

Review of HBO's *Big Little Lies*: Forensic Psychiatry Perspectives

Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée and Andrea Arnold.
Screenplay by David E. Kelley, based on the novel by
Liane Moriarty. HBO. First episode of Season 1 aired
February 19, 2017.

The HBO series, based on the novel *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty, is renowned for its star-studded cast. Winner of eight Emmy Awards, the show does a remarkable job of taking us on an emotional roller coaster. The novel is set in an upper-class coastal suburb in Australia,¹ whereas the HBO series takes place in picturesque Monterey Bay, California. Both retrospectively tell the story of a community ravaged by a traumatic event (spoiler alert!): the suspicious death of Perry Wright, played by Alexander Skarsgård. The show takes a slow-burn approach, jumping between an unclear ending and its origins. Interjected between transitions is comical hearsay during police investigations from community members who were only distantly related to the main plot.

From the beginning we are introduced to five families: the Mackenzies, the Wrights, the Chapmans, the Carlsons, and the Kleins. Each family has a child entering the first grade. The conflict begins on the first day of school when little Amabella Klein is choked by another student. Initially reluctant to reveal the perpetrator, Amabella eventually accuses Ziggy Chapman. Taken aback, Ziggy adamantly denies the accusation. This immediately splits the parents, the Chapmans versus the Kleins. As the school year unfolds, a series of petty attempts among the parents to alienate each other plays out. While the central plot plays out, *Big Little Lies* also touches on bullying, heritability of violence, posttraumatic stress disorder, and intimate partner violence perpetrated by both men and women.

As the story line transitions back and forth, we witness the development of five main characters, starting with Jane Chapman (Shailene Woodley), who is the socioeconomic outsider and only single mother. Struggling with a traumatic past, we see Jane worry about the heritability of violence in relation to her son, Ziggy Chapman (Iain Armitage), a sweet, likeable kid. Despite his demeanor, Jane constantly observes Ziggy for violent tendencies because Ziggy was the product of a vicious rape. Thus, when Ama-

bella accuses Ziggy of choking her, Jane's worst fear is realized as she dreads that Ziggy is violent like his father. She supports Ziggy's innocence in front of others but internally questions it. After a second incident where Amabella is bitten and Ziggy is accused, Jane takes him to a child psychologist, who assesses him and believes Ziggy is innocent. Despite the psychologist and Ziggy's proclaimed innocence, Amabella's mother, Renata (Laura Dern), remains skeptical. Renata is the antithesis to Jane. She is a powerful, materialistic business executive who is trying to find the balance between a career and motherhood. Overly dramatic at times, Renata threatens Ziggy after Amabella is choked, and then has a birthday party for Amabella, inviting every first grader except Ziggy.

Celeste Wright (Nicole Kidman) is a lawyer turned housewife and is the envy of others for the ease with which she controls life. Likewise, her husband Perry Wright is an attractive and powerful business executive. Both Celeste and Perry are apparently loving parents to twin boys, Max and Josh. Behind closed doors, however, Celeste and Perry are frequently violent with each other. Perry is controlling and jealous, transitioning from loving husband to savagely beating Celeste in a matter of seconds. The violence typically moves from physical to sexual, leading to rough sex or potentially rape. They engage in a vicious cycle of intimate partner violence, sex, gift giving for reparations, and then more violence. He attempts to strangle her, an important risk factor for later intimate partner homicide.² Aware of the trauma this could cause their children, they do their best to keep the violence hidden. They decide to see a couple's therapist. When Celeste sees the couple's therapist alone, who tells her to leave, Celeste queries the therapist's ethics. Eventually Celeste grows tired of the abuse and develops a plan with their therapist to leave Perry. She gets an apartment and will move out while Perry is away on business, but Perry discovers Celeste's plans to leave just prior to Trivia Night.

As Celeste is planning to leave Perry, we learn Ziggy is not the violent first grader. It is Max Wright, copying the actions of his father toward his mother. In another Trivia Night twist, we learn Perry is the person who raped Jane (and thus is Ziggy's father). Perry, seemingly unfazed by Jane's realization, is focused on Celeste. As they publicly argue at the Trivia Night, Perry physically attacks Celeste. Madeline,

Jane, and Renata rush to Celeste's rescue, but Perry fights them off and continues to beat Celeste. Bonnie Carlson (Zoe Kravitz) rushes over and pushes Perry off, and he topples over a rail, falling to his death. Battered women's syndrome and imperfect self-defense may come to mind.

In an act of unity, the five women report that Perry lost his balance and accidentally fell. The novel ends with Bonnie turning herself into the police and receiving community service. In contrast, while HBO's first season ends with Perry's death, season two is a keeping of the secret. We learn Bonnie has a personal history of physical abuse, and we watch her decompensate and struggle with the lie. Likewise, we watch the other four women struggle to work through the trauma. Celeste undergoes a child custody battle with Perry's mother, Mary Louise Wright (Meryl Streep). During that battle, Celeste's intimate partner violence history is discussed in open court, as are her allegedly Ambien-induced behavior and amnesia. Jane attempts to date again but finds intimacy difficult. Finally, Renata's husband is arrested for stock fraud and insider trading, forcing them into bankruptcy.

In *Big Little Lies*, multiple typologies of intimate partner violence exist. For the Wrights, Perry uses coercive-controlling violence, where the main tenants are power and control. Perpetrators of this type are predominantly male and use a mixture of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse to control their victim. The response to coercive-controlling violence by the victim is often violent resistance, another form of intimate partner violence.³ Displayed by Celeste, she often meets Perry's violence with violence. This is viewed as a potential means of survival. A final form

of intimate partner violence displayed in *Big Little Lies* is situational couple violence. Rather than being a chronic problem and predominately male-perpetrated, situational couple violence is an emotional response to conflict that at times becomes physical.³ It is exhibited at similar rates between males and females. Renata demonstrates this when she hits her husband, verbally degrades him, and destroys his game and train room. Better conflict resolution is needed, even in idyllic Monterey.

The unifying themes of *Big Little Lies* are relationships and the heritability of violence versus environmental contributors to violence. We see Jane and later Celeste worry about the influence of Perry's violent tendencies on their children. These themes, played out by excellent actors, will likely interest many forensic psychiatrists. The show grapples with questions of ethics for a couples' therapist in situations involving risky intimate partner violence, child custody in intimate partner violence cases, Ambien and amnesia, and indirect aggression.

References

1. Moriarty L: *Big Little Lies*. New York: Berkley, 2014
2. Glass N, Laughon K, Campbell J, *et al*: Non-fatal strangulation is an important risk factor for homicide of women. *J Emerg Med* 35:329–35, 2008
3. Kelly JB, Johnson MP: Differentiation among types of intimate partner violence: research update and implications for interventions. *Family Court Rev* 46:476–99, 2008

Chandler Hicks, DO
Susan Hatters Friedman, MD
Cleveland, Ohio

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.003936-20