Out of Hours Books

AGONY'S JOURNEY

**The Story of Pain:
From Prayer to Painkillers**
Joanna Bourke

*Oxford University Press, 2014
HB, 416pp, £20.00, 978-0-19-968942-2*

Joanna Bourke, Professor of History at Birkbeck College, presents an in-depth analysis of the language of pain and its interpretation by sufferers and clinicians drawn from Western literature of the past three centuries. This book is not a physiological description of pain or a handbook of pain control. Who is it for? Anyone wanting a deeper understanding of pain and its meaning for them and their patients, for those involved in pain clinics, palliative care, and pain research.

The earlier chapters explore the difficulties of describing and defining pain. Love has a rich language, pain a thin one, although Bourke does a fine job in distilling what has been written. Using frequent

quotes and illustrations she unpicks the struggle of communicating pain to others and the estrangement pain produces.

The use of metaphor to describe pain has evolved with militaristic, mechanical, and industrial metaphors replacing those from classical literature, nature, and rural life. Electricity entered early on into the language of pain and remains with us today in descriptions of neuropathies and neuralgias.

Religion is shown to interpret pain as being a consequence of sin and yet a force for personal improvement, as well as a path towards salvation. For many the invention of chloroform and ether anaesthetics and effective analgesics dealt a serious blow to the doctrine that pain was a spiritual good and a secular backlash to this view ensued.

The final chapter on pain relief deals with the advent of anaesthesia and morphine and the reluctance of the medical profession to employ these agents. Today the persistence of poor pain control, especially for patients with chronic pain despite the availability of powerful analgesics and supplementary treatments is perplexing. Bourke examines possible causes from both sufferers and clinician perspectives and concludes that:

'Pain does not emerge naturally from physiological processes, but in negotiation with social worlds.'

Patients in pain are a constant feature of our professional lives and produce mixed emotions in us. This book helped me think

more widely around the meaning of pain and is an encouragement to do better.

David Seamark,
GP, Honiton Surgery, Honiton.
E-mail: david.seamark@nhs.net

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IN THE WATERS

Diseased, Douched & Doctored.
Thermal Springs, Spa Doctors
and Rheumatic Diseases
Roger Rolls

*London Publishing Partnership, 2012
PB, 256pp, £19.99, 978-1-907994-04-3*

After thriving since Roman times, 'In recent years the medical profession has largely forsaken its interest in spas.' Roger Rolls has given us a detailed, well-illustrated history of Bath, our best-known spa. On

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reading of the ebb and flow of novel ideas about how the waters might be therapeutic, it is natural to question why was belief in their powers maintained for so long?

One answer was given by Voltaire who told us that the duty of the physician is to entertain the patient while nature effects the cure. Sufferers from leprosy, gout, paralyses, and a legion of other ailments sought relief at Bath where they, and those who cared for or preyed on them, gathered.

The spa doctors sought to persuade patients that the mineral waters had healing properties. Many reports were written but invariably they failed to include a control group and were thus valueless.

Of course spas would never have had any success if people were not open to being persuaded. If we are tempted to feel superior we should consider the rise from nowhere of the bottled water industry, based to a large degree on the erroneous idea that tap water is somehow less than safe.

Medicine is its worst when it claims too much. Spas offered false solace from an enormous range of remedies, foul drinks, and much prolonged bathing.

Diseased, Douched & Doctored is more than a record of a world we have lost forever. It is a mirror on our own practice today, potentially reprimanding us when we claim too much; reproving us for poorly conducted therapeutic trials, and above all, encouraging people to rely on medicine when health would be likelier to come from a good walk, good company, creativity, and thinking of others above ourselves.

John Holden,
GP, St. Helens, Lancashire.

E-mail: John.holdens@hsthpc.nhs.uk

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SEX PIONEERS ADD FUEL TO THE SIXTIES SOCIAL REVOLUTION

Masters of Sex

Michael Sheen and Lizzy Caplan

Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2014

William Masters (no relation) was a feted consultant obstetrician and fertility expert at Washington University in St Louis, US, in the early 1960s. He wanted to become world renowned and decided that he could do this by being the first to meticulously describe the physiology of the normal human sexual response. At the time such research could cause expulsion from the medical world but had the advantage that it was not subject to modern-day ethical approval! Nevertheless, despite all the odds he was determined to succeed but failed to realise that he needed an essential co-worker if he was to achieve his goal: a woman. This partner was Virginia Johnson who, although totally unqualified and a single mother of two children, became his indispensable colleague and research assistant. Based on Thomas Maier's well-received biography, *Masters of Sex* won a Golden Globe for best drama series in 2013.

Masters of Sex has wonderful costumes and sets producing a post-war feeling of American optimism. Yes, it does have plenty of sex (in real life they observed over 10 000 complete sexual cycles in people of all shapes and sizes) but unlike many television offerings there's no violence. The series brims with clever ideas and sometimes one simply cannot believe that this really happened. Virginia Johnson (Lizzy Caplan) is the star of the show: the modern intelligent motivated woman without whom the work wouldn't have been done. The characters are strongly drawn and the hospital setting totally believable

(the overhead operating light purchased via eBay). The talented Martin Sheen plays the driven William Masters.

The trials and tribulations of this unusual research programme are amusing, endearing, and fascinating as it explores a variety of sexual and social issues of its time. The vital two researchers-odd-couple relationship is at the heart of the dramatisation, but for retired doctors like myself it also induced nostalgia for the days of cigarette-smoking doctors, gynaecologists sporting natty bow ties, and the bliss of no bleeps or computers.

Nigel Masters,

Retired GP, Highfield Surgery, Hazlemere, High Wycombe.

E-mail: nigel.masters@nhs.net

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