



E-Therapy: Where Shadows Meet

Richard Carr

Archway

(210pp)

978-1-66576-947-1

A therapist seems to forget her professional training when she is pulled into an online scheme in the psychological thriller E-Therapy.

In Richard Carr's gripping thriller *E-Therapy*, a therapist kindles an online relationship during the early days of the internet, running headlong into deception and danger.

In the 1990s, Eileen, a therapist, seeks refuge from her troubled marriage in chat rooms. She forges a friendship with Sweetdude35 and agrees to meet him in person. Doing so puts her in peril, though; she comes to realize that people online are not always who they claim to be. She also uncovers unsettling family secrets.

The book jumps between characters to reveal people's differing emotional states, as when Brock, Eileen's troubled patient, is described as feeling elated and distracted while replaying events in his head on his drive home. And when situations devolve later in the book, Eileen's frenzy of fear is apparent as she runs through worst-case scenarios in her head. Such subjectivity results in a feeling of immediacy and raises the stakes when Sweetdude35 turns out to be less sweet than menacing.

Eileen is a flawed heroine who acts on impulse and has lapses in her professional judgment. In contrast, Sweetdude35 is humanized via a tragic backstory that is used to excuse his behavior. Still, his actions are quite exaggerated: He swears, sneers, and shouts while the targets of his belligerence stammer in fear.

The book's central themes are handled in a quite blunt manner too. The book opens with the declaration that Eileen is about to make the worst mistake of her life, compromising its suspense. Proclamations such as that while Eileen found that fantasy intruded on reality for some of the patients she treated, reality was about to intrude on the fantasy life she sought online, also undermine the book's delivery. Despite period-accurate attitudes and lingo, the fantasy world of the online chats unravels due to this heavy-handedness and the characters' disproportionate emotional responses to commonplace exchanges.

Cliches abound: Shivers run down spines, hands tremble, and people sit bolt upright. The abundance of described body language, as of squinting and shoulder sloping, is distracting. Mundane details about short drives, getting ready for work, and the beeps, chimes, and hissing of logging on to the internet also crowd the prose, whose pace is slowed by a preponderance of exposition regarding topics like why people make the decisions they make. And a few twists late in the book are used to explain people's earlier, undercontextualized behavior. A lesson is learned, priorities shift, and perspective is gained, yielding a level of catharsis.

In the tense psychological thriller *E-Therapy*, a therapist faces threats, betrayals, and secrets while trying to escape her troubled home life online.

JOSEPH S. PETE (March 11, 2025)

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