

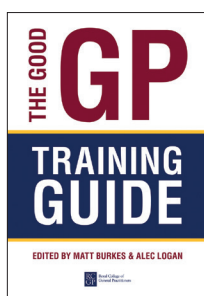
Out of Hours Books

ATTAINING GP NIRVANA

The Good GP Training Guide

Matt Burkes and Alec Logan

Royal College of General Practitioners,
2014, PB, 432pp, £30.00/£27.00,
978-0850843484



This book rather undersells itself in its title. This extraordinary guide sets out to advise and mentor pilgrim trainees in their quest to reach GP nirvana. It has a far from dry prose and speaks from the heart providing sincere advice while trying to save the trainee from many an uncomfortable situation.

The conversational style makes you feel like you are being addressed by a senior trainee or perhaps a friendly supervisor. The initial chapters discuss the philosophy behind the profession putting everything that we do into context. The section on tips about hospital rotations is incredibly useful. Not only does it warn you about the pitfalls to be wary of in 30 different hospital posts but, incredibly, even gives you personal development plan (PDP) ideas! So if you wondered what benefit a post in maxillofacial surgery or colorectal surgery was going to bring to you or were shaking in your shoes about your obstetric post, relax and get some first-hand advice from this book.

There is practical advice on managing your e-portfolio, workplace-based assessments, exams, and much more. Having only recently completed training, I can vouch for the fact that following these tips will make for smooth sailing.

If you have wondered what you were getting into or perhaps worried about what you might be missing from your career, this book will certainly hold your hand. There is a collection of lovely anecdotes dotted around the book practically illustrating what it is to be a GP by immersing you in thought or laughter!

Critiquing this book is difficult but I feel it should have included a chapter on trainees in difficulty or those struggling to pass exams. However, if there is one book that you read in your training that will put your career in perspective and save you from trouble in all its forms it will be this: the extraordinary GP training guide!

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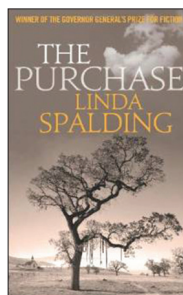
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PAIN IN THE PRAIRIES

The Purchase

Linda Spalding

Sandstone Press Ltd, 2013
PB, 368pp, £8.99, 978-1908737519



PG Wodehouse this ain't! With undeniable literary skill, Spalding has exhumed her dead ancestors and presents a fictionalised misery memoir to beat them all. This is a story of unremitting trouble, toil, and travail played out against the backdrop of the bleak Virginia frontier of 18th century America. The bleakness of the landscape and the harsh choices it imposes are an appropriate backdrop to a novel essentially about circumstances, choices, and consequences.

Daniel Dickinson, the novel's central character, is an abolitionist and widowed father forced by circumstance to take a young orphan girl as his wife to look after his children. This brings the opprobrium of the Elders at the meeting house and he is forced to take off to the territories where men — white men at least — are judged less severely. Arriving at the nascent community of Jonesville, Virginia, Dickinson

is tricked into buying a young slave boy, Simus, the Purchase of the title, at the cost of a horse which he can ill afford to lose. Daniel is therefore forced to compromise his principles and set Simus to work so the horse can be reclaimed and he can purchase his freedom.

This is an intensely literary novel. Human struggles are effectively described and the emotional impact of striking events made powerfully clear, but without hyperbole. Descriptions of landscape and nature are lyrical and beautiful. The rendering of people battling on in a tough landscape is the key achievement of the novel. The dialogue is spare and convincing, the reader feeling that this is how people felt and spoke on the frontier.

At its heart, the novel meditates on slavery and the uneasy truths about its pivotal role in the foundation of America. The author evokes the dreadful cruelties of slavery, most strikingly achieved in the description of a slave auction. However, this is an intelligent book recognising that relationships between owner and owned were far more complex and codependent than comfortable modern moralising would have us believe. A further interesting note is struck by the way in which Bett, the runaway slave girl, instructs and mentors Daniel's daughter Mary in an holistic and humane approach to medicine and midwifery, contrasting starkly to the approach of the town doctor, an Old West Sawbones if ever there was one.

Personally, I saw enormous merit in this novel but found it difficult to read. It is beautifully written, evocative of the America of the frontier and it is thought-provoking. However, it is unremittingly gloomy. There must have been some joy and pleasure on the frontier and the novel singularly fails to capture that. As it stands, it is difficult to understand what could have sustained such miserable lives as these. One is left impressed and affected but quite unable to comprehend how the protagonists found the will to keep going. A worthy and accomplished novel but the reader will experience little in the way of spiritual leavening from reading it.

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