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HBO's *The Undoing*

Directed by Susanne Bier. Written by David E. Kelley, based on the novel *You Should Have Known* by Jean Hanff Korelitz. HBO. First episode of Season 1 aired October 25, 2020.

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The Undoing (based on the book *You Should Have Known* by Jean Korelitz) finished as the most viewed series on HBO in 2020 and received numerous award nominations. It was a must-watch because of its star-studded cast and attention-grabbing story line. Forensic psychiatrists who have not yet seen the six-episode series should consider watching it. Particularly of interest is the concluding episode's courtroom scenes that provoke questions about confirmation bias and boundaries (the clinical psychologist wife is asked to give an informal violence risk assessment of her husband, who is the defendant).

The show opens by allowing viewers into the picturesque Manhattan life of clinical psychologist Grace Fraser, played by Nicole Kidman, and her husband, the well-respected pediatric oncologist Jonathan Fraser, played by Hugh Grant. Their lives, seemingly perfect to the outsider, begin to unravel after a mother from

their son's prestigious school is murdered. As police investigate, Jonathan is nowhere to be found. Details emerge that Jonathan had been having an affair with the deceased mother while treating her son, who had a Wilms tumor. Jonathan is eventually found and charged with murder. He takes the case to trial and vehemently maintains his innocence. As the police did not find the murder weapon, the crux of the case relies on testimony regarding Jonathan's potential motive and his character.

While Jonathan outwardly proclaims his innocence, and the defense attempts to portray him as a doctor that became too close with a family he cared for, the prosecution paints a picture of a "psychopath" and "narcissist." Going into the trial, although there are signs of indecisiveness, Grace verbalizes strong support for Jonathan, and a belief that he is innocent. During the trial, however, Grace learns that at age fourteen Jonathan left the door to his home open and his four-year-old sister walked out and was hit by a car. Jonathan's mother tells Grace that Jonathan showed no remorse or grief after the accident. Grace then begins to increasingly question her certainty about Jonathan's innocence.

After a series of covert discussions, the prosecution is cued into the newly learned incriminating information about Jonathan's past. Grace arranges to take the stand as a defense witness. On direct examination, she testifies that her husband "could not have" committed the murder; she cites her ability to "intimately observe who and what he is," noting the fact that she is a clinical psychologist with an "expertise in brain cognition . . . [and] a skill set that allows [her] to read people." She concludes her direct testimony by stating "it is not within him to do what he has been accused of."

On cross-examination, the prosecutor asks Grace if she is familiar with "confirmation bias." Confirmation bias is a tendency to review facts in a way that support your preexisting viewpoints.¹ The prosecutor points out that Grace views her husband as the love of her life and father of her child; the prosecutor contrasts those preconceived notions with Grace's difficulty conceptualizing Jonathan as a murderer.

One thing that the prosecutor did not explicitly point out is the conflating of Grace's portrayed role as a psychologist and her role as a wife, and the boundary problems that this creates. Although character witnesses offer a legitimate form of testimony,² the line between being a fact witness and an expert witness (with a prominent conflict of interest) was severely blurred when

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Grace was asked by the defense to give an opinion, based on her clinical training, that equated to a violence risk assessment.

Boundaries are the clinical, or professional, frame within which we practice.³ Engaging in dual roles can constitute a boundary violation (e.g., providing therapy and psychiatric medications to a spouse). In this case, Grace attempted to merge her role as a clinician with her role as a character witness by attempting to act as a pseudo expert witness.

After the trial, we learn through a series of flashback scenes that Jonathan had in fact murdered the victim; he bludgeoned her with a sculpting hammer during a disagreement regarding the victim's attempts to become socially involved with Grace Fraser, and Jonathan's attempt to terminate the affair. The murder was portrayed as a crime of passion rather than something well-conceived.

The Undoing concludes with Jonathan being found guilty, seemingly as a result of Grace's behind-the-scenes (by way of a friend) disclosure of incriminating information to the prosecution. At the end, Jonathan attempts to flee with his son. A car chase ensues and ultimately ends with his capture.

The Undoing holds value as a teaching tool. In addition to the aforementioned lessons on bias and

boundaries (encapsulated in the last episode), the series offers a useful case-study of intimate partner homicide, which could be discussed alongside literature on the topic.⁴ It could also serve as a conversation starter on topics ranging from narcissism to the undoing defense mechanism.⁵ It would be a good show for forensic interest groups (or other trainee groups) to watch and discuss in a movie club.

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E R R A T U M

In the originally published version of the editorial by Charles Dike MD, MPH (Dike CC. A radical reexamination of the association between pathological lying and factitious disorder. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*. 2020; 48(4): 431–35), the description of pathological lying on page 431 was erroneously edited. A corrected version of the editorial was posted online October 21, 2022 with the author's originally intended description. We extend our apologies to the author and our readers for this error.