Can Frankenstein be read as an early research ethics text?

In his article (Med Humanit 2004;30:32–5), Davies asks whether Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, can be read as an early research ethics text. It is misguided to give the impression, as the author does at times, that Shelley was ‘just’ writing for a future institutional review board: there are reasons for believing that the novel’s theme of overreaching was a largely unintended rebuke to the fame-seeking writers who made her early life such a mixed blessing. Indeed, the diversity of ways in which Mary Shelley’s novel can be interpreted—as ‘a later version of the Faust myth, or an early version of the modern myth of the mad scientist; the id on the rampage, the proletariat running amok, or what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman’—suggests that, for all its occasional crudity of structure, it is indeed one of the foundation texts of ‘a scientific futurology’ in which the cumulative effects of ‘the lengthened reach of our deeds’ need to be understood, in view of our partial knowledge, by an ‘imaginative heuristics of fear’.

Ethics, like Mary Shelley’s novel, ought to have a feel for the mythic too.

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References

BOOK REVIEWS

A bumper review of fiction and poetry


Literature pays attention to the smallest, most significant details of how people are, can be, and have been: in the ways they relate to each other, individually, socially, and to our world. It forms a channel between the reader, and the closely observed. Since literary authors include some of our best doctors, and the effects those relationships have on a gripping and memorable way to communicate what they have deduced and how they have interpreted this raw observational data, using the full panoply of literary devices such as narrative, metaphor, plot, and characterisation. Their skills lie in making in the process of deep learning thoroughly enjoyable: we learn best when enjoying the process.

These books are all written with skill and experience. Not all these authors work in medicine or health care. Since, however, practitioners need to observe closely and to understand the role of metaphor, narrative, and character in people’s lives and bodies, this is immaterial. Health issues abound in literature because the three constants in life are that we will be born, get ill or critically injured, and die. And of course we not only suffer or delight in these ourselves, but in our nearest and dearest as well. Health fascinates any reader, not just the clinician. Cecil Helman has gathered together literary wealth. Clinician readers with little time can be certain of encountering writings focused toward their interests and needs here. The collection includes stories about and by doctors, clinical encounters, and personal patient accounts such as Rachel Clark’s description of her cancer—so harrowing in so young a girl. Arthur Conan Doyle and Sacks are included, as is Kafka’s complex and clever story about a country doctor. This collection, with Helman’s insightful introduction and notes, will be invaluable to anyone running a medicine and literature course, as well as in situ for learning for any clinician or student.

Couléhan’s *Chekhov’s Doctors* presents an extraordinary kaleidoscope of doctors in medical and social contexts. I read it straight through, but the stories would also repay being read separately. Chekhov’s observation of detail, both of character and place, is precise, building up vivid pictures and portrayals, immersing the reader in nineteenth century Russia: a different world from ours. They mostly are not really stories, but studies of character and situation, raising many questions as they answer. The introduction and Couléhan’s commentaries are succinctly useful. A book to read and mull over, and a place to learn about what adversity can do to human clinicians and their patients. Another doctor/writer says: ‘My early answers to the question ‘what is healing’ came from these stories. I still have a piece of an envelope on which I copied part of a letter Chekhov wrote to an editor who had criticised his story, *Ward Number Six*, [included in Couléhan’s collection]: ‘The best of writers are realistic and describe life as it is, but because each line is saturated with the consciousness of its goal, you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it’. ‘Life as it should be in addition to life as it is.’

Those who read little fiction really do need guidance and support when choosing contemporary texts, they are so varied in quality. Jane Rogers and Lesley Glaiser are reliably worth reading, as much as anything for their observation of how people relate to each other, and the effects those relationships have. Glaiser’s novels are not horror as the book jacket asserts; her skill is in depicting psychological oddities and aberrations. This book is as deliciously bizarre as her other eight, offering deep insight into a psyche and the way people can become willing victims.

Jane Rogers’s books are deep psychological studies. The Independent reviewer asserted: ‘she writes better than almost anyone of her generation’, and went on to say that her books were so carefully plotted and the characters so believable in spite of strange happenings. *The Voyage Home* involves the child of a missionary trying to make sense of her past, her parents, and her own sexuality. If you want to understand people better (as anyone in medicine and health care must), read Jane Rogers.

*Something Beginning With* is a stunning first novel. Salway’s academic writing the way families interact and impact on individuals. Her novel has an innovative form. Beneath an ingenious deceptively light surface lurks great insight into the way women relate to each other in close friendships, and the way parents can have an impact on their children’s adult sexuality.

I was not sure about Murray’s *A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies;* many concern doctors or medicine in different ways. They are clever, set in mainly exotic locations, and rely on extremely dramatic events. I am afraid I found them unsubtle; but other reviewers have raved.

Gwyneth Lewis’s *Sunbathing in the Rain* takes the reader on a psychological journey into and through her acute depression. I would hardly call it cheerful, but it certainly turns depression to excellent account: a must for anyone who has suffered this terrible disorder, and for their carers.

Poetry last but not least. *We Have Come Through* celebrates courage in overcoming depression and trauma, and is published in
also from radiance, heights’.

are ‘well born, / Derived from people, but
will benefit from reading these books. Books
and even fairy tales. All of these are
travelogues, film and book reviews, essays
US$38.50, pp 648. ISBN 0936741155
Edited by R Crawshaw. Medi-Ed Press, 2002,
Quest into the Soul of Medicine
Compassion’s Way: a Doctor’s

Indeed.

wonder how differently we hear our patient’s
ently we read these books. It makes me
reporting a hospital based reading and dis-
and however varied they are. Bonnebaker,
 actions should be weighed up
and patient. Compassion is expressed as far
work.

have shaped his professional life and
origins. His family, educational, and military
respect, the author relates many stories
illustrating the important need for social
responsibility. These are collected from his
publication as articles 30 years
ago, the topics are evergreen and are still
relevant today. We would find this book most interesting:
everyone who deals with people as
individuals, and indeed, also those who deal
with population groups because they too
need to appreciate what is required when
dealing with individuals. This group would
include doctors, medical students,
nurses, other ancillary medical staff, and
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This is to give generous notice of this conference and a preliminary call for papers. Abstracts are invited for 15 minute papers on topics related to the medical humanities. The organisers of the conference welcome contributions from all healthcare staff, academics and clinicians, and from those working in the medical humanities. The themes for this conference are:

- Narrative interpretations of practice, particularly narratives of music, film, and visual art
- Medical humanities and the education of healthcare practitioners
- Medical ethics
- The medical humanities and changes in clinical practice

Abstracts of no more than 300 words should be submitted by email on a pro forma. This should be available on the AMH website, currently under construction, or from Dr Robert Marshall, robert.marshall@rcht.cornwall.nhs.uk

The deadline is 15th April. Further details of the conference are available on the website or from Dr Marshall.