

# On Screen

In the first of a new series, psychotherapist and couples counsellor **Hilda Burke** looks at the role of psychotherapists in film and TV drama

## Dr Amanda Reisman *Big Little Lies*

**T**herapists are often portrayed in film and TV but how accurate are these dramatic characterisations, and does our profession emerge well?

Of course, it isn't the responsibility of TV and film makers to portray therapists in a positive light, any more than they should teachers, doctors, priests or lawyers. The primary purpose is always to entertain. In fact it could be argued that the 'perfect' or even 'good enough' therapist with their firm boundaries and perfect awareness of counter transference vs. transference might make for quite insipid TV.

The difference between therapy and teaching or law as a profession is that most of us will have had some direct experience with the latter professions. Psychotherapy, on the other hand, is still something only relatively few of us will have experienced. And so for many, the perception they have of the profession, and its practitioners is taken from TV, film and books. In *Big Little Lies* we meet Dr Reisman first as Celeste and Perry's couples therapist.

The next time we meet her she's with Celeste in an individual therapy session. How did that happen and did Perry know about it? Couples therapists can have differing takes on seeing a couple individually but it's something I personally avoid. If Dr Reisman entered into a contract to work with both Celeste and Perry as a couples therapist but had a meeting privately with Celeste on the side, I'd consider this a breach of the original agreement.

While Perry is undoubtedly a highly violent and unstable character, the fact that he's going to couples therapy and admitting that there's violence in the relationship is a start. In reality it's rare for a violent partner to agree to therapy. By seeing Celeste separately,



Photo: HBO/Kobal/Reis/Shutterstock

**ABOVE:** Robin Weigert as psychotherapist, Dr Amanda Reisman

there's a risk of Dr Reisman excluding Perry, thereby antagonising him further. This approach might be OK if Celeste had taken the decision to move out and leave Perry, but it's clear that she's actually quite far from taking such a step.

To say Dr Reisman's approach is 'directive' is something of an understatement: she couldn't be more instructive about suggesting Celeste moves out; advising her to stock her refrigerator and pay the utilities bills in preparation. Yet I feel she's out of sync with where Celeste is at, which is the initial stage of admitting the physical abuse issue aloud. With undoubtedly good motives, Dr Reisman has stepped into the role of 'rescuing' Celeste: which, in real life, can unfortunately mean running the risk of alienating the client and could result in therapy ending prematurely.

Certainly *Big Little Lies* triggered a valid debate over domestic violence. But in terms of how the issue was treated therapeutically on the show, I feel it was rather simplistic. I'm in the minority here: the consensus on social media being that Dr Reisman did a good job in telling Celeste what she needed to hear and psychotherapist as heroic rescuer makes for good TV, but I'm left with so many questions. What would have happened if Dr Reisman had let go of her agenda? I would have liked to see her explore why Celeste was drawn to Perry, what she experienced growing up in her family of origin that somehow paved the way for her to accept being in a long-term relationship with such a violent man? And so I'm left sitting with the unknown: a familiar therapeutic challenge!

► **Next issue:** *The best TV therapist ever?*  
*The Sopranos' Dr Melfi*

What have you seen on screen that has annoyed or inspired you? We'd love to hear your stories.

Email [communications@ukcp.org.uk](mailto:communications@ukcp.org.uk)