



# Playing Pygmalion: How People Create One Another

By Ruthellen Josselson

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## **Playing Pygmalion: How People Create One Another** By Ruthellen Josselson

Like Pygmalion with his Galatea, we create the characters of people in our lives. Although others appear to us to be who they just "are", there are complicated psychological processes, outside of our awareness, that lead us to experience people in ways that we ourselves construct.

Psychoanalytic theory offers a wealth of understanding of how people unconsciously create what they both need and dread. But these processes are not well understood by most therapists. Too often, therapists join their patients in overlooking their own role in creating the relationships in their lives, such that it seems that patients were simply unfortunate to "have" an un-giving mother or to "find" an unloving spouse. Because processes of creation in relationship are largely unconscious, they are much harder to see. As a result, most theorists of relationships acknowledge that they exist, but offer little language or explication for how they unfold or manifest themselves. *Playing Pygmalion* is an effort to trace in psychological terms the subtle interplay by which people create the other. This book adapts the psychoanalytic concepts of transitional object usage and projective identification to show their importance and applicability beyond the therapeutic situation to the understanding of people's relational lives. Using examples from literature, film and clinical work to illustrate the theory, the book goes on to consider in depth the relationship narratives of four pairs of ordinary people to demonstrate how people unconsciously "create" one another. The stories demonstrate that the "other" is always more than one conceives him or her to be. Readers inevitably rethink some of their important relationships in terms of how they are creating people or being created by them. This may lead them to take in other aspects of the person, to see how they are looking very selectively at a human being who exists beyond their relationship. These stories also provide cautionary tales to therapists who begin to believe in the simpl

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

With astonishing lucidity and compassion, this insightful and engrossing book is a must-read for people who want to understand how people create their own reality in relationships. In clear, evocative prose, with carefully analyzed case studies, this book demonstrates the dynamic processes by which people construct one another. Therapists will see their patients differently after reading this book and people will think differently about their own relationships. (Irvin D. Yalom, M.D.)

Ruthellen Josselson is able to see and articulate the minute mental moves by which we build our interpersonal world. No psychologist is better at describing how we come to know ourselves in interaction with others and the role we play in both finding and creating people around us. Whether we are considering a lover, a daughter, or a friend, we bring other people and ourselves to life within relationships. In *Playing Pygmalion*, Josselson extends her important work in identifying the unexpected dimensions of human relationships. (Terri Apter, Ph.D., author, *The Sister Knot*)

The dramatic relational stories, rendered in this book's pages with compassion and wisdom by Josselson, demonstrate that we cannot help but create one another as we struggle with being bound inextricably together (Jefferson A. Singer *PSYCRITIQUES*)

*Playing Pygmalion* is a lucid, timely, and engaging book about the play of unconscious processes in relationships, a book of great value to therapists and clients, and to anyone who is intrigued by the question of how the human mind invents the world of relationships in which we each take our place. Josselson illuminates how, in our original families and in our current relationships, impressions of others, and others' impressions of us, shape our emotional responses. As she clarifies the psychological processes at work in imagining one another, Josselson creates a window into some of the most puzzling and repetitive aspects of human relationships. She writes of truth in a new register, beyond the accuracy of this or that story about a person, event, or memory, to the emotional truths at stake in the way we invent and reinvent key relationships in our lives. In case after case Josselson shows us how people may be imagined as an answer to our deepest yearnings, or how they might become a cast-off of our own guilt or anxiety. To complicate matters, Josselson shows how their versions of us may harmonize with our own version of self, or not. As we construe and misconstrue one another in our most lasting, intimate relationships, we can compel some (Annie G. Rogers PhD, associate professor of clinical psychology, Hampshire College; author of *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma and A Story of Harm and Healing in Psychotherapy*)

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construe and misconstrue one another in our most lasting, intimate relationships, we can compel someone in the present to live as a ghost of an unacknowledged past. Beyond a careful exploration of the complex, human process of constructing one another, this book challenges us to question deeply held illusions that can undermine love, and ignites a desire to understand one another more fully by seeing what illusions we've imposed, and what irreducible mystery in each human being remains. (Annie G. Rogers PhD, associate professor of clinical psychology, Hampshire College; author of *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma* and *A Story of Harm and Healing in Psychotherapy*)

The dramatic relational stories, rendered in this book's pages with compassion and wisdom by Josselson, demonstrate that we cannot help but create one another as we struggle with being bound inextricably together (Jefferson A. Singer *PsycCRITIQUES*)

#### About the Author

**Ruthellen Josselson, Ph.D.** is professor of psychology at The Fielding Graduate University and was formerly professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem as well as at Harvard University. Recipient of the Henry A. Murray Award from the American Psychological Association and a Fulbright Fellowship, she is also a practicing psychotherapist. Her research interests focus on the use of narrative to understand people's life histories and she has authored several books on relationships and on women's identity. She has also co-edited the series *The Narrative Study of Lives*.

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