

Theodore Isaac Rubin Is Dead at 95; Popularized Psychotherapy

Dr. Theodore Rubin in the late 1970s. A psychiatrist who spent most of his career in private practice in Manhattan, he also wrote some 30 books and often appeared on television to discuss mental health, therapy and people's daily emotional struggles.

via Rubin Family

By **Benedict Carey**

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Theodore Isaac Rubin, a psychoanalyst and writer whose short novel “Lisa and David,” about two teenagers finding love at a therapeutic school, was made into an Academy Award-nominated movie, and who became the public face of psychotherapy in postwar American popular culture, died on Saturday at a hospice in Manhattan. He was 95.

His son Dr. Jeffrey Rubin confirmed the death.

Dr. Rubin, a psychiatrist who spent most of his long career in private practice in Manhattan, was a young analyst in the late 1950s when he found his literary calling — writing a novella, “Jordi,” about a troubled boy. The character was based in part on a child who was being assisted by his wife, a special-education teacher.

He followed that book with “Lisa and David,” which examined the inner lives of two young people with severe mental distress.

“Lisa and David” was made into the popular 1962 movie “David and Lisa,” directed by Frank Perry and starring Keir Dullea and Janet Margolin, with Howard Da Silva as a psychiatrist. (The two names were switched to avoid confusion with another movie of the time called simply “Lisa.”)

Mr. Perry was nominated for an Oscar as best director. Eleanor Perry, his wife at the time, was nominated for the screenplay.

Oprah Winfrey produced a television drama of the same name in 1998, based on the original screenplay, with Lukas Haas, Brittany Murphy and Sidney Poitier.

The success of the book and movie propelled Dr. Rubin, known as Ted, into another career. He went on to write some 30 books — fiction, nonfiction and self-help. He had a regular column in Ladies’ Home Journal and often appeared on TV to discuss mental health, therapy and people’s daily emotional struggles.

“Once he saw that he could write about these things, I mean, he just took off like a rocket, writing more and more,” his son Jeffrey said.

Dr. Rubin’s signature was an openness about his own self-doubt and failings, apparent in book titles like “The Angry Book,” “Overcoming Indecisiveness” and “The Thin Book by a Formerly Fat Psychiatrist,” in which — according to the

former Times language columnist William Safire — he coined the term “comfort food.”

Keir Dullea and Janet Margolin in “David and Lisa,” the Oscar-nominated 1962 movie based on Dr. Rubin’s novel “Lisa and David.” Continental Distributing/Photofest

Dr. Rubin’s writing was self-reflective and unflinching. In “Love Me, Love My Fool” (1976), he wrote, “I must learn to love the fool in me — the one who feels too much, talks too much, takes too many chances, wins sometimes and loses often, lacks self-control, loves and hates, hurts and gets hurt, promises and breaks promises, laughs and cries.”

Joann Gerardi, an analyst in private practice in New York, said of Dr. Rubin in a phone interview: “He wrote in a way that was clear, that grabbed people and took them along, and that could be understood by readers outside of psychology. But those of us who were in psychology and psychiatry also learned a great deal from him.”

He added to the psychoanalytic literature in 1975 with his book “Compassion and Self-Hate.” For many analysts, self-hatred was a concept centered on the loathing, put-downs and recriminations people turn on themselves. Dr. Rubin argued that the category should be expanded, to include any attempt to deny or forcibly undo uncomfortable emotions like sadness, grief or anger. Those are also attacks on the self, he wrote, and compassion for oneself is the healthy way to resolve them.

“His great skill was to be able to make rather difficult concepts come alive in everyday words, and to create a sense of generous compassion for the characters in his books with mental illness,” said Dr. Doug Ingram, a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College. “He wanted so much to convey the sense that the person you find yourself to be is a solid, good person.”

Dr. Rubin was born in Brooklyn on April 11, 1923, the second child of Nathan Rubin, a pharmacist, and Esther (Marcus) Rubin, who ran the household.

In addition to his son Jeffrey, a psychiatrist, he is survived by two other children, Dr. Trudy Rubin and Dr. Eugene Rubin, also psychiatrists; six grandchildren; and a great-grandson. His older sister, Blanche, died in 2005; his wife, Eleanor (Katz) Rubin, died in 2017.

After graduating from Far Rockaway High School in Queens, Theodore attended Brooklyn College, completing his degree in 1946. He served in the Navy in New York and got his medical degree in 1951 from the University of Lausanne, in Switzerland. He did his residency at the Los Angeles V.A. Hospital before completing his specialty in psychiatry at Downstate Medical School in Brooklyn.

Dr. Rubin trained in analysis at the [American Institute for Psychoanalysis](#), the Manhattan center founded by the prominent German-American analyst Karen Horney, whose work he admired. He became a fixture there, joining the faculty in the early 1960s and serving for many years as the institute’s president.

He also kept a private practice in Manhattan as long as he was able and continued writing. He kept a log of favorite aphorisms he had written, which his

son Jeffrey said contained some 1,500 entries.

“The problem is not that there are problems,” reads one of his most commonly circulated lines. “The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem.”

Correction: Feb. 21, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary misstated part of the name of an organization with which Dr. Rubin had a long association. It is the Institute for Psychoanalysis, not the Institute of Psychoanalysis. The earlier version also omitted a survivor. In addition to those named, Dr. Rubin is survived by a great-grandson.

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