

Leah Kaminsky (ed), *The Pen and the Stethoscope* (Scribe, 2010)<sup>1</sup>

*Make a habit of two things: to help; or at least to do no harm.*

Hippocrates

There has always been an aura of divinity surrounding the medical profession. Its practitioners must duel with death; banish acne; save failing minds; determine the spread of contagions that could eliminate the world's populations, and salve wounds with precise words. Who would want to carry such a burden day after day? *The Pen and the Stethoscope* is a collection of disparate nonfiction and fiction works that are thematically linked by the fact that the subject matter of the works and the writers of each piece are qualified medical practitioners. This anthology allows the reader a glimpse into the everyday trials, comedies and tragedies that make up a medico's life.

Leah Kaminsky is an astute editor. All of the pieces are inherently interesting and they are written from all spectrums of the medical profession: oncology and critical care to psychiatry and surgery; but most of the pieces are several years old. It would have been nice to discover a new piece or several in this collection.

There are a number of famous names in the collection. The collection begins with an essay by Atul Gawande on the life-saving ingeniousness that is simplicity. 'The Checklist' is a well-written analysis and description of the efficacy of critical care teams using a checklist to keep them on point when treating patients who are often in a horrendous physical condition and just as susceptible to injury from the practices that are being used in critical care units to keep them alive. In the midst of sophisticated machinery and complex routines and procedures a simple pen and paper checklist can make the difference between life and death. What makes this essay interesting, and this point applies for all the nonfiction essays, is the use of the writer's own extensive file of real life case histories.

Sandeep Jauhar's essay 'Falling Down' is an affecting story of a junior doctor's lot on night shift. It is a trial by fire and the job of a doctor, stripped of its finery, is explained to him by his specialist brother, "'We're not saving patients,'" Rajiv told me. "'We're just stabilising them so they can save themselves.'" – sobering advice to a young and earnest medico and a humanising exposition of the practice of 'reality' medicine.

The fallibility of medicos is exposed in the 'Index Case' by Perri Klass. Dr Klass becomes the 'Index Case' instead of the healer when she contracts pertussis and must navigate officialdom and notify all of her patients that she is a carrier of a potentially fatal disease. This is countered by Danielle Ofri's disturbing 'Intensive Care'. This is a well-written homage to a teacher who succumbed to the intense and specific pressures of being a medical practitioner.

Modern technology has irrevocably altered the way medicine is practised. The machine will be the defining tool, trope, sign of our age and its place in medicine is assured but its intrusiveness should be challenged. Abraham Verghese writes eloquently on the tension between old methods and new procedures in 'Bedside Manners'. He is a surgeon and a professor and it would be well worth spending time

<sup>1</sup> Royalties from the sale of this book will be donated to the Starlight Children's Foundation.

in his classes. He blends his own experiences with fascinating snippets of medical history into the evolution of 'percussion'. Percussion is both an art and a science. It is the doctor 'reading' the body's sounds and converting this knowledge into symptoms and diagnoses. Professor Verghese's skilfully, and with adept humour, brings the body – the Alpha and Omega of medical science – front and centre. But he's not writing about cadavers, the Professor bemoans a modern education system that relies on computer simulations at the expense of teaching young students how to speak with and examine a living and singular human being.

The nonfiction essay by Dr Lifton 'The Nazi Doctors' touches, all too briefly on a fascinating and disturbing subject: German doctors sworn not to do harm, happily conspiring with the Nazi machine to infect, damage, destroy and kill masses in the interests of ideology. The extract is too brief for it to be more than dramatic. Serious readers should seek out his book: *The Nazi Doctors: medical killing and the psychology of genocide*. 'The Lost Mariner' by Oliver Sacks is as well written and intriguing as any of his other works. Anyone who is familiar with his work will enjoy this essay and the tenderness with which it exposes the fragility of the human mind.

*The Pen and the Stethoscope*, like all anthologies, must try to attract a wide readership which means including pieces from a varied group of writers. Some are better than others but there is enough to satisfy a wide readership. Doctors wrote these essays but they are all more than competent writers in their own rights.

There are six fiction pieces in the collection. Kaminsky has chosen to organise the anthology into nonfiction and fiction sections. The fiction stories are a mixed lot. Ranging from Peter Goldsworthy's superb *The Duty to Die Cheaply*, Nick Earls's dark and bitterly funny *Dog 1, Dog 2* to Ethan Canin's poignant *We Are Nighttime Travellers*. I don't believe that the background of a fiction writer is important. Tinker, tailor, plumber, doctor: fiction must satisfy other criteria and is subject to different rules from nonfiction. For the most part, the reader will have her appetite whetted to pursue the other works of the fiction writers in this anthology.

This is a successful anthology. It succeeds in giving the lay reader a glimpse into one of the world's oldest professions. A look around its bloody theatres, its sterile consulting rooms and, importantly, an insight into the personalities who do this difficult work, for the most part, quietly, compassionately and competently. A collection of professional writings that do justice to its contributors' skills with the pen and the stethoscope.

**Susan Gorgioski**