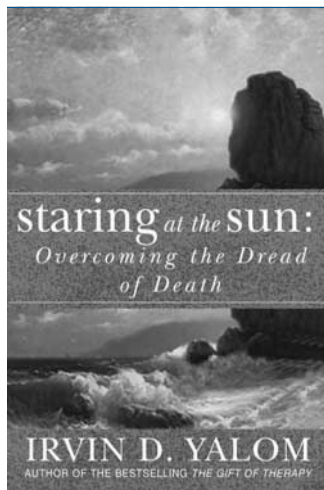


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge, Femi Oyeboode
and Rosalind Ramsay



**Staring at the Sun:
Overcoming the Dread
of Death**

By Irvin D. Yalom.
Piatkus. 2008. 306pp. £14.99 (hb).
ISBN: 9780749928094

'At the root of all anxiety is the dread of death. Discuss.' Regrettably, Yalom does not dissect this proposition but presents it as a certainty, although he does cite sources for 'the ubiquity of death anxiety'. Even if we set aside specific anxieties such as agoraphobia and social phobia, which Yalom presumably excludes from his theory, I remain sceptical: what dynamic contortions would be required to trace the anxiety of a 16-year-old facing a school examination to a dread of death? There are two likely reasons for Yalom's overstatement of his case – his personal experience ('I've been astounded to see that death has shadowed me my entire life') and his renown at dealing with his specialty, which inevitably leads to his practice being flooded with clients who are dominated by death anxiety.

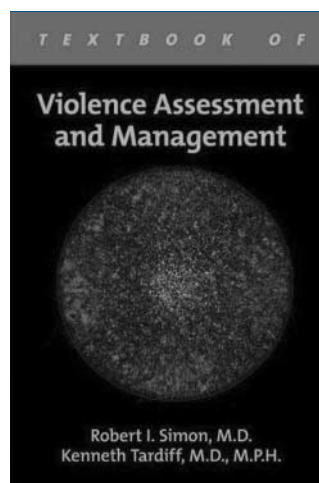
Having aired this grouse, I can move on to Yalom's expertise as a therapist, which is clearly evidenced in the numerous case illustrations he presents, although he is commendably honest in detailing at least one of his therapeutic failures. Yalom defines himself as an existential psychotherapist, recognising like minds in philosophers such as Epicurus, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. From a psychodynamic viewpoint he is an unconventional therapist, making physical contact with his clients, revealing to them details of his private life, getting up during a session to retrieve notes of a previous session, and encouraging his clients to address him as Irv. The spur to this approach is clearly identifiable – he writes that he remembers none of the 'thoughtful, dense and carefully worded interpretations' of his ultra-orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst, but cherishes 'an unusual momentary burst of tenderness' when he reports his mother's blaming him for his father's heart attack. He recounts that he gained more from studying philosophy than from the psychoanalytic literature. As a consequence, he often adopts the role of a teacher to his clients: 'In every hour of work, I am able to pass along parts of myself, parts of what I have learned about life'. However, his philosophy-inspired teaching does not invariably achieve the desired effect. He quotes one client as saying, 'Even though I get something from discussing all those great thinkers pondering the same question, sometimes these ideas don't really soothe the terror'.

It is not clear for whom Yalom intends this book. The case illustrations are educational for colleagues and are sufficiently jargon-free to be appreciated also by lay readers. There is a chapter

headed 'Advice for therapists', and a curious section at the end entitled 'A reader's guide' which appears to be written by an editor and comprises sets of questions about each chapter which read like a test of comprehension for students, for instance, 'Has Dr Yalom persuaded you that the Greek philosopher Epicurus has something more valuable to teach us all, and if so, what is it?' There are nuggets of gold in this book, particularly in the case examples, but a fair amount of irritating material has to be sluiced away to reveal them.

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**Textbook of Violence
Assessment
and Management**

Edited by Robert I. Simon
& Kenneth Tardiff.
American Psychiatric Publishing.
2008. 638pp. US\$84.00 (hb).
ISBN: 9781585623143

Fifty people contribute to this 600-page book, ranging from academics with international reputations to doctoral students. Although it is possible to make multi-authored books work, it requires strict editorial control to do so, both in terms of defining chapter coverage and content and of being relatively savage in quality control of the eventual product.

The book's structure tends to mirror, for a large part, what one might expect to find in a general psychiatry textbook, and readers are obliged to pick through the various chapters for information about assessment and management of violence in particular disorders, treatment settings or special patient subgroups. It is certainly not a manual for the assessment and management of violence. In fact, only 5 of the 28 chapters deal directly with principles of assessment and management. These include introductory chapters on structured risk assessment and on psychological testing, all of which are informative, but US-focused (e.g. US courts' pre-occupation with risk 'scores', consideration of the Rorschach test). The final chapter on clinically based risk management of potentially violent individuals disappoints in that it concentrates largely on Tarasoff warnings and on patients with guns.

The editors state in the preface that 'much latitude was given to the different authors' writing styles and perspectives'. The result is a hodgepodge of chapters, some of which appear to be written for the professional and some for the novice. We are told, for instance, that 'from Biblical times to the present, we have known that alcohol is often associated with out-of-control behaviour and violence,' and that 'schizophrenics may be delusional and develop ideas of persecution'. This contrasts with the style in other chapters where, for instance, details are set out of controlled trials