Out of Hours Books

THE UNCERTAINTY SINK

The Bad Doctor

Ian Williams

Myriad Editions, 2014

PB, 220pp, £12.99, 978-1908434289

A middle-aged man named Iwan, an ex-heavy metal fan, a cyclist, and a GP. The central figure of Ian Williams' graphic novel would have a Twitter bio alarmingly close to my own. With the title in mind I approached *The Bad Doctor* with some trepidation. It is subtitled '*The troubled life and times of Dr Iwan James*' and we follow Iwan as he consults, worries about being a bad doctor, and struggles to cope with his own obsessive compulsive disorder. His GP experiences with patients and partners are punctuated by cycle rides with his gay mate.

There can't be many GPs who don't worry about being bad doctors. And, in truth, we all have days when the complexity seems to run away from us; where even the simple things elude our grasp. General practice is celebrated as an uncertainty sink but that same uncertainty can overwhelm us on the bad days. That's part of the normal ebb and flow of professional life. General practice forces us to recognise and live with our own foibles. Iwan's struggle to come to terms with his own self is at the heart of this story. As he says: '*The doubt is only about myself. I can be objective about patients. I don't worry about treatment decisions.*'

The monochrome images are spare but effective. The graphic novel format offers a richness and depth to this tale; it is a tribute to Williams' skills that I can't imagine reading simple prose on this topic. A short essay on burnout wouldn't have the same effect. A paper on 'doctors in difficulty' wouldn't linger in the mind the way Iwan's struggles do. More than anything, Iwan James, '*Bad Doctor*', turns out to be, like all of us, a perfectly normal doctor. In other

words just a perfectly normal human being. There is much in this reflective graphic novel to help us all reconcile the personal and professional.

Euan Lawson,

Deputy Editor, *BJGP*, London.

E-mail: euanlawson@gmail.com

@euan_lawson

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JUSTICE

Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do?

Michael J Sandel

Penguin, 2010

PB, 320pp, £9.99, 978-0141041339

According to Jiminy Cricket you should 'always let your conscience be your guide'. But what about hard cases and new problems? Yes, we have the four principles. Maybe we need no more, just as I only need the brake, accelerator, clutch, and steering wheel to drive. Do I really have to worry about what lies under the bonnet? But if, as Dunstan has suggested, doctors are society's 'accredited moral agents' then perhaps we should know about morals as well as muscles? There's more to ethics than four principles just as there's more to musculoskeletal medicine than doling out naproxen.

Justice is by far the best general introduction to moral theory that I have come across. Also the liveliest. Sure, Sandel covers Aristotle and Kant and Bentham and the gang, but the book is full of stories of real moral problems. This reminds us that ethics is not about moral theory. Ethics is about what to do when Jiminy Cricket lets us down.

The book covers the usual curriculum of moral philosophy: utilitarianism versus

duty, liberty, free markets, inequality, virtue, and human welfare. Interestingly (and very much in the tradition of Aristotle) Sandel also covers issues such as friendship and loyalty. Morality exists within a social space and within human relationships. We are also reminded that few problems are genuinely new. An open market for kidneys? Read what Kant said about the rich buying the teeth of the poor for attempted implantation.

Sandel is a lawyer and political philosopher, not a medical ethicist. It is refreshing to talk about morals in the wider world rather than just our own well-rehearsed problems. From whether it would be justified for a soldier to kill three enemy sympathiser civilians to save the lives of 19 of his comrades, to whether Clinton lied to the American people or merely 'misled' them, this book will give you plenty to think about. And you will find that you have received a pretty good education in moral theory without really noticing.

This book is easy, fun, erudite, and genuinely worthwhile. I suggest it as introductory reading to ethics students. If combined with some notes on one's own 'ordinary' cases it would be a brilliant starting place for self-certified CPD.

David Misselbrook,

GP, Dean Emeritus of the Royal Society of Medicine, Past President FHPMP the Society of Apothecaries, Senior Lecturer in Family Medicine RCSI Medical University of Bahrain and *BJGP* Senior Ethics Advisor.

E-mail: DMisselbrook@rcsi-mub.com

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WELL-VERSED IN MEDICINE

Tools Of The Trade:

Poems For New Doctors

Lesley Morrison, John Gillies, Ali Newell,

Lilias Fraser, Editors

Scottish Poetry Library, 2014

PB, 96pp, £5.00, 978-0956219169

'New doctors will be empowered by poems in the pockets of their metaphorical white coats.'

Such is the aim of the RCGP (Scotland) and the Scottish Poetry Library in producing

Out of Hours Theatre

this pocket-sized anthology of poetry given free to all graduating medical students in Scotland this year as a memorial tribute to Dr Pat Manson. In their foreword, the editors express their hope that this little book will be 'a friend to provide comfort and support' to newly-qualified doctors who are urged to 'use the poems as tools to connect with your patients, your colleagues, yourself'. I hope they will; there is certainly much here to challenge as well as comfort.

Of the 51 poems, a handful are from well-known poets such as Emily Dickinson and Seamus Heaney but most are from poets unknown to me, quite a few of them doctors. There are recurrent themes — children, hands, death, and obstetrics — but still a wide variety of emotions and topics are covered. Inevitably the human body is never far away, whether being likened to a guest house:

*'This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.'*

Or to a home being burgled:

*'I glimpse a thousand silent break ins;
The scalpel's shining jemmy pops
A window in the body.'*

With space at a premium in such a small book, I did wonder why there are four blank pages for notes, which seem pointless as several more poems could have been included. Nevertheless, a totally brilliant idea that I hope other GP colleges worldwide will imitate.

Trevor Stammers,
Programme Director in Bioethics and Medical Law,
St Mary's University Twickenham, London.
E-mail: tgstammers@doctors.org.uk

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THIS MAY HURT A BIT **BY STELLA FEEHILY, DIRECTED BY MAX** **STAFFORD-CLARK**

St James Theatre, Victoria, London
Wednesday 14 May 2014

This little gem of a play about the NHS is like a punch in the gut, brief but memorable. It is partly a paean to the founding values of the NHS and partly a polemic about its dismantlement, and while it does have a plot, the scenes are more like a series of sketches interspersed with singing, dancing, and jokes. It loosely follows one family's various encounters with the NHS with all the mishaps, staff shortages, mess, and terror that a brush with the health service can entail. Early on, the son is told he has a 'prostate the size of a space hopper' while his mother who is admitted to a fictional North London hospital called 'The Harrington' notices a 'small stool in the shower tray and I don't mean the three legged kind.' It is overtly political in places with characters often directly soliloquising to the audience. Memorably, one of the cast members dressed as a weather girl talks with an asinine smile about the forecast for the NHS in the regions: needless to say the outlook is poor, especially for the North.

Stella Feehily also makes use of political characters from the past and present: Bevan, Churchill, and Cameron all appear

in chorus roles presenting opposing views about public and private ownership. You are left in no doubt as to her viewpoint as she has an advisor warn Cameron in an early scene regarding changes to the Health and Social Care Bill, 'well Prime minister, you can put lipstick on a pig — but it's still a pig'. This production uses an ensemble cast who are all excellent in their different roles. There are a few familiar faces: Stephanie Cole is especially good as the matriarch, bringing humour and pathos to her role as the patient, but she is not alone. From the brusque urologist doing a rectal exam to the Eastern European nurse talking to a dead patient because of 'regulations and protocols', the characterisations are so accurate so as to make the audience wince with recognition. The production drew a standing ovation at the end that was as much due to the skill of the cast as to the strength of feeling it aroused in a partisan audience. Therein lies the paradox of political theatre: it's not the people who go to see it who most need to hear its message.

Charlotte Alexander,
GP Locum, Crouch Oak Family Practice,
Addlestone, Surrey.

E-mail: charlottealexander@doctors.org.uk
[@charlottealexa](https://twitter.com/charlottealexa)

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Problems exposed: Brian Protheroe and Tristram Wymark in This May Hurt a Bit.