

Out of Hours Books

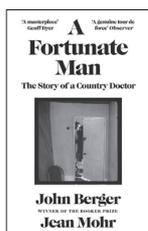
TROUBLE IN THE FOREST

A Fortunate Man:

The Story of a Country Doctor

John Berger and Jean Mohr

Canongate Books, 2015, HB, 176pp,
£14.99, 978-1-782115-01-4



First published in 1967, this is one of those must-read general practice books, essential for every trainer, trainee, and practice library, and one, I suspect, that has been more frequently recommended than read. It has been re-issued this year with an introduction by Dr Gavin Francis. Anyone coming fresh to *A Fortunate Man*, expecting a paean to idyllic country general practice, will be disappointed, because the romanticised hero of John Berger's extended essay is a deeply troubled individual to whom the epithet 'fortunate' can be applied, at best, with irony.

Berger, now 88, is a distinguished critic and Booker Prize winner. He met the central character of the book, Dr John Eskell, as a patient in St Briavel's, in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, and became a close friend. Eskell had been a Royal Naval surgeon during the war in the Mediterranean, and was now in single-handed practice following the death of his GP partner. Some time after Berger had left England for Geneva, Eskell, who becomes Dr John Sassall in the book, invited him and the photographer Jean Mohr to spend 6 weeks with his family and to shadow him round-the-clock in his surgeries, on his many house calls, and, presumably, in his domestic life, although this is not mentioned once in the book. Sassall was clearly a revelation to Berger, and the degree of connection, empathy, and acceptance that he showed to his patients, and the lengths to which he went, literally, to care for them are clearly regarded by Berger as astonishing and exemplary. In describing Sassall's actions and thoughts, and it is more often than not very difficult to know whether Sassall or Berger is doing the thinking, many of the core qualities and responsibilities of a

GP working in an isolated rural setting are perfectly captured.

However, Sassall's hyper-commitment to his practice and his patients was, at least in part, a function of his bipolar disorder. Berger rather coolly describes Sassall's lows, but doesn't seem to quite understand the highs. Sassall's wife, who ran his practice, died in 1981 and Sassall shot himself the following year. His professional life was troubled and he practised with little professional or, indeed, social contact. While being admirably reflective and sensitive, he appeared to lack, or at least managed to avoid, any real recognition of his wider role as a GP as an advocate for his practice population's health or as a medical scientist. I can't help making comparisons with Julian Tudor Hart, working wonders in Glynccorwg, and John Fry laying the foundations of general practice research from his little practice in Beckenham.

I started reading this book 30-odd years ago and was put off by Berger's often convoluted, freewheeling writing and Jean Mohr's dreary photographs. I grew up in the Forest of Dean and, while recognising its comparative social isolation, bridled at Berger's patronising depiction of Forest folk as uncultured half-wits, and still do. However, re-reading it at one sitting very recently, I recognised the limpid beauty of some of Berger's prose, the subtlety of his descriptions of nature and of human interactions, and his insights into the needs of ordinary people faced with illness, anguish, and loss. His (or is it Sassall's?) understanding of the role of the GP as a witness and a 'clerk of record' needs to be widely understood, and never more so in these days of therapeutic miracles and performance indicators, when the unmeasurable essence of patient care can so easily be overlooked.

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STRESS RESILIENCE

Out of Chaos Comes a Dancing Star:

Notes on Professional Burnout

Chris Ellis

OpenBooks Press, 2014, PB, 95pp,
£18, <http://www.lastoutpost.info/>



The author of this book has a fellowship and doctorate in family medicine, and from 2005 to 2009 was associate professor of family medicine at the University of the United Arab Emirates. He is now back home, semi-retired, and doing family practice in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

The opening quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche sets the tone, 'Out of chaos comes a dancing star', which in its fuller context reads: 'One must have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star.'

The text derives from his collection of notes taken from experience, workshops, and courses on the management of stress and burnout in medical doctors, and those involved in the healing professions, although he says it applies to all professionals whether in law, business, or driving the school bus. Stress is a common theme risking progression to burnout. His work shows that understanding another person's trials and tribulations can be a source of inspiration. Although the text has a serious undertone it sparkles with wit throughout.

Insights into some of the struggles experienced by healthcare professionals are revealed, creating an awareness of the similarity of concepts and conditions encountered by all doctors. The book offers advice and motivation to see past the common despairs of working life and provides comfort in the knowledge that you are not alone when times can get tough.

Topics included are: how we see patients, attitudes to medicine and the practice thereof, the organisation of our work, and conflicts. There are quotes from attendees at the workshops, and excerpts from 'iconic texts' scattered throughout the book for contemplation.

Even the list of contents is intriguing. For example; the wounded healer; long hours and no sleep; the character of the doctor; management of acute burnout; guilt and loneliness; the Mr God complex; the angry doctor; the doctor-doctor relationship; credentials needed for