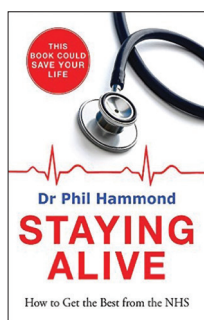


Out of Hours Books

Staying Alive: How to Get the Best From The NHS

Phil Hammond

Quercus, 2015, PB, 320pp, £14.99,
978-1848664517



THIS BOOK COULD MAYBE SAVE YOUR LIFE

Dr Phil Hammond, the GP and journalist, believes that our healthcare systems have become so splintered, and care sometimes so poor, that patients now have to take initiatives to protect themselves. It is you, the patient, who has to coordinate your care and carry your records with you; connect with your doctor by fostering a good relationship from the start (hold out your hand to shake when you meet); query the diagnosis (15% of GP diagnoses are wrong) if your thoughts don't match your doctor's and ask 'what else could this be?'; ask what would happen if you did nothing; ask for a second opinion if you remain doubtful, or if the recommended treatment is invasive, toxic, or long-term; check out hospital specialists' outcome figures; and ask to be referred to a specialist centre for any rare or difficult disease. These and many other initiatives are set forth in this remarkable book, written with humour and humanity.

Dr Hammond helps his readers manage this exacting 'active patienthood' by providing references to websites with information about symptoms and diseases; to sites with sets of standards for treatment and care, like NICE's; and to sites with patients' discussions of their experiences and tactics. Vivid accounts by patients who secured the treatment and care that they judged best for them provide bracing examples of how to be an active patient. Ideally, patients who are too ill, too inarticulate or too frail to act for themselves

should have carers or advocates to act for them.

For this patient-reader, the book raises questions about how far doctors should be responsible for offering good care to their patients and how far patients should be responsible for ensuring that they are offered good care. Is there a dangerous disjunction between patients' expectation that GPs will tell them what they need to know, and GPs' expectation that patients will ask? Should doctors as well as patients change their consultation styles? This book is an excellent stimulus to thinking about the problems that both patients and GPs face, separately, and together.

Charlotte Williamson,
Chair, Patients Liaison Group 1994–1997, Royal
College of General Practitioners, London.

E-mail: charlotte@wmsn.freemove.co.uk

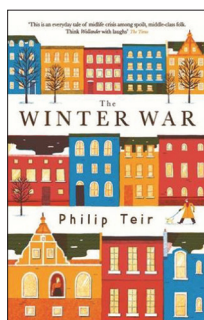
DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X687097

* * * * *

The Winter War

Phillip Teir

Serpents Tail, 2015, PB, 304pp, £7.99,
978-1781254899



THE SCANDINAVIAN GOOD LIFE?

Phillip Teir's first novel, translated by Tiina Nunnally, is a winter's tale set in a mild Finland and an even more temperate England. The novel describes a family struggling with identity during the winter of 2011–2012 at the time of the Occupy London protests at St Paul's Cathedral. The story revolves around the family members, their needs, interactions, and relationships.

Max is a sociology professor turning 60 and trying to write a book on his hero, the late Edvard Westermarck, also a

sociologist. His wife Katrina, increasingly unhappy, describes their marriage as a 'highly functional totalitarian state' without many options other than keeping to oneself. Eva, their youngest daughter, is studying art in London, and Helen, their eldest has a husband Christian and two children, Amanda and Lukas.

When Max has an interview about Edvard Westermarck with an ambitious attractive former student-turned journalist, this leads to the inevitable conclusion of the book and his marriage. Eva is having a relationship with her art lecturer, Malik, but Russ, a fellow student is also in love with her.

The setting and style are more minimalist and intimate than grand or demonstrative; the wars are gentle skirmishes and the winter a light snowfall; these are not the majestic landscapes evoked by Sibelius' *Finlandia* or the great Scandinavian battles of the Napoleonic Wars. From a medical perspective we see the effect of bipolar disorder on behaviour and the use of yoga as prophylaxis for premature ejaculation. There are also some comical touches from the children and animals in the story. Blixten, the grandchildren's hamster ends up in the freezer. The family dog, also named Edvard, often appears in the action from nowhere. Amanda manages to provoke Max into losing his temper.

Although Teir's novel does not compare with Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* in its depth of characterisation, intensity of plot, and tale of struggle in an academic family, he nevertheless manages to create a natural narrative and characters authentic enough for this to be a great read.

Niro Siriwardena,
Professor of Primary and Prehospital Health Care,
and Director, Community and Health Research
Unit, School of Health & Social Care, University of
Lincoln.

E-mail: nsiriwardena@lincoln.ac.uk
CaHRU_UoL@nsiriwardena

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X687109