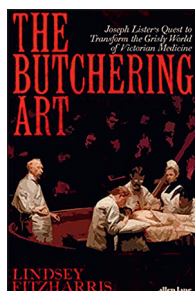


Life & Times Books

The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine Lindsey Fitzharris

Allen Lane, 2017, HB, 304pp, £16.99,
978-0241262498



TRANSFORMING THE GRISLY WORLD OF VICTORIAN MEDICINE

From the start, Lindsey Fitzharris's account of the life and times of surgeon Joseph Lister gleefully evokes the smells, sights, and sounds of mid-nineteenth century medicine. Surgeons in bloodied aprons used instruments still filthy from previous operations to perform amputations in seconds, slicing through testicles and assistants' fingers in their haste.

Little wonder that operating theatres were known as 'gateways of death' as half of those undergoing surgery did not live to tell the tale. A broken leg could lead to amputation and surgeons were still pillaging cemeteries to obtain cadavers.

The advent of anaesthesia in the 1840s offered surgeons the opportunity to undertake longer, more complex operations, but outcomes remained appalling due to the postoperative suppuration that Fitzharris vividly describes. Smells outside hospitals feature prominently too, as Fitzharris relates the career progression of Quaker surgeon Joseph Lister through the reeking Victorian streets of London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow.

Lister developed a technique of antiseptic surgery, using carbolic acid to disinfect wounds during and after surgery. He constantly worked to refine his carbolic spray device, which surrounded the operation site with an antiseptic mist, and his irrigation techniques. Contemporaries were initially sceptical (doctors were mystified why infections kept the death rate so high) but Lister was tireless in promoting his system, which soon became widely

accepted and ultimately resulted in Lister's ennoblement.

Some might find the book's American spelling a little irksome, and this highly graphic account of the smells of hospital wards, the sounds of agonised patients, and the sights of the 'Butchering Art' of surgery might have benefited from a few pictures. Fitzharris occasionally tends towards an uncritical account of Lister, and not all historians would accept her implication that Lister, with his enthusiasm for microscopy, pre-empted the discovery of germ theory. But Fitzharris is a medical historian with a deep knowledge of her subject, and her account is fun, fascinating, easy to read, and assumes no prior historical knowledge. It deserves a place by the bedside of any clinician interested in a glorious pus-and-blood-filled romp through this aspect of the history of their profession.

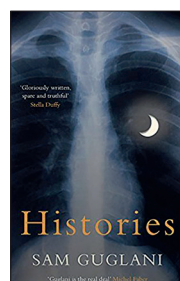
Martin Edwards,
Retired GP and medical historian.

The Butchering Art is on the long list for the 2018 Wellcome Book Prize. The winner will be chosen and announced at the end of April: <https://wellcomebookprize.org/book/butchering-art>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X695585>

Histories Sam Guglani

Riverrun Press, 2017, HB, 128pp, £20.00,
978-1786483805



HEALTH, HUMANITY, HUBRIS

Delicious is not a word that normally springs to mind when describing a book but consultant oncologist Sam Guglani's debut novel is just that: delicious. Despite wanting to devour each chapter I deliberately slowed

down to savour every word, every morsel, of this poetic, poignant, and charged novel.

Histories is — as the title states — a collection of stories set within one hospital over 1 week with each chapter offering a different perspective, and many of the substories interlinking. We are privy to the inner thoughts of the experienced, weathered, alone but not lonely consultant physician Dr Bhatia — or 'Bat-ye', the new but not-so-new consultant oncologist Dr Emily Carroll still orienting herself to this new role, wondering why after reaching the highest rung on the ladder she feels: '*less steady, more easily knocked about ... as though all her other patients, all their shouldered but invisible histories, weigh upon and unbalance her*'.

Then there is Josh Webster, the hospital porter with his own profoundly enlightening opinion on how to really take a history, and many more.

Although *Histories* is a novel that can be enjoyed universally, there are so many parts that the clinician reader will not just empathise with but also cry out in solidarity and recognition — how it is often not a catastrophic event but more often that one final straw that can break us. As one doctor speculates: '*... maybe this is how doctors and nurses finally burn out. Past their failures, their hours, all their inhaled sadnesses. Perhaps finally it really is broken printers and the like, the accrued weight of so many tiny things*'.

There is the absurdity of debating drug rationing due to cost restraints when the NHS increasingly cannot afford enough doctors and nurses. How true and continually surprising it is: '*... how quickly consultations are shaped. In seconds really, set in motion like clockwork or else broken and thrown off course. The wrong word or inflection, even the wrong posture ... like the notional butterfly at sea, its tiny wingbeats troubling the air, which is magnified then into storms at the coast*'.

How much we as doctors — and, dare I say, GPs — pride ourselves on how well we communicate with our patients, how compassionate we are, how adept we are is thrown into sharp focus by Guglani's subtle but scathing depiction of some of the doctors depicted in the book. The hospital domestic's impression when she is confronted on Sunday mornings with the task of cleaning the doctors' mess: '*... smeared plates everywhere, half empty bowls tipped up and*