



The Left Atrium

Developmental reading

Out of poverty and into something more comfortable
John Stackhouse
Mississauga: Random House Canada; 2000
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Not long after John Stackhouse became the *Globe and Mail's* first "overseas development writer" in the autumn of 1991, I was sitting in a window seat on an Indian Airlines plane readying for takeoff out of Bombay. Just off the runway, clusters of men, women and children were living in makeshift shelters. Later during that same vacation, I travelled in the air-conditioned comfort of our friends' Ambassador sedan in Kerala province. At the side of one highway I saw women and children slowly hammering rocks into gravel to build more roads. These days, when casual conversation turns to foreign travel and, occasionally, to issues like poverty, homelessness, noise pollution and soul-shattering work, I can share a few bleak observations of life *in extremis* in the "developing" world.

John Stackhouse spent the years from 1992 to 1999 as a foreign correspondent based in New Delhi. *Out of Poverty and into Something More Comfortable* is a surprisingly optimistic book about his meetings with poor people in more than 40 countries. In contrast to my brief sojourn to visit friends in the south of India, his travels ranged as far east as Indonesia and as far west as the Côte d'Ivoire with many stops in between. He searched out, lived among, listened to and recorded the stories of subsistence farmers, nomadic cattle herders, shrimp fisherman, forest dwellers, shea-nut gatherers and entrepreneurial groups of women. More than a third of the book is devoted to repeat visits to Biharipur, a hamlet of 700 people in the northeast of India on the Gangetic plain.

His book goes against the grain of many of our preconceptions about the desperate lives of the poor — certainly as

presented in the various appeals for donations that fall into my mailbox. His first-person narrative blends energetic curiosity, respect for the people he meets and almost unflagging good humour under trying circumstances. He meets with some of the poorest of the poor: Amma, a Dalit ("untouchable") widow in Biharipur; Abdul Aziz, a farmer turned unsuccessful shrimp fisherman in Bangladesh; Gulabdaai, mother of seven, who presents herself at a sterilization camp in Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh.

The book unfolds in a straightforward series of encounters rooted in geography. The writing is clear and unsentimental; recounted conversations speak with liveliness and authenticity. Photos of the people, taken by himself and his photographer spouse, Cindy Andrews, open each chapter. They provide a two-dimensional identity for some of the names: the sisters Hajera and Badana, Kartar Singh and his family, farmer Sindaiga Sabar. The final paragraphs of each chapter summarize one of the multiple struggles facing the poor: education for girls, equitable division of land, a more bountiful harvest, timely medical care and "something more comfortable" against the larger, unrelenting crush of limited resources, corrupt bureaucracies, caste prejudice and ill-conceived aid.

Travelling with Stackhouse we run repeatedly into the d-word. It first occurs in his introduction, where he summarizes the single most important insight of his eight years of work:

As I traveled from country to country, village to village, it became glaringly clear that human development is not about creating wealth, though income and material assets are important. It is not about outside interventions, whether they are massive government projects or simply the imposition of free-market ideologies. I came to see development as a process, even a struggle, that was internal to a place and deeply democratic in nature. This book is about those struggles, quiet as they are, carried out in hamlets and slums, on riverbanks and mountainsides, by people who until now have been largely excluded from public decision-making.

To some extent Stackhouse could be likened to a doctor recording the stories of many patients and then attempting to draw conclusions about the state of public health in the nation. Development is now recognized as more than aid, debt relief, structural adjustment and megaprojects; similarly, health is more than health services, drugs, CT scanners and massive immunization or sterilization projects. Of paramount importance in both areas are strong families and communities. The difficulty remains that micro efforts in health or economics are inextricably tied up with macro initiatives.

Out of Poverty is quite a different book from, say, Graham Hancock's *Lords of Poverty*, a hard hitting attack on the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Stackhouse's reliance on oral histories reminds me of Studs Terkel, while the main setting in India calls to mind V.S. Naipaul's *A Million Mutinies Now*. Picking my way again through Naipaul's book, I came upon his description of a much earlier book by London *Times* special correspondent William Howard Russell, entitled *My Diary in India in the Year 1858–59*. Naipaul's comment pinpoints



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some of my uneasiness with Stackhouse's work:

The trouble I had with the book was a trouble with history, a trouble with the externals of things he described so well. There was such a difference between the writer and the people of the country he was writing about, such a difference between the writer's country and the country he had traveled to.

Stackhouse is aware of his position of privilege and power, and he lets us know he's thinking about it. He is reminded from time to time by some of the villagers he meets:

As Kartar spoke, a small boy from Biharipur appeared, announcing that we, the foreigners, had come to exploit them. We would take their photograph and offer nothing in return, the boy said I often thought the villagers were right to expect something more than sweets but also feared that if I brought lavish gifts it would change the nature of my visits.

Just what is the nature of his visits? What is the quid pro quo here? Why has he written this book?

To get his stories, or rather to get their stories, Stackhouse laboured under difficult living conditions that temporarily resembled those of his subjects. The heart of his narrative is outside himself; it rests in the hearts and aspirations of the people he meets. At the end of the day there remains something unsettling about a well-written book that grew out of the stories, pictures and transient relationships of an overseas development writer and his subjects. It is unsettling if only because part of the original impetus for this writing was to help fill a newspaper (with its particular world view) and sell it for more than the equivalent of a day's wage for many of his subjects. The sticker price of his book would render it unattainable to the people he writes about, were they part of his intended audience.

Out of Poverty invites the necessary comparison between our own lives, families and struggles and those of the

individuals described. The men and women Stackhouse portrays demand a response from us. What do we think about them? What is the nature of community? We've heard more than enough about globalization and development; can there be such a thing as global solidarity that cuts across extreme economic inequities? I worry that the reasons for optimism that Stackhouse discovers among some of the world's poor may simply foster among his middle-class North American readers a more comfortable complacency.

In the end, what's to be done? For a start, consider reading this book but not buying it. Support your community

lending library instead. And while you're there, have a look at a copy of the *New Internationalist*, a magazine that "exists to report on the issues of world poverty and inequality." Continue to educate yourself in world affairs. And send the \$40 you've saved to a reputable NGO like CalmMeadow Foundation, Interpares or Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief — but not before you've had a look at their vision statement and annual report. You could change a life, maybe your own. Failing that, you'll still end up with a small tax credit.

Vincent Hanlon
Emergency physician
Lethbridge, Alta.



Uric acid wit

Gout: the patrician malady

Roy Porter and G.S. Rousseau
New Haven and London: Yale University Press; 1998
393 pp. \$35 (cloth) ISBN 0-300-07386-0
\$16.95 (paper) ISBN 0-300-08274-6

Histories of disease have enjoyed a surge in popularity recently. Epidemics, including plague, cholera, smallpox, Ebola and AIDS are the focus of new books. Chronicles of cancer,

tions have also captured the public eye. So how does a book on gout — that ancient, chronic and relatively benign ailment — fit into this flurry of fascination fixated on sex and death?

The prolific and inspired Roy Porter, professor of the social history of medicine, and G.S. Rousseau, professor of English literature, have joined forces to produce what will become the standard history of gout from antiquity to the 1930s. With uncommon erudition, they move chronologically through medical texts ranging from the famous works of Hippocrates, Sydenham and Garrod to the more obscure but intriguing accounts of Cadogan, Stuckey and Scudamore — many themselves afflicted with gout. But they also pay close attention to the words of lay sufferers, especially writers such as Smollett, Dickens, Conrad and Hemingway, whose uric acid infiltrated their fiction and correspondence as well as their tissues. The greatest attention is devoted to the early modern and enlightenment periods, areas of expertise for both au-



Edmé Jean Pignal (1798–1872), *Fructus Belli, Docteur!* Lithography by Langlumé

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heart disease, blood disorders, STDs and neurologic conditions such as multiple sclerosis and the slow virus infec-