



Tales from the Couch: A Clinical Psychologist's True Stories of Psychopathology

Bob Wendorf

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Tales from the Couch is collection of actual case studies and a primer on psychopathology, as well as a captivating reflection on the human condition. Drawn from Dr. Bob Wendorf's thirty-six-year career years as a clinical psychologist, the book examines the lives of some of his most troubled patients, in a project that aims to both educate and fascinate the reader. Clinical syndromes are described and dramatized by real-life case examples (altered only as necessary to protect patient confidentiality).

Each of the sixteen chapters focuses on a particular psychiatric diagnosis, including Multiple Personality Disorder, Asperger's, and ADD. The clinical picture and symptoms are described and explained, then brought to life by case examples taken from the author's practice. Dr. Wendorf presents the cases as a series of narratives—some dramatic, some humorous, most quite poignant. Along the way, the author offers his own reactions to the people and events described here and application to the general human condition as well.

Tales from the Couch offers compelling stories of extraordinary people, clinical conditions, and events—both in and out of the therapy hour—while providing insights into the nature of human beings, mental illness, and the psychotherapeutic enterprise.

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Demyan says

Entertaining and informative

An entertaining yet informative read. The author is knowledgeable and has the ability to capture the reader. It allows an interesting behind the scenes look.

Lesa Tobiason beach says

A fun read

We're all a little nuts, for sure. Those of us that admit it can see the humor in this collection and I have to agree that people's addictions can be tedious to treat. Bob seems like a kind and caring person along with being a good psychologist. I enjoyed this.

Petra CigareX says

I like reading books on psychotherapy and neurology. How people behave according to their frame of reference, chemical make up or gene inheritance interests me. I thought this book was something rather different and might be interesting.

1. The majority of the psychology books I read are by doctors with a Jewish background. This doctor is Roman Catholic and his background does inform certain of his patients' treatments.
2. Most of the authors owe a lot to Freud, Dr. Wendorf is contemptuous of him. Freudian therapists like to get to the root of the problem, Wendorf is strictly behavioural. Cognitive behavioural therapy to be more precise. My favourite author in this genre is Dr Irv Yalom who had a Jewish background but was an existentialist. This comes closest I suppose to behavioural therapy but in no way is Dr Wendorf an existentialist and does not address his patients' problems from this point of view at all.

Although I am an existentialist, I lean more to CGT as therapy than anything else. A lot of us know why we do stuff that is not making us or others happy, or don't really care, what we want is to stop doing it, do something else that is better, not 5 years of lying on a couch and talking about oneself. (Exception. My mother, she just liked talking about herself and popping valium.) Some of his treatments were interesting. The man who couldn't pee in public having to distract himself by counting back from 20, the boy with no self esteem who was taught to play ping pong and since he didn't do anything else at all, no school, no work, no treatment, became extremely good at it and thereby cured himself.

3. In Oliver Sacks' books, patients come alive as people who have issues, people with schizophrenia for example, and not schizophrenics. Dr Wendorf doesn't lack compassion but his description of the patients is generally only as far as it has to do with the mental problems. However, he, like Sacks does often involve the

person in looking at their disorder in a quite objective way that they could treat together.

It sounds like a really great read, but actually I was mostly bored.

The book started off well enough, at a fast clip through patients and disorders and, Wendorf being quite a personal writer, what he thought of them, if he liked the patient or the opposite. But when he got into disorders he really enjoyed, like borderline personality disorder and multiple personalities, now called dissociative identity disorder, he just went on and on. All the patients were unattractive individuals to read about and they mostly had horrific backgrounds. The borderline personality people with their inadequacies and alternatively seductive/aggressive sides were just people you really hoped you'd never have to deal with since they don't seem able to be cured. One wonders if they even want to be.

Some things were almost beyond belief. Like every male member of the family raping a little girl from the time she was a toddler and selling her. The grandmother would 'clean' out her vagina with lye, rendering her sterile. Or the little girl who had small dead animals put into her vagina and left to rot. I was terribly sorry for these poor women and it is no wonder they developed multiple personalities as a defence against actually having to deal with these horrific issues. But there is a limit to how much I want to read about these personalities and how the author handled them.

In the end I kind of drifted off, skimming, just trying to finish. That's never a good sign and that's why the book only gets 3 stars.

Emmy Gregory says

OH BOY HERE WE GO. I can't remember the last time a book made me this angry. It started out promisingly enough. There were some interesting cases. The author's approach to mental health seemed a bit old fashioned but then he is now retired. Then real doubts crept in: his chuckling at the ethical standards of the profession. His disdain for "silly" suicidal people. His frankly creepy need to describe how attractive his female clients are, including speculation about whether one of them had had a boob job.

It got worse. There's a common belief in Psychology - now fortunately going out of fashion - that you don't need to bother with evidence as long as you have some vaguely coherent notion about how something works. I found myself wanting to yell at the book WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE FOR YOUR POSITION as he wanked on about the inner causes of BPD and narcissism.

And then he went on to MPD and the satanic panic and I realised he was one of the original professionals responsible and that's when I got really angry. I understand that the guy was acting in good faith at the time. He was misguided but so were a lot of people. But the science of how memory works has come along so far since then, and so many claims of ritual abuse have been investigated and found unfounded, and so many have been retracted, that any therapist who still propagates this bullshit is absolutely culpable. He wants to know why the rate of MPD has dropped in the last 20 years? Because the late 1990s is when doubts crept in and therapists stopped expecting to see it, newspapers, magazines and TV stopped going on about it, and The Courage to Heal dropped off the bestseller lists. That's why.

So we get a long list of horrific acts of abuse, the descriptions of which are as gratuitous as the acts themselves are implausible. His message to any doubting reader is "bad things happen. The Holocaust happened." Yes. The Holocaust happened. But the reason why I believe that it happened is that there's

evidence for it. Nobody has found any evidence of Satanic ritual abuse rings. And we're not talking about the kind of crime that leaves no physical trace. With the specific crimes mentioned (I won't go into details) we're talking about a situation where absence of evidence really is evidence of absence.

So basically yeah. I didn't like this one.

Teri says

This book just rubbed me the wrong way right from the beginning. I set the book down twice for a while to try and clear my mind a bit and come back to it without my irritation, but failed. I finished it, but hated it.

I am going to write about some specific examples, but in case you don't want to read through all of them, here is the general idea: his stories are a bit unempathetic and egocentric. I have heard many psychologists tell tales of their patients. Some of which were funny stories told to entertain, some which were not. Sometimes they were just looking for advice or sympathy or even just to vent frustration. Some stories were books, some were told at conferences or presentations and some were just shared socially. I don't feel like I've ever really gotten the impression that a psychologist was mocking their patients until this book (with the exception of a few patients Robert Hare has told stories about). Also, he takes every opportunity to mention his various classic cars and whether or not that particular patient paid him his bill (or if he did the talk pro bono or not). Obviously since he wrote the book, he is mostly telling his success stories, but quite a few don't sound very successful at all. Sure they stopped coming in, but I would have too if you were charging me by the hour for that kind of service.

His introduction started out quite promising. He wants to tell some stories about some of his most memorable and/entertaining patients. He clarifies that he will use terminology that colloquially may have become offensive but were proper clinical terms once upon a time. I liked that distinction especially because people have this idea that a diagnosis is like a bad label, but this is really a colloquial idea that clinical psychology keeps having to rebrand and run away from.

After this, I started to turn on him. He talks about ADHD and how he never likes to use medication over therapy, except Ritalin, which is great. And it can be for some people, sure. He then goes on to talk down the idea or argument of the problem of overprescribing Ritalin. Then he tells a story about a father who functioned totally fine until he got a desk job and now he's restless and going crazy. His son is ADHD and Ritalin helped so why not him too?! That would be a good example of unnecessarily prescribing a drug considering he did function totally fine in the other job. Sounds like a lifestyle change could have probably sorted that out actually.

Then his whole take on suicide was pretty discouraging. He talks about how with most suicide attempts they don't really want to die. That is usually true. They are lost and desperate and they don't know what to do and they do this because they want help but they don't know how or where or who. Fine Bob, with you so far. Then he precedes to imply that these are just the irrational impulses of silly teenagers (usually due to a break-up) and really they are so silly and stupid you just need to point out their silliness and they'll be on their way. Yes Bob, because normal and healthy functioning teenagers try to kill themselves every time a break-up occurs. That's how well functioning people react to that situation. Definitely no underlying issues there.

His take on discipline. Yes, this is important to teach any child, however he seems unable to differentiate between discipline and violence. He encourages the parents to discipline their child using threats of violence (and then of course you must follow through if they do not listen). The one woman threatened her son with a switch, and he considered that success. Did it produce results? Sure. Did it produce further psychological dysfunction? Probably.

I have more issues with the book, but I am running out of time. I have places to go and people to see, all of which I would prefer to do over continuing to write about a book I really didn't enjoy.

Alia Makki says

I made the mistake of reading these autobiographies in rapid succession:

Tales from the Couch

Furiously Happy

The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo

As result, my brain pretty much wobbled, my review of the books got meshed and overlapped with each other and somewhere around the first third of the Tattoo book, the wobbling tipped and broke my heart and I stopped reading prose for a week to huddle under a collection of sonnets.

The thing with autobiographies, even those masquerading in the form of essays and creative nonfiction techniques, is that they're written from rawest materials of human experiences. Added to the fact that in all three books, the subject floated around mental health.

Enmeshed. That's the word I was looking for the things that hurt. It came up first in the Couch book. The lofty title for it was: Borderline Narcissistic Personality Disorder. (Then it came up again in Amy's book, when I eventually managed to read it through.)

For all that it's worth, Tales from the Couch was the safest, happiest of the three.

I am grateful for every bit of luck that made this book the first of the three. God knows what would've happened to me if I started from somewhere less steady, pensive and wholeheartedly glad of his luck in the world.

For one, the author provided a sweeping view of the cases in his long career. He hopped lightly from learning difficulties, to juvenile delinquency, to ADD, to personality disorders to *the real nutcases*. And because he came out of all of those cases sane enough to write a sensible book about it, you can bet that you too can come out of the book smarter, safe and sane.

For another, Tales from the Couch knew the difference between mental illnesses caused by genetic screwups, and those that are socially fueled. This awareness created the tonal difference in the author's voice in describing his cases. If I learned anything from this book, it's to respect that subtle difference. That you don't go kidding around with the tigers of insanity. And that you don't meddle crazy, even if they appear kitten-cute and caged, unless you have every means of exit secured with the push of a thought.

Reading this didn't hurt. Written from the vantage point of somebody relatively in control of his mental capacity and bowel movements, it offered a relatively safe cruise through the mental seas, ending with enough hope to make it an uplifting book.

Pennylope says

Where to start? So many things about this book made me rage. The author's clear narcissism. The fact that this book was clearly just a vehicle to stroke his own ego and mock his patients. His inability to acknowledge that he doesn't understand - truly - what the forensic process is about. His regular notation about which clients did - or did not - pay his bill or his "very high fee." His unnecessary and regular mentions of his jaguars. His incredibly unkind characterizations of addicts. This is awful.

I'm just glad he's not a practitioner that I have to deal with.

Carla says

True psychotherapy

This was a surprisingly well written and entertaining book. After over 40 years at a mental health agency, I can say it's an accurate view of a career in this field. Social work doesn't pay well, but it has a VERY high entertainment factor. If the field interests you, you will enjoy this book.

Deborah Gallatin says

Excellent!

I've not read a more honest, raw or humourous account describing the world of therapy. I give credit to Dr. Wendorf, as the job he's taken on has not been an easy one. In his book, he breaks down the chapters by diagnoses. This is one doctor who knows how to separate the wheat from the chaff, he understands the difference between MPD & schizophrenia.
His retelling of his patients lives & clinical adventures are at times both tragic and humorous. Well done Doc, well done!

Maria Meagher says

Interesting book but I was surprised to see it was written in 2015. Between recommendations for spanking children, references to "bastard" (illegitimate) children, "inappropriate" homosexual relationships, it seemed horrendously anachronistic. His judgemental attitude towards some patients, and obvious narcissism, were oftentimes difficult to read.

andreea molocea says

A good read

I loved reading about the cases that were presented, the book is well structured, but I felt many times that the author was sometimes judgemental while speaking about his patience and I felt he tried to be funny in cases where I was expecting empathy.

But if you want an easy to understand book about ADHD, MPD, Borderline this is a good start.

Peter says

3.5 STARS

Reading some of the reviews for this I have to wonder if people even have the attention span to focus on more than the first few lines any more, seeing as most (not all) of what is being criticized by the reviewers is usually explained or built upon a few lines later in the book. People seem to shut off their brains (or just put down the book) as soon as they read something they may not agree with.

This book certainly has its "flaws" and will not appeal to everyone. It's unnecessarily graphic in places, the author does come off as rather egocentric and some of the decisions or procedures in regards to his patients does seem a bit questionable or unethical (never extremely so, he's not abusing his patients of anything like that). But considering at least some of these stories seem to take place before their respective disorder became "a thing", let alone a well researched thing, it's hard to be too critical about it.

Also most of us (the readers) don't have a background in psychology or medicine, so focusing the criticism on those parts of the book are never really a good idea unless you can substantiate it.

So judging this book as the work of entertainment it is I found it pleasing, providing me with a good amount of humour, a little bit of shock and awe, as well as some "aw, that's sweet" moments.

Ruthanne Davis says

TALES FROM THE COUCH begins in an unusual way...the good doctor confesses that he doesn't have a couch!

That would lead one to believe that this book might be both humorous and educational. It was somewhat educational about various mental illnesses and personality disorders, but there was far too much of the author's experiences, Freudian disenchantment, and personal feelings to be truly enlightening.

As a retired R.N., I have encountered patients with many of the diagnoses in this book. I was hoping for additional enlightenment on why and what I experienced with my patients' symptoms. So I was moderately disappointed.

Paul says

Fascinating and entertaining book for those interested in clinical psychology. Borderlines love to marry narcissists! (Whoda thunk it?) Some great anecdotes that illustrate various psychopathologies.

The writer is a very kind and principled psychologist with a great sense of humor.

Some parts are interesting, such as his two patients with multiple personality disorder, which he believes to be a true phenomenon, but at the same time, some of his stories border on voyeuristic, especially the ones on women who have highly sexualized characters as alters.

Matheus Freitas says

Encontrei este livro quando estava procurando por indicações no gênero psicologia – *behaviorismo, sendo mais específico* – para que pudesse ter uma conversa mais detalhada com uma amiga que está estudando isto na faculdade. Pela sinopse, assumi que tivesse uma pegada **Oliver Sacks** e estava certo... É uma versão aguada, homeopática, que não funciona.

Começou bem, com potencial: casos curiosos e com algumas visões interessantes na análise. *Legal, legal...* Mas... Meu problema começou quando as *soluções* começaram a pipocar. Antes de tudo, não sou um expert no assunto então é bem possível que esteja errado. Quando comparo este livro a outros que li, no mesmo assunto, as soluções que ele encontra parecem simplistas e definitivas (*o que acaba criando em mim a esquisita dúvida sobre a veracidade das histórias e/ou sobre a estrutura e funcionamento de terapias*).

Bob Wendorf tem uma personalidade, ou perspectiva, um pouco presunçosa. Ele é especial e o mundo prova isto jogando diversas situações incomuns, das quais ele supera com maestria: quando mais ninguém consegue falar com uma criança, ele se torna o melhor amigo; quando todos já desistiram de um caso, ele encontra a peça que faltava; quando o trote da clínica é jogar o novato em um caso insolúvel, ele mexe com um garfo e sai vitorioso e respeitado por todos.

Quando termino um livro do **Oliver Sacks**, vejo o quão fascinante, assustadora e complicada é a mente humana. E nunca há uma solução milagrosa para os transtornos. Nesta área, acredito, as pessoas mais *quebradas* são as que mais dão respostas: quanto mais fragmentados, mais conhecimento temos da formação. Aqui não foi bem assim: não é sobre o que falei acima, é sobre distúrbios bizarros (*ou até engraçados*) ou sobre o autor (*com algumas soluções milagrosas*), ao ponto que o paciente se torna o pano de fundo. Foi um pouco decepcionante.
