

Review

A family in Therapy

A family in Therapy. Peter McCallum and Moshe Lang. Ringwood, Victoria. Penguin. 1989. 291. \$A14.99.

This book is a great read and in many ways is also a great clinician's indulgence. The major part of the book goes through (as the title suggests) the therapeutic process with one particular family, beginning with initial presentation and ending when the therapist (Moshe Lang) ceases contact with the family: a total of five sessions.

It's a fascinating process to go through, not least because the authors have a great talent for setting up the scenes in the reader's imagination in a way that is both succinct and wonderfully evocative. After the initial scene-setting for each session comes extracts of dialogue from the session (taken from videotapes) with accompanying notes to flesh out the non-verbal side of the interactions. I found myself caught up in the suspense of the family struggle, urging myself to stay up late, read on, find out what happens - the can't-put-it-down effect of a good novel.

But the book is not, of course, a novel. In fact, from a clinician's standpoint, it has several other interesting dimensions. It is a kind of indulgence. The authors do something that I, and I imagine most other clinicians, often wish we could do: replay a session; go through it with care and full attention and time; have a second bite at the cherry, or at least check that the first bite was okay. My mind was involved in the family's story, but also analysing and sometimes questioning the techniques and strategies used by the therapist. For a practising therapist the opportunity to test one's own reactions and therapeutic decisions against those of the authors was interesting and involving. For a therapist-in-training I think this process could be valuable.

I did find myself saying "yes ...but" to some of the analyses and decisions made by therapist and authors. If the book had ended with the recounting and re-analysis of the family's five sessions I would have been left with these doubts and reservations. However a great strength of this book is that the last 55 pages are devoted to commentaries from six "fellow professionals" from diverse backgrounds. These six commentaries range from feminism, through psychiatry and normal family therapy to social and historical perspectives; and from the brief (2 pages from Dr. Norma Grieve, academic psychologist) to the detailed (20 pages from Max Cornwell, family therapist).

The final section of the book, the six commentaries, was a brave and illuminating inclusion. It left me with just one major reservation about the book: an ethical question. The authors comment that when therapy ended it was on the understanding that the family could re- contact the therapist at any time in need but that, if they did not make such contact, it would mean that they were managing their lives satisfactorily.

The family has made no contact with the therapist in the 13 years since therapy ended. The authors chose not to attempt to follow up the family because "to do so would intrude on the family and its task ...of put(ting) therapy behind it and get(ting) on with life" (p.222).

The six professionals who wrote commentaries on the family's therapy viewed the videotapes of the therapy sessions and read the author's annotated transcripts.

Whoever amongst the rest of the world chooses to read the book can burrow into the intimacies of a very difficult stage in this family's life. Presumably, all of this has happened and continues to happen without the prior knowledge and consent of the "Black" family.

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Publication Reference

Flatt, J. (1989). A Family in Therapy. Australian Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, Vol 17.