

Fiction & Physicians

Stephen McWilliams

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Stephen McWilliams is a man of many talents: published novelist, essayist and psychiatrist to name but a few. He is the son of the renowned and greatly missed Brendan McWilliams, who for many years contributed the erudite and vastly entertaining Weather Eye articles to the Irish Times. *Fiction & Physicians* brings together and expands upon occasional and varied pieces that Stephen McWilliams has been contributing for many years to medical and other publications. McWilliams says that one of his aims in writing this book was to give readers the experience of discovering surprising details about authors and their characters' relationship to the medical profession and, in this, he amply succeeds.

Although the title suggests that the book will deal only with novels and stories, its scope is much greater than this, with poetry, drama, novels, short stories, memoirs and case histories all included. The book is divided into two parts - the first concerns doctors who were also writers, while the second focuses on doctors and medicine in the writings of non-doctors. The first chapter is an overview of the many doctors and students of medicine who were also writers of note. McWilliams asks if there is anything special about the medical profession that sets its writers apart from authors who are soldiers, nurses, social workers or teachers. McWilliams suggests that although doctors may have big egos and crave fame, their predilection for writing - as opposed to making music or appearing on television - belies a tendency towards soul searching and teaching. Doctors tend to have dramatic human experiences and McWilliams suggests that writing may be a means of dealing with suffering. The public is also eager for the gory details of medical experience. McWilliams also suggests that doctors are good at time management, have great stamina, thick skins and tend to be observant, all of which contribute to their success as writers.

McWilliams divides his chapters into chapters on pre-19th, 19th, 20th and 21st Century doctor/writers. He briefly touches on Rabelais, who was writing in the mid-16th Century, before giving a detailed account of Nostradamus's infamous and ambiguous divinations. The book then skips ahead to the 18th Century, where we are scolded for forgetting Oliver Goldsmith's classic work, *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Tobias Smollett is another, rather overlooked, writer to whose novels McWilliams devotes some time. Also included is an entertaining discussion on Arthur Conan Doyle's life and detective writings, as well as mention of an eclectic gathering of 19th Century doctor/writers. It was news to me that Charles Darwin had flirted briefly with medicine before going on to greater things; his life and writings are discussed at some length. I was similarly ignorant of the fact that John Keats had trained as a surgeon.

The chapter on the 20th Century surprisingly starts off with R.D. Laing, whose poetry McWilliams has an unusually high opinion of, praising his "unique skill in describing complex human dynamics using very simple language". It was also news to me that Emil

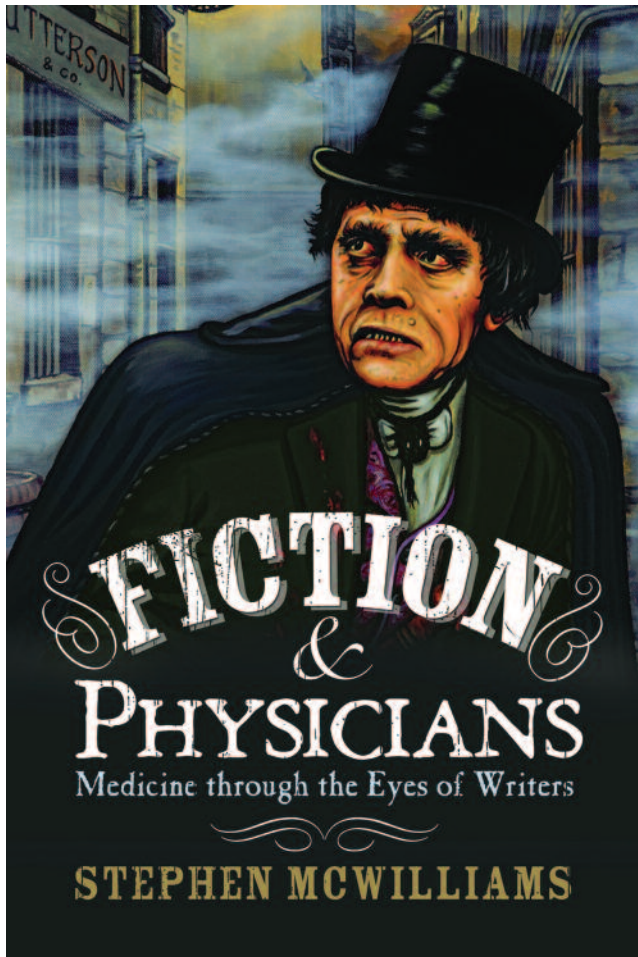
Kraepelin was a published poet. W.H. Auden's poem about Sigmund Freud offers McWilliams an opportunity to write about the father of psychoanalysis whom, McWilliams laments, did not write poetry. Next, the author gives us some interesting details of Oliver St John Gogarty's life as a doctor rather than dwelling on his better-known life as a socialite and writer. In the poetry of William Carlos Williams, McWilliams sees the "keen eye of the physician". Penultimately, A.J. Cronin's novel, *The Citadel* - in which he excoriates his profession for their "useless guinea-chasing treatments", causes McWilliams to reflect on medical ethics in the 21st Century. The 20th Century wraps up with a piece on the life and work of doctor and popular novelist, Michael Crichton.

Some of the 21st Century writers discussed will not be known to readers and I am certainly looking forward to some new reading. Medical thriller writers including Paul Carson, Tess Gerritsen, Michael Palmer and Robin Cook are given a section. Doctor and author of *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini, features and Ethan Canin's work is discussed at some length. Various other physician writers are mentioned including two young Irish writers, Juliet Bressan and Seamus Sweeney.

In the second half of the book, McWilliams concentrates on doctors as characters in fictional writing. He starts with those works in which incompetence or greed of doctors is satirically or comically portrayed. There is a lengthy and interesting piece on Laurence Sterne's hilarious *Tristram Shandy*. In Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, McWilliams chooses to focus on Charles Bovary and his medical exploits. McWilliams reveals that Victor Frankenstein was not a medical doctor as many mistakenly think, in his treatment of Mary Shelly's enduring classic. Robert Louis Stevenson's, *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Bram Stoker's, *Dracula*, are also insightfully discussed in a section on Gothic literature.

The doctor as hero (or anti-hero) is the subject of another chapter. The successful neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, whose calm is interrupted by a villain with Huntington's disease in Ian McEwan's, *Saturday*, offers McWilliams the opportunity to discuss the condition in some detail. Other subjects include the romantic idealist, Dr Yuri Zhivago in Boris Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*; the heroic narrator, Dr Bernard Rieux in Albert Camus' existential classic *The Plague*; and the self-pitying, self-serving but ultimately heroically redeemed Doc Daneeka in Joseph Heller's, *Catch-22*.

Infectious diseases and their treatment have been central to many literary classics. In a chapter on the subject, McWilliams discusses portrayals of smallpox in literature and other media, together with the life of Edward Jenner who first developed a vaccine to prevent this dreadful, now thankfully eradicated, disease. Syphilis and its many famous literary sufferers is an endlessly fascinating subject. *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; Thomas Mann's, *Death in Venice*; and William Somerset Maugham's, *The Painted Veil*, offer a chance to discuss cholera. Maugham's *The*



Rebierre and Thomas Midwinter in Sebastian Faulks' *Human Traces* and Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris' novels.

This is a well-produced book that will be greatly enjoyed by anybody with an interest in medicine and literature. Well written, with a light-hearted tone it is replete with interesting observations and insights. It is not overly-scholarly and any technical terms are explained very clearly for the lay reader. There is also a very useful glossary and index. One can always quibble with some of the choices for inclusion or omission but McWilliams wasn't intending to produce an exhaustive and authoritative work on his subject. This is a book by a doctor about some of the books that have inspired him to write and to keep reading; his enduring enthusiasm is evident throughout. I certainly look forward after reading this book to rereading some old classics and to some of the new titles that McWilliams has introduced me to.

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Moon And Sixpence, leads to an account of leprosy and Louis de Bernieres' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, to the discovery of penicillin. It was curious that McWilliams did not include tuberculosis which features so dramatically in many great novels and other literary works such as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

There is much in this book that will be of particular interest to psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. Few will have been familiar before with the poetry of R.D. Laing and Emil Kraepelin or the children's books of Silas Weir Mitchell. A piece on Arthur Conan Doyle includes an interesting debate as to whether or not George Edalaji (from Julian Barnes' novel, *Arthur & George*) could have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. A chapter on fiction and paranoia includes a detailed piece on de Clerambault's Syndrome in Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Alan Bennett's play *The Madness of George III* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* also feature. A chapter on fictive psychiatrists includes Dick Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, Dr Grene in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, Martin Sturrock in Alastair Campbell's *All In The Mind*, Jacques