

Ten Years of Medicine and the Arts

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Academic Medicine is a premier journal in the field of medical education. In 1991, *Academic Medicine* started publishing an innovative monthly feature on medicine and the arts. The column presented a work of art -- fiction, poetry, film, fine art -- accompanied by a brief commentary on the relevance of the work to medicine and medical education.

With the support of various foundations and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), 100 of these pieces have been gathered together in one book and provide a valuable resource for teaching and personal reflection.

The pieces have been grouped together into eight sections. The Foreword and the Introduction talk about the creation of "Medicine and the Arts" (MATA) and the creation of the book.

The first section is "Witnessing and Creating". A poem by Louisa Coultts on habitual abortion, *Charlotte's Web* (which tells the story of Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider who live together in a farm), a film titled *Strangers in Good Company*, a film directed by Cynthia Scott, *The Death of Bed Number 12*, *Christina's World* (a painting by Andrew Wyeth of Maine, United States), and a journal of the plague years by Daniel Defoe are a few pieces. Commentaries on the famous painting by Rembrandt titled *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and the poem *Ethics* by Linda Pastan are interesting.

The second section is "Patients' Stories". The uncertainty of being a patient is brought out by the introductory sentence "All that is familiar and comfortable is left behind". The excerpt from the novel *Cancer Ward* by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn shows a doctor's personal confrontation with cancer. The movie *Defending Our Lives* talks about domestic violence in the United States. Several women who have been battered by their male partners are featured in the movie. The photograph chosen for the piece dramatically illustrates domestic violence inflicted on women.

"Empathy and Objectivity" is the focus of the third section. Virginia Woolf, the famous novelist, tells a story which has been excerpted. A mathematics professor has lost his wife and is confused and despondent. He turns to his wife's friend Lily Briscoe for help. The excerpt and the commentary describe how Ms. Briscoe overcame her dislike for Mr. Ramsay, the Mathematics professor, and helped him. *Siddhartha* is a famous book by Hermann Hesse. Gautam Buddha, as he is also known, was born in Nepal nearly 2600 years ago and founded the religion Buddhism. The interaction between Siddhartha and a boatman, Vasudeva, has been described. "The Death of the Hired Man" by Robert Frost and *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen are other pieces of literature covered. *The Scream* by Edvard Munch is a famous painting, said to represent the patient's internal world that is spilling out and shaping the external.

The fourth part deals with "Dying and Death". *The Ship of Death*, a poem by DH Lawrence, is discussed. Akira Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* (to live) forms the basis for a MATA article.

The fifth section is "About the Body". *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, *Diabetes* by James Dickey, and *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain form the basis for some of the features. *Self-Portrait* by the artist Alice Neel also features in an article, emphasizing self awareness of the human body and acceptance of the changes wrought by time.

The sixth part is "Caregivers". *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, set in Italy in 1944, is used for a feature. *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Hurston tells about rabies in rural Florida in the 1930s. The caregiver often experiences tremendous pressure and tension, and healing the caregiver can be time-consuming and difficult for a doctor.

"Difficult Questions" is the seventh part of the book. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *The River Styx Runs Up-*

stream by Dan Simmons, *Adam and Eve* (a painting by Rembrandt), and *The Elephant Man*, a film directed by David Lynch, have been all used as a backdrop to raise difficult questions.

The eighth section deals with “To Be a Doctor”. *The Plague* by Albert Camus describes events in a North African town stricken with a fatal contagion. The responsibility of the medical community in caring for patients with a new disease is well brought out. *On Studying Anatomy* by Diane Roston is also interesting. The book ends with a list of references and brief notes about the contributors.

The idea of using literature and the fine arts as a backdrop to raise and discuss questions in medicine and medical education is a novel concept. The photo reproduction, printing and artistic merit of the book is excellent, with blue being the dominant color scheme. I really enjoyed reading this excellent book. The book will be interesting reading for medical educators, medical students and all those interested in humanities in medicine.

Acknowledgement:

I am grateful to Anne Farmakidis of *Academic Medicine* for sending me a free copy of this excellent book.

About the editor:

Lisa Dittrich was educated in English and classical civilizations and earned a Master of Fine Arts (poetry). She has taught English in various schools in the United States. She edited the ‘Medicine and the Arts’ section of the journal *Academic Medicine* for a number of years. She also serves on the editorial board of the Literature, Arts and Medicine database.