

Book review

Physicians at home in fiction

The Doctor in Literature**Volume 2: private life**

Solomon Posen

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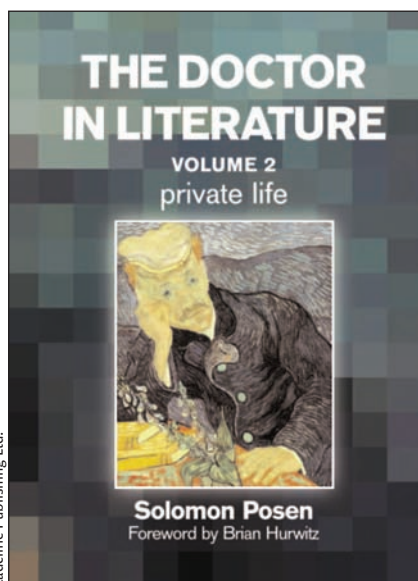
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For anyone who has even a passing interest in the representation of physicians in literature, *The Doctor in Literature* series will provide a compendium far more interesting than the usual fact-filled but dry-as-toast, offering. In this, the second of an eventual 4-volume series, a huge variety and number of sources are cited, such that an avid reader could use the book's index as a reading list for several years.

For those who find reading about reading a tiresome process, the jargon and, oft times, elitism of literary criticism are refreshingly absent from this book. There are no long expositions on point of view, narrative voice or the nature of longing and desire. This book is far more pragmatic; it gets to the point, in clearly headed and suitably catalogued sections, and covers a large range of the day-to-day life issues that the human side of physician life encompasses. The book reads like it was written by a physician, for physicians. There is much insight into what makes a doctor tick in his or her emotionally stripped-down self.

The world remains fascinated by television programs that document a seemingly realistic, but often sensationalized, version of physicians, their practice and personal lives. Literature moves beyond that grandiosity in its concern for the material substance of the lives as they are lived. It strives to represent those lives meaningfully, to allow the reader to understand, to stave off the confusion and chaos that dog us by day. By ordering and commenting on the vast array of mostly English-language literary representations of doctors, Posen gives readers much opportunity to think about



what it is to be a physician and at the same time to be a human being, and, thus, inherently flawed.

There is one significant caveat, however, to the book's scope. After reading the first few pages and noting the title of the first chapter — "The Doctor and His Family" — anyone with a modicum of gender equality awareness will soon wonder about the non-inclusive nature of the text. However, this perceived impropriety is clarified in the introduction by a footnote that indicates that "The fictional female doctor is discussed in detail in Volume 4 of this series." This book could, in fact, be re-subtitled "*Male Private Life*." I felt a bit misled when I recognized this restriction on the content. No specific explanation is offered for the separation of the sexes, though to be sure, fictional portrayals are likely to be as divergent as the lives of male and female doctors are in reality. Presumably, the number of references to female physicians is smaller than their male literary counterparts, given the historical predominance of men in medicine. The publication date for volume 4 is not mentioned, though volume 3 is due this year.

This is not to say there is nothing for

a female physician to glean from the portrayal of male doctors. The literary examples Posen provides illustrate a broad range of human behaviour. Physicians are revealed in fiction as heroes and tyrants, as adulterers and substance abusers; they suffer from sleep deprivation and burnout; they occasionally experience moments of epiphany and deep satisfaction.

Ultimately, the importance of a perspective that the *Doctor in Literature* series affords cannot be underestimated. In today's hyperscrutinized and pressurized atmosphere that can characterize the practice of medicine, it can be hard to know what exactly it is to be doing one's best. The last time I flipped through this book, looking for a section of interest (the best way to read it, in my opinion), "Whistle-blowing: the reaction of the relevant authorities" leaped out at me. My province's passage of whistle-blower legislation is the current topic of yet another round of policy development. And yet what does whistle-blowing actually mean? In its many shades of grey, this question comes to life in literature, where the whistle-blower can be a courageous voice or a vindictive snitch, and the moral dilemmas of revealing a colleague can be explored.

Altogether *The Doctor in Literature: private life* is a highly revealing, deeply satisfying book, serving both as a launching point for one's own reading pursuits and as a touchstone for the doctor making his or her, sometimes lonely way through the world of wellness and illness. As Posen concludes, "Fictional doctors are essentially solitary figures, and relatively few of them enjoy a normal family life." As useful as therapy may be, doctor-readers can also make their own connections and conclusions with the help of this book, and the stacks of novels on their bedside tables.

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