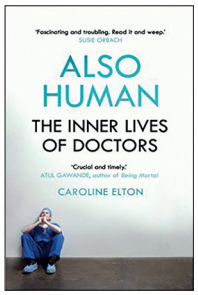
Life & Times
Books

Also Human: The Inner Lives of Doctors
Caroline Elton
William Heinemann, 2018, HB, 400pp, £16.99, 978-1785150906



ALL TOO HUMAN

This timely, passionately argued book made for a challenging read, exploring and exposing many of the more difficult aspects of doctors' lives. Caroline Elton is a psychologist whose experience leading the Careers Unit for trainees in London has given her insights that she now shares, hoping to show that 'doctors are people too'. One trainee crashes her car twice, so desperate is she to escape the hospital where she is treating patients with the disease that killed her father, and another is baffled by the lack of empathy from other obstetricians to her failed fertility treatment. The cases come thick and fast, covering such a variety of situations that I suspect all doctors will find a topic that resonates personally. I know I did.

The discussions framed by the cases address many important issues in medicine. Written before Dr Bawa-Garba's plight hit the headlines, this book contains a prescient exploration of discrimination in medicine and the difficult conditions within which many junior doctors work. Although many of the points are raised without solutions, the author does suggest some potential approaches, such as looking to the trainee intern year in New Zealand to provide a model for transition between medical school and foundation years.

Overall, I would have found this book more readable with tighter editing and fewer stories simply resolved by doctors leaving medicine, but that should not detract from the importance of what Elton has to say. Non-medics may approach this book with fascination, yet for those of us already intimately familiar with the medical world I would suggest approaching it with some trepidation and a good friend to talk with about the issues it raises. Whether or not you agree with Elton's observations and arguments, all of them give opportunities to reflect on the habitually dismissed consequences of doctors also being human. Now we need to start doing something about them!

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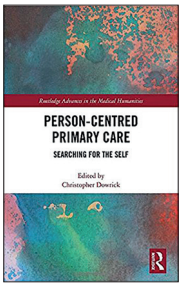
Person-Centred Primary Care: Searching for the Self
Christopher Dowrick
Routledge, 2017, HB, 192pp, £115.00, 978-1138244184



CRITICAL REFLECTION

This book brings together some of the most interesting general practice writers and researchers from the UK and Europe with a collection of seven essays that explore the nature of the person, or self, and our attempts to attend to it in clinical consultations. Deborah Swinglehurst's chapter describes her research into the ways in which electronic patient records demand our attention and interrupt consultations. Her findings will be immediately familiar to frustrated patients and clinicians. Her methodology — linguistic ethnography — is a great example of how scholarship can reveal what happens in the swampy lowlands of general practice.

Defining the person (or self) on which we aspire to centre care proves to be challenging. Like the generalists they are, the authors draw on a rich mix of neuroscience, history, philosophy, clinical practice, and social sciences research to think deeply about theory and practice. Clinical vignettes provide material to work with, and, although some sections of the book venture into the theoretical high ground, others like Joanne Reeve's chapter are full of practical suggestions.

I would have liked more on what happens when we have different selves that we are ashamed of, a problem that plagues perfectionists and addicts, doctors and patients alike. I would also have liked to read more from patients' perspectives, especially given that the book begins by introducing epistemic justice — the ability for patients to give their own account and explain its meaning and significance. A more explicit account of empathy could have helped show how epistemic justice can be achieved in practice. With the book being priced so high I fear that it will reach too few reflective GPs or trainees, and even fewer patients.

Where the book succeeds is in challenging the reader to think seriously about the ways in which power and assumptions are everywhere in everyday practice. This critical reflection makes us engaged and resilient.

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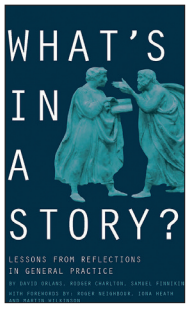
What's in a Story? Lessons from Reflections in General Practice
David Orlans, Rodger Charlton, and Samuel Finnikin
Hampton-In-Arden Publishing, 2017, PB, 362pp, £10.00, 978-0954560447



LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINE

Put simply — this is a brilliant book. The authors have carefully curated anecdotes written by around 100 GPs in the interest of sharing experience and wisdom for the common good. It is primarily aimed at trainees but I would argue that there is something for GPs at any stage of their careers.

The book seamlessly combines an eclectic array of tales covering the full spectrum of highs and lows experienced by GPs, and each story concludes with a 'lesson' or 'reflection' for the reader to take away. The usefulness of the lessons is variable, ranging from the not very helpful 'expect the unexpected' through to more practical advice such as 'never rely on someone else's interpretation of results'.

The anecdotes are grouped into themed chapters covering a myriad of aspects of general practice ranging from 'the consultation' to 'death'. This well-intentioned grouping has the slightly unintended effect of making some points seem repetitive. A chapter on 'occupations and hobbies', for example, has at least four anecdotes where the conclusion is essentially to remember to ask patients with unusual symptoms about their hobbies and occupation.

However, there is so much wisdom contained within its pages that the book is hard to put down. The most compelling reading comes towards the end of the book in the chapter entitled 'Errors', where brave souls lay bare the lessons they have learnt the hard way. The tales told are brutally honest and I challenge you to finish the chapter without a sense of gratitude for those volunteering their stories for the cause.

In summary, this is a great read. It is a book that is both educational and enjoyable in equal measure, and I recommend it without reserve.

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This book is available to buy online at https://www.whatsinastory.co.uk

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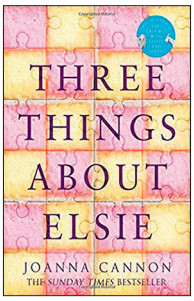
Three Things About Elsie
Joanna Cannon
The Borough Press, 2018, HB, 464pp, £14.99, 978-0008196912



FORGET ME NOT

I saw a frail, severely kyphotic 80-year-old lady mobilising slowly with her Zimmer frame in surgery this week. I confess to not being overly excited by her presenting complaint of a cough. However, as she apologised for coming to see me for what was *'probably just a self-limiting viral infection, doctor, but I was worried I might not be able to compensate for much longer given my age and comorbidities'*, I sat up straight, turned my hunched body away from the computer, looked at my patient, and asked what she had done for work before. Her face blossomed into a knowing smile as she informed me that she was a retired casualty sister of a large London teaching hospital. In that instant I did not see a frail, kyphotic older patient — I saw a colleague.

By chance I came upon former psychiatrist, now writer Joanna Cannon's new novel and I thought of my patient as I read it. *Three Things About Elsie* is ostensibly about Elsie but the real protagonist of this delightful and bittersweet novel is 84-year-old Florence Claybourne. We first meet Florence at 4:48pm lying on the floor of her flat in Cherry Tree Home for the Elderly, and the novel is structured with Florence's life unfolding in front of us — alternating between past and present, and different points of view from Handy Simon the young but not-so-young-any-more handyman, Miss Ambrose the put-upon and reflective home manager, and Florence herself. At the centre of the novel is a mystery involving a new resident to the home who looks identical to a man from Florence's past. Who is this Gabriel Price and why has he come back to haunt Florence?

Elsie helps Florence and the reader navigate this mystery and we quickly learn from Florence within the opening chapters that:

'There are three things you should know about Elsie, and the first thing is that she's my best friend',

the second is that Elsie *'always knows what to say to make me feel better'*, and the third that Florence cannot quite remember because her memory is not as good as it used to be. Forgetful she may be, but Florence delivers some razor-sharp insights and observations. While lying on the floor she imagines the sequence of events that will occur when she is found: the paramedics who will call her Flo even though they don't know her and she has never said that they can call her Flo, the ambulance racing to the hospital, being rattled across A&E to people who will ask the same questions as the paramedics:

'they will wheel me down blank corridors and put me through their machinery. A girl at a desk will look up as I pass by, and then she will turn away, because I am just another old person on a trolley, wrapped up in blankets and trying to hold on to the world.' Later *'... they will find me a ward, and a nurse with quiet hands. She will move very slowly, but everything will be done in a moment, and the nurse with quiet hands will be the first person to listen with her eyes.'*

Part whodunit, part thriller, part nostalgia narrative, part ode to the redemptive love and refuge of friendship, *Three Things About Elsie* is above all a meditation on ageing and society's view of the aged. Beyond the fragile appearance, the deteriorating mind, and the weathered hands, inside there is a retired casualty sister, a best friend, a father, a daughter, a person.

This book ought to be mandatory reading for all doctors, surgeons, and GPs alike, and is a poignant reminder that *'even the smallest life can leave the loudest echo'*.

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