

ESSAY

# A creative writer's journey into medical imagery

In 1998, I illustrated *Forms of Devotion*, a collection of short stories, with collages I made myself, using line drawings and wood engravings from earlier centuries. My fascination with old illustrations, in particular anatomical drawings, has continued.

The first story I wrote for *Forms of Devotion*, which won the Governor General's Literary Award for English Fiction, was called "The Spacious Chambers of Her Heart" and included several quotes and drawings from the 1901 edition of *Gray's Anatomy*. Still considered the classic human anatomy textbook, *Gray's Anatomy* was first published in 1858 and continues to be regularly revised and republished. Although the older editions no longer provide up-to-date anatomical representations that could be useful for medical purposes, the early illustrations remain intriguing for the detailed precision of their execution and for the often haunting impressions they evoke. To the untrained eye, there is something inherently sinister in the fine representations of the human body dissected layer by layer, piece by piece.

My attraction to anatomical art initially centred on its visual beauty and intricacy, which I felt compelled to integrate into my writing in the hope of creating something more powerful and evocative. Indeed, combining these images with the text of my stories added new layers of meaning and multiple dimensions of resonance that I could not have achieved otherwise.

My first fruitful encounter with anatomical art led me to look further into the field. Long before Henry Gray created his classic textbook, many others had been drawing the human body complete with bones, ligaments, muscles, nerves and blood vessels, often with highly dramatic and disturbing results. Among these were the anatomical plates of Andreas Vesalius of Brussels, whose



*Consumptives Should Not Kiss Other People*, 2011, paper, acetate transparency film.

1543 masterpiece *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* is considered to have "established with startling suddenness the beginning of modern observational science and research";<sup>1</sup> of Bernard Siegfried Albinus of the Netherlands, who has been called "the greatest descriptive

anatomist of the eighteenth century";<sup>2</sup> and of Henry Gray's contemporary Dr. J. Fau, whose 1849 collection of lithographic engravings, *Human Anatomy for Artists*, remains a classic reference work.

I have also relied extensively on a weighty volume called *Images of Medi-*

*cine: A Definitive Volume of More Than 4800 Copyright-free Engravings*, published in 1991. Going well beyond the strictly anatomical, this book includes illustrations of all kinds of abnormalities, disease symptoms and bizarre injuries. It also features sections on medical equipment, therapeutics, deformities and medical curiosities such as the degenerative phases of alcoholism and the sexual organs of a hermaphrodite.

I have recently completed another illustrated collection called *By the Book: Stories and Pictures*, in which the collages are in colour and the stories themselves are drawn from old textbooks. Several of the collages in this book also make use of medical imagery, both anatomical and otherwise. In particular, the story called “Consumptives Should Not Kiss Other People” takes a look at medical advice from a historical perspective. The title of this story is actually a phrase taken from one of the 2 source books I used to create the text. Intended for children in Ontario public schools in the early 20th century, these 2 books are *The Ontario Public School Hygiene* (1919) and the *Ontario Public School Health Book* (1925), authored by medical professors from Queen’s University and the University of Toronto, respectively.

What first caught my imagination in these 2 books was the stern and uninten-

tionally humorous nature of the medical advice. Many warnings are given about all manner of threats to good health. For instance, the necessity of isolation in all cases of communicable disease is emphasized with the warning

... that the children in the house must not go to day school or Sunday school, and that the grown-up folk ... must not mingle with others at “bees” or threshings, or in shops, factories, street-cars, or in churches.<sup>3</sup>

And, of course, “consumptives should not kiss other people.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to sternly advising against the consumption of alcohol in any quantity under any circumstance, the wise doctors also caution that “tight boots, tight garters, tight belts, tight collars, and tight hats are all harmful.”<sup>5</sup>

*The Ontario Public School Hygiene* includes a detailed explanation of the theory that the larger a child’s head, the greater will be his ability in all things. In conclusion, the doctors agree that the “children of intelligent people have a larger circumference of head than the children of the ignorant” and that “poorly fed, ill clad, and poorly housed children can hardly ever hope to be more than hewers of wood and drawers of water for others.”<sup>6</sup>

But lest we despair at the impossibility of ever being able to follow all of

these health rules and regulations, the doctors happily assure us in the end that

[n]othing is so contagious as cheerfulness. If we have it, others will catch it from us. There is no better physician than Dr. Merryman. The medicine he gives us to take is the pleasantest in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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Diane Schoemperlen’s latest book is *At A Loss For Words: A Post-Romantic Novel* (2008). *By the Book: Stories and Pictures* will be published in 2014. She is currently working on another book of illustrated stories called *We Are Not Lost* and a memoir of her 6-year relationship with a federal inmate serving a life sentence for second-degree murder.

## References

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