



The Schopenhauer Cure

By Irvin Yalom
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Introduction

Psychiatrist Julius Hertzfeld learns that he has perhaps one year to live. His contemplations on his approaching death lead him to be curious about past patients, and especially about his most spectacular failure: Philip Slate, a handsome, arrogant sex addict. Julius wants one more chance at reaching Philip, who in spite of an almost pathological lack of social skills, now wants to become a therapist. What ensues is a funny, moving, and authentic look into the mystery and power of human relations. Julius spends his last year engaged in what he does best: guiding a group of people through the tangles of emotional life with engagement and kindness. In so doing, he prepares for an honest, good death.

Yalom has performed a unique synthesis with this latest novel. It is entertaining, psychologically astute, and brings the thought of one of history's most intriguing philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer, into the available present. Yalom's passionate interest in the workings of the human heart is evident on every page. The group therapy sessions are so believable and involving that the reader may long to join in, and will certainly want to read Schopenhauer.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Philip consider Schopenhauer to be the perfect therapist?
2. Both Philip and Arthur Schopenhauer are described as "loners." Why do you think society often regards desire to be alone as unhealthy?
3. Julius, at least at first, finds Philip to be "unlikable." Do you? Does he have any likable traits?
4. On page 39 Yalom writes, "All group therapists know about the wonderful healing qualities inherent in the atmosphere of the working group." What might it be about group therapy that makes it work differently than one-on-one therapy?
5. Do you find Yalom's technique of alternating biographical chapters about Schopenhauer with chapters about the characters and their story to be effective? Is Schopenhauer also a character in this novel?
6. On his first visit to the group, Philip describes Schopenhauer's view of "the universal human condition – wanting, momentary satiation, boredom, further wanting" (Page 84). Do you agree?
7. How do you feel about Bonnie and Rebecca's conversations about beauty and attractiveness, and the particular importance that this subject holds for women?
8. While in India, Pam experiments with vipashyana meditation, and experiences the pleasurable sensation of "sweeping." What do you think is happening to her?
9. When Pam and Philip encounter each other again in the group setting, the effect is something like a small explosion, and it affects everyone in the group in some way. Describe some of these effects and how you felt about them.

About the Author

Irvin D. Yalom is the best-selling author of *Love's Executioner*, *Momma and the Meaning of Life*, and *The Gift of Therapy*, as well as several classic textbooks on psychotherapy, including the monumental work that has long been the standard text in the field, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychology*. He is Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Stanford University and lives and practices in Palo Alto, CA.