

Editors try to find out why TV's 'House' is so popular

"Gregory House is a medical genius and a Sherlock Holmesian figure, but he's also a self-destructive, deeply troubled misanthrope," Ted Cascio and Leonard L. Martin observe on the back cover of the new book they co-edited, "House and Psychology: Humanity is Overrated."

"What is it about this angry, arrogant curmudgeon that is so appealing to us?"

Good question – and one that Cascio, Martin and their collaborators attempt to answer in great detail, using dialogue from the popular TV show as the basis for their observations and interpretations. Cascio teaches psychology at Universidad de Deusto in the Basque region of northern Spain; his research interests include individual differences in self-esteem and authenticity and moral reasoning and judgment. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia. Martin is a professor of psychology at the University of Georgia. After deciding to take on this project, they enlisted the services of 28 colleagues – most of whom have doctorates in psychology or related fields – to author or co-author the various chapters that eventually became this book.

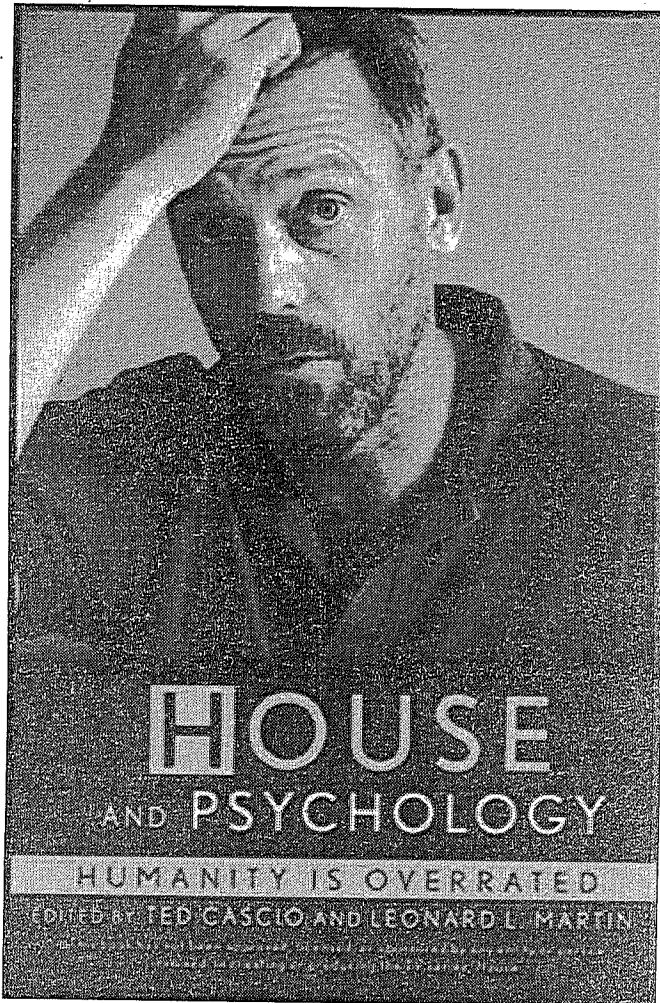
"House and Psychology" consists of a collection of essays on the popular TV show arranged in four sections: The Good: Unlimited Vicodin; The Bad: Psychological Malpractice; and The Ugly: Is That My EKG and The Awesome-Inspiring House Rocks! Virtually every aspect of the show and its main character are subjected to a detailed analysis rivaling that given to any contemporary issue or concern. Moreover, it becomes obvious early on that most of the contributors to the book tend to be fans of the long-running drama.

Chapter 8, "House and Narcissism: Why Are Flawed Heroes Simply Irresistible?" is one of my personal favorites. In this foray into the psyche of Gregory House, Mark Alicke, a professor of social psychology at Ohio University, attempts to get a handle on why the character has such a broad appeal – despite his egocentric and self-absorbed nature, qualities that tend to put people off in most circumstances:

"Research on what is known as social comparison theory has shown that the talents of superior others can be inspiring under two specific conditions: if we believe that we are capable of attaining their performance level, or if their talents are completely unrelated to our own pursuits."

In one particularly revealing passage, Alicke compares House to Tiger Woods, a celebrity who possesses many of the same characteristics in real life.

"The main bond between the two is that they possess extraordinary abilities that make us want to like them and dazzling faults that frustrate the attempt," Alicke writes. "Perhaps the most obvious difference is that whereas Tiger Woods and his marketers went to great lengths to craft a false per-



"House and Psychology: Humanity is Overrated" by Ted Cascio and Leonard L. Martin. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2011. 326 pages, \$17.95.

sona, House goes to equal lengths not to."

I also found Chapter 16, "You Are Not as Special as You Think: The Political Psychology of House, M.D.," to be especially insightful. In this well-written essay, Jesse Wynhausen, John T. Jost and Gregory L. Murphy – colleagues at New York University – provide their perspective on the political undercurrents that often permeate the show.

"Although the show is primarily a medical drama, political questions are often central to the characters' motivations," they note. "Indeed, House's team members frequently serve as political foils, with Cameron taking the role of the traditional liberal, Foreman that of a neoconservative, and Chase espousing the views of an apolitical pragmatist.

"House's political genius is that he can clash with all of them simultaneously," they add.

"House and Psychology" is saturated with dialog from the series; this is one of its most appealing features. If you watch the show regularly, you will enjoy the references to specific characters and situations. If you are not a regular viewer, you will be motivated to watch the show – if only to better understand how the book captures the spirit of the show so perfectly.

For instance, in Chapter 15: "A Hospital Full of People but Only Five Personality Dimensions: The Big Five Personality Fac-

tors," Peter J. Rentfrow and Jennifer A. McDonald (both at the University of Cambridge) reference a comment Wilson makes in one episode that succinctly explains what truly inspires House:

"You know how some doctors have the Messiah complex – they need to save the world? You've got the Rubik's complex – you need to solve the puzzle."

Martin and Matthew Sanders, a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia, hint at the appeal of House in the final chapter, "House and the Hero's Journey."

"The truth of the matter is, we don't know how things are going to turn out for House. By watching him, we can be inspired to make our own journeys and slay our own dragons. That is why House is a hero."

So what would House think of this book?

As the editors note in the introduction, "House himself just might consider this book 'cool.' Of course, another possibility is that House would dismiss everything here as pretentious psychobabble."

The bottom line is that if you like the TV show, you will probably love this book. If you don't like the show – or have never watched it – be forewarned, you probably will after reading "House and Psychology."

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.