

INTENSIVE THERAPY

A Novel by Jeffrey Deitz

Author Q&A

Q: How did the story of *Intensive Therapy* first come to you?

A: Two things happened around the same time. First, I was working on a novel about horse racing. An editor said the subject would greatly limit the audience, the majority of which would be women. From my psychology background I knew the importance of relationships to women, and the basic storyline of *Intensive Therapy: A Novel*, which had been percolating unconsciously, sprang to mind immediately.

Second, I was greatly distressed by media portrayals of psychotherapists and psychotherapy. I wanted readers to see and feel effective therapy, and see the therapist as real person.

Q: How did your background as a psychologist contribute to the creation of your characters?

A: Practicing psychiatry and psychotherapy exposes one to thousands of characters. We have to know character development inside and out. I started with Jonas and Victoria and trusted my creative unconscious, which I had become best friends with over the years, to tell their story. Stephen King calls the creative unconscious *The Man in the Basement*. He and I had a lot fun writing the story.

Q: Do you see a strong link between psychology and fiction? If so, why?

A: To me, psychology is all about emotion. Whether stories are true or made up, they have to make sense. Having a grasp on how people are put together emotionally delineates the rules of engagement between people, which gives the novelist the freedom to imagine stories, characters and situations without worrying about whether or not they are true-to-life. It's true that the novelist has to embed the story in a world that readers can enter, but within that world the novelist is free to imagine.

Q: Why did you choose to set the story of *Intensive Therapy* in Philadelphia?

A: I love Philadelphia. I lived there for 11 years, which were critical in my development. Every place in the story has meaning to me. From my point of view, Philadelphia itself is a major protagonist (fin de siècle Philadelphia, I think of it), especially the landmarks and institutions like the Analytic Institute and the Academy of Music, which have undergone dramatic changes since the 1980s era.

Q: Which elements do you think are key to developing a strong protagonist?

A: Open-mindedness and a willingness to change. Readers like protagonists with strong convictions, even when they don't agree with them. I don't think we need superheroes. It makes them harder for readers to connect with.

Q: Which character was the most difficult for you to write? Why?

A: Undoubtedly, Dr. Fowler. My real training-analyst was a very erudite man but, although he had a very razor sharp tongue, he wasn't nasty like Dr. Fowler. A diehard Freudian, I learned more about the man's life from his obituary than I ever did from him. I needed a character to embody the rigidity of that era.

Eddie was also difficult. As in the story, my father died young of a complication from surgery, which was very traumatic. Having never had a brother, it made me sad to realize how much I would have loved having one.

Q: Are any of the characters based on people or patients you have known? How do you protect the anonymity of real-life people who inspire you?

A: Sure they are: some more than others. Also characters I've know from books and/or movies. The externals of someone's life are easy to change. Marathoners become rowers. Lawyers become investment bankers. What's most important is the emotional lives of people. It doesn't matter whether you're a multimillionaire or a truck driver, when you meet that special person who makes your heart go pit-a-pat the emotion resonates instantly with people of all backgrounds.

Q: How did you approach the process of writing female and teenage characters?

A: Fortunately I have gotten to know many women and teenage girls over the years. I'd like to think they've helped me be more comfortable with my softer, more feminine side. I think masculinity and femininity exist on a continuum within each individual. One of my specialties in practice was adolescent psychiatry. I love hearing how teenagers think. They continually amaze me. I also have some very good women friends and have worked with several excellent women over the years. I also read a fair amount of current fiction and non-fiction by women writers to try and stay in touch with them. Of course, there's always my wife JoAnn to reel me back in when I'm way out of line.

Q: In the novel, Jonas is a fan of music and opera. Why did you choose to incorporate this genre of music into this character and what effect do you think it had?

A: Music is such an integral part of my artistic life that I can honestly say that I think musically. To me, melodic themes and story-themes go together. My favorite operas

have three acts, so do most piano and violin concertos. Symphonies usually have four movements.

Intensive therapy was structured along the lines of a symphony: a relatively long first movement which takes readers to where the protagonists reconnect in the present; a stormy second movement which encompasses all of Thanksgiving day; a slower third section with reflective elements comprising the aftermath of the event; and the resolution which includes recapitulations of and elaborations on themes introduced much earlier. The biggest challenge dramatically was to reestablish momentum after the vigil at the hospital.

Q: How important do you think dialog is for a novel? Why?

A: I think every novelist has his or her own voice. Writers from the Southern tradition like Faulkner and Conroy spin out paragraph after paragraph of the most melodic descriptive prose. To me, their prose is elegiac. Molly Bloom's musing at the conclusion of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is essentially one long aria.

Personally, I love dialog, probably because my entire professional life has been spent talking with individuals and families. Since my underlying metapsychology is relational, my characters spin out their yarns to each other. Dialog is also musical and improvisational like jazz. My favorite "novelist" isn't really a novelist at all; it's Eugene O'Neill. His plays read like novels, with all the description in the stage direction. But his dialog is pure music.

Since my themes are psychological I could either spend long sections describing characters' thoughts or reflections, or let them show their emotions and backstory through their interactions. How well I remember what my first writing mentor told me when I said Jeffrey Deitz wanted his say. He said, "Your job is to keep Jeffrey Deitz out of the story. If Jeffrey Deitz has anything worth saying, he better find a character to say it!"

Q: What impact do you hope the book will have on your readers?

A: I hope the book raises consciousness about the seriousness of mental illness and the power of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is a very potent treatment, but it needs to be properly conducted. Also, I want to show the varied dimensions of love and connection, and how precious every individual's story is in the larger scheme of things.

Q: Can we expect to hear more from Dr. Jonas Speller?

A: You bet! Next year, we'll see Jonas through the eyes of one of his patients. Also, don't be surprised if Jonas hears from Dr. Breckenridge somewhere down the road. Anna is a very complex woman and as she says to Jonas, "I see a lot of awful stuff. It would be good to have someone to talk with."