

BOOKS

Summer reading

THE LAST HOUR OF THE DAY: AN ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES AND ESSAYS THAT HAVE INSPIRED PHYSICIANS, edited by Michael A. LaCombe, Christine Laine (ACP Press; 2008). The title of this anthology appropriately alludes to Sir William Osler's lifelong habit of reading beloved books before going to sleep — a habit he encouraged his students to adopt. This collection pays homage to this advice by providing a wide range of excellent reading, moving across genre and time, from Plato commenting on slave doctors, through to a futuristic parable by the doyenne of sci-fi, Ursula LeGuin. Physician authors are well represented and include Osler himself, Richard Selzer, Anton Chekhov, Oliver Sacks and Abraham Verghese. The editors wisely include Raymond Carver's powerful short story about loss and misunderstanding, "A Small Good Thing." Meanwhile, Selzer's story about an angry, racist doctor who sutures an emergency department patient to the table so he can tend to him, is troubling on many levels, as it delves into a taboo subject: a physician's rage toward a patient. And Reynolds Price, the noted American novelist and essayist, tells unflinchingly of personal transformation after becoming paraplegic due to a spinal tumour, without sounding a single wrong note.

The Last Hour of The Day, like other medical anthologies, is not meant to be read in one sitting, or chronologically. Readers should choose their own best moment for reflection and then savour one of these finely crafted stories, ever-mindful of the fact that Osler was right. Reading enriches our work as doctors because our work is made of stories. — Allan Peterkin MD, Head, Program in Narrative and Healthcare Humanities, Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto, Ont.

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Fred Sebastian

THE HEART SPECIALIST, by Claire Holden Rothman (Cormorant Books; 2009). Inspired by the life of Maude Abbott, this novel vividly describes the struggles of Agnes White as she resolutely breaks into the masculine world of medicine and of research in the late 19th century; we follow her from the cold isolation of the anatomy museum with its dusty jars to her international recognition as a leader in congenital heart disease.

Agnes White's most vivid memory of her father is of being woken by his tears as he stooped over to kiss her goodbye. Although acquitted of murder, the McGill "morbid anatomist" deserted his two daughters and his ailing wife without leaving any trace. After their mother's death the girls are brought up by their devoted, very proper grandmother who, as she tries to prepare them for their women's role in society, is upset and confused by Agnes' fascination with dissection and determination to become a doctor.

Agnes is a strong, vivid character and her story is well told. Women's difficult path into the medical and scientific world makes interesting, informative reading, but Agnes herself does not fully come to life. Brilliant, determined and complex as she is, I am not drawn into her struggles; I merely observe them. — Mary Flegel, Montréal, Que.

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PRESCRIPTION FOR SURVIVAL, by Bernard Lown (Berrett-Koehler Publishers; 2008). In this compelling memoir, Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Bernard Lown chronicles his work at the helm of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and his commitment to ending the final epidemic. Lown delivers a persuasive message: There is no such thing as a winnable nuclear war and preventing the death and destruction that would ensue is the responsibility of every physician. He highlights the bankruptcy of concepts such as "mutually assured destruction" and the direct harm of the trillions of dollars spent on developing, testing and storing nuclear weapons.

Lown, a Harvard professor and inventor of the cardiac defibrillator, speaks with unquestionable intelligence. Perhaps the greatest strength of the memoir is Lown's ability to articulate the machinations of the Cold War and global politics with the keen diagnostic ability of a practising physician. *Prescription for Survival* is more than just a captivating tale about a group of doctors' struggles to prevent a global catastrophe. It is a wake-up call that demands we take responsibility for our actions and those made on our behalf. — Alex Singer MD, Family physician, Montréal, Que.

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