criticism today. People forget that he was the creator not only of psychoanalysis but also of psychotherapy *per se*. There was no real psychotherapy before Freud – the whole field sprang from his contributions. Through the course of my own education I have learnt a lot from Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, Rollo May, Lester Havens, Carl Rogers and Jerome Frank.

What has been your most controversial idea?

At the beginning of my career I was all directed towards research articles and essays for professional psychotherapy journals and textbooks in group therapy and existential therapy, but I made a major shift 40 years ago with *Love's Executioner*, a book of ten psychotherapy details all of which were meant to teach some aspect of the existential approach in psychotherapy. I began to feel that the narrative form was a potent way to teach so have since written a series of teaching novels. One of those novels, *Lying on the Couch*, explored the theme of self-revelation of the therapist. My novels, *When Nietzsche Wept*, *The Schopenhauer Cure* and *The Spinoza Problem*, all focus on many aspects of psychotherapy but my hope is that we can learn from the works of these great thinkers.

Although these books have been best sellers to a general audience and have been reviewed often – favourably and unfavourably – on their literary merit, I intended them as pedagogical works, books of teaching stories and a new genre, the teaching novel.

What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

Writing. My first writings were scientific contributions to professional journals. My first book, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, has been widely used as a text for training therapists. It has been translated into 12 languages and is now in its 4th edition. Instructors praise it because it is based on the best available empirical evidence. I suspect, however, that it owes some of its success to storytelling – to a stream of brief human vignettes running throughout the text. For 20 years I have heard students tell me that it reads like a novel.

My last few years have been devoted to the writing of a novel, *The Spinoza Problem*, which was published in March 2012. Like my other novels, I consider it a teaching novel for young psychotherapists. It is an attempt to use my psychotherapy skills to explore the inner world of this great thinker. Spinoza is almost invisible in his own work and very few facts are known about his life. One could summarise a great deal about his inner life from his work and I have attempted to do that.

What was the last book you read?

I read a great deal of fiction. The last fine novel that I read was *The Sea* by Iris Murdoch. The contemporary writer I most admire is the British novelist David Mitchell.

How did novels come to play such a key role in your life and career?

I was born in Washington DC, on 13 June 1931, of parents who immigrated from Russia (from a small village named Celtz near the Polish border) shortly after the First World War. Home was the inner city of Washington – a small apartment atop my parents' grocery store on First and Seaton Street. During my childhood, Washington was a segregated city, and I lived in the midst of a poor, Black neighbourhood. Life on the streets was often perilous. Indoor reading was my refuge and, twice a week, I made the hazardous bicycle trek to the central library at 7th and K streets to stock up on supplies.

No direction was available: my parents had virtually no secular education, never read books and were entirely consumed in the struggle for economic survival. My book choices were capricious, directed in part by the library architecture; the large, centrally placed bookcase on biography caught my attention early, and I spent an entire year going through that bookcase from A (John Adams) to Z (Zoroaster). But it was mainly in fiction where I found a refuge, an alternate, more satisfying world, a source of inspiration and wisdom. Sometime early in life I developed the notion – one which I have never relinquished – that writing a novel is the very finest thing a person can do.

Sabina Dosani

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