

Review

Consuming Psychotherapy. By Ann France. London: Free Association Books. Pp 258. £27.50 (hardback); £9.95 (paperback).

The psychotherapy literature is dominated by the constructs of therapists, endlessly analysing the intricacies of the therapy relationship from the perspective of the therapist or, occasionally, the therapist's surmise of the patient's view. Ann France was in weekly therapy with one therapist for three years; then, after an interval of a few years, more intensively with another for five years and for the last 18 months a third, concurrent with the second. Hers is a personal account of what this experience was like, what she needed, got and did not get. She is critical of practice orthodoxy, which in her view imposes an unnecessary limitation on what the therapist can give. At times, she feared for her well-being and wanted to escape from therapy but was caught in a spider's web of desperate need and hopeless, hate-filled transference.

Clearly her need was great – off-stage a cast of Samaritans, psychiatrists and friends was marshalled in her support – but the criticisms she makes are worth pondering on. Using examples of her experience at various stages and drawing on the literature from the humanistic and existential end of the dynamic spectrum, she examines the hazards and limitations as well as the benefits of being, in her word, a consultant. Chapters deal with expectations (being prepared in theory at least for an erosion of adaptive strategies, a frightening accompaniment of the work of psychotherapy), choosing a therapist (she illustrates how that she needed different qualities in her therapists over time, a point of broad validity) and the time, place and cost of therapy (a therapist whose consulting room is in his/her home conveys a different intention on distance and anonymity than one where the two are separate). Where should the balance be in length of session between a flexible response to the imperative of the moment and the security for both parties of a fixed structure? The end of sessions was sometimes a painful reminder that therapy is a professional relationship and not the same as friendship; however no clear distinction can be drawn between the two in terms of tolerance. Her first therapist later became her friend but, then, did not want to know the details of her despair. At times, the despair was too much for the second therapist (and nearly too much for Ms France), though

generally the fact that their time together was limited enabled her to maintain a therapeutic stance. In other words, the limited time-frame of the session may bring out the best in the therapist.

The meat of the book is in the second half. The chapter titles, transference, the therapist as a real person, the space to play, interpretation, the cult of silence, absence and loss, underline her theme. She draws attention to the exquisite sensitivity of the consultant to how his/her inner self is received or is perceived to have been received by the therapist and argues that, for the success of the venture, a meeting with a responsive therapist who acknowledges the reality of their situation is essential. This is not the same as a therapist who discloses his own dilemmas and subverts the session for his own use. The more she experienced the therapist as an enigmatic, non-communicative stranger, apparently devoid of feelings and human responses, the more she guarded her inner self. The more she felt secure in being accepted and responded to as an individual, though not necessarily liked, the more she was able to explore the less savoury aspects of her being. I agree with her that this simple human truth needs greater emphasis in training schemes. As she says, "Psychotherapy is a shared experience; it is a painful exploration two people undergo together. One of the two is more experienced, and needs to remain detached to some extent from the suffering; but this does not imply retaining the aloofness of a superior and less vulnerable being" (p. 243).

Psychotherapy nearly consumed her in the sense of using up and destroying when in the middle of the second therapy she could feel nothing but a re-enactment of her annihilating relationship with her mother. She points to the hazard of being so dependent and locked-in to the relationship that, without external assistance, she could neither break away nor work through the transference neurosis. Intensive psychotherapy is not to be embarked on lightly. Eventually, the therapy restored colour and movement to her life. One account cannot have universal application but I urge trainers and trainees to read this well-written book which challenges us to think again about how nourishing or poisonous is the diet that we offer to those who consume our services.

MARK AVELINE
Nottingham Psychotherapy Unit