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Blood And Bone: Poems By Physicians



Synopsis

Blood and Bone: Poems by Physicians explores the profound connections between medicine and poetry through the eyes of contemporary physician-poets. These one hundred poems record instances of pain and recovery, joy and grief, humor and irony within the restricted society of caregivers and their patients.

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Very rarely is a book, let alone an anthology of poetry, ever completely successful at what it sets out
 to do. Horace said, "even Homer yawned," meaning I think that in such a gigantic work such as the
 Iliad or the Odyssey, some parts will be stronger than others, and one shouldn't be surprised to

discover parts that fail completely. Not so this book. I expected a sort of catalog of poems by physician-poets that represented a sort of response to a general "call for submissions." Some master of the craft, some well-intended tyros in need of encouragement. What I discovered is a beautiful anthology of work of 31 poets, each strong in the elements of his craft, each with something strong and focused to say, each a full participant in the great dialogue of the poetics of the body and those committed to its welfare. And in 150 pages, you get the full range of human response: comedy, tragedy; the present, the past; the actors, the acted upon; the physician alone, the physician an heir to millennia of collaborators; the physician as patient, as actor, as observer, as human being. The book is divided thematically into four sections with great care taken by the editors to create a narrative flow. Personally, as a poet, I feel the climax of the story is John Stone's "Getting to Sleep in New Jersey," a poem that does so many things at the same time and so simply, I read it several times in succession--the first time. It seems, these days, that the essential humanity of every profession is being recognized by one or more anthologies of poetry (I recently read books devoted to farmers, lawyers and chefs). There are, thankfully, several devoted to medicine, notably from the patients' point of view and the interns' point of view. Here you have the doctors' point of view. Wonderful.

As advertised

Auden said a poet's job is to notice things. This is also a physician's job, when he or she is trying to diagnose. As a physician and an appreciator of poetry, I think this book succeeds admirably. The poems are breath-taking in their beauty and power, and demonstrate the humanity of both people in the patient physician encounter. It makes a perfect gift for that special physician in your life

The editors of Blood and Bone have assembled a fine and varied collection of poetry by physicians. When I first opened this book, I wondered what I would find--what do our doctors think about as they attempt to cure us, attempt to fight off our diseases and our deaths? I wanted to find love, compassion, and, most of all, evidence of humanity, and I did. In section one, the physicians consider their patients, often speaking in the patient's voice, and they present the tools of their trade. Here's the first stanza of Dannie Abse's lovely and haunting "The Stethoscope," an example of the quality and depth of the poetry throughout this volume: Through it,/ over young women's abdomens tense,/ I have heard the sound of creation / and, in a dead man's chest, the silence / before creation began. Also in this section, see "The Azalea Poem" by Jack Coulehan. In this poem

the doctor admits that the false hope he gave a patient was "colored by my need." At home, the physician grieves for time lost, for the imperfection of life and relationship, for the elusive, everyday pleasures in a poem that's touching, painfully honest, and reassuringly humane. Alice Jones' "Tap" relates the poet's sensual vision of a successful spinal tap, admitting not love for the patient, but sheer delight in the procedures and successes of the trade. In the second section, we hear what the physician thinks about when away from the hospital or office, and we're surprised, perhaps, to learn that doctors worry, fret, and ponder the significance and the horror of what they must do in the name of healing. Rafael Campo daydreams while taking a bath, washing away "The hospital, the incurable illnesses," in his "El Curandero," and Kristen Emmott vents her frustration at being wife, mother, and physician, juggling family and housework in a poem that's both funny and poignant, "Who Looks After Your Kids?" This section, because it intertwines the personal with the professional, is extremely moving and contains some of the finest poems. For example, see John Graham-Pole's "Leaving Mother, 1954." The third section looks at teaching and education, and, as all the sections do, presents many poems about death--the monster that these physicians most often try to defeat both in their work and in their poems. Especially in the poems about autopsy, the reader gets a sense of the physician's fear and awe when looking into the human body--as Campo says, "It was terrible, what the body told." Outstanding poems here include Abse's "Carnal Knowledge" and "The Origin of Music"; Jack Coulehan's "Anatomy Lesson" (one of the most moving and reassuring poems in this collection) and "The Rule of Thirds"; and John Stone's "Gaudeamus Igitur: A Valediction." The final section presents poems that transcend the individual patient and physician and consider the world beyond, where suffering becomes universal and political. For me, these poems were less successful than the more intimate poems of the book's first three sections. This is a book of poetry that should be read and reread, with pages marked and worn. The editors, wisely, did not spare us anything--in this volume we meet physicians' fear, joy, arrogance, necessary dark humor, doubt, and, ultimately, their stark and utter humanity.

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