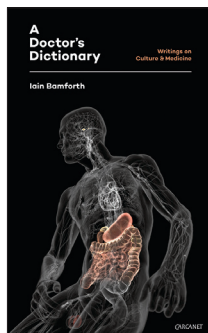

**A Doctor's Dictionary:
Writings on Culture and Medicine**
Iain Bamforth

Carcanet, 2014
PB, 328pp, £15.29, 978-1784100568



EPIPHANIES

The title of poet, medic, and writer Iain Bamforth's new book and the radiological scan on the cover showing a glowing intestine suggest that we are in for a lexicon of clinical topics. Instead, we are treated to much more. This is a trove of scholarly essays, previously published elsewhere but brought together in a rich hoard of writing that mines European literature and philosophical thought on medicine and the culture it serves.

There is a masterly piece on *Romains' Knock*, a play about a GP who imposes the 'higher morality of health' on previously contented villagers who do not yet 'know' that they are 'ill'. There are essays on Kafka's *The Country Doctor*, on liverish states and folk illness, on a poet undertaker, on being hospitalised with Stendhal's syndrome — a consequence of being overcome by exposure to sublime art — on whether medicine is pledged more to the vivisectioning optical scalpel of the eye than to the (listening) ear, and a further 20 other lettered essays. Value for money, certainly, and a motivation to read the writers and books that Bamforth quotes from.

There are occasions where Bamforth's erudition stampedes with such unbridled momentum onto the page that I may not be the only one who needs to re-read a paragraph or look up unfamiliar words such as kulakism (Kulaks, a relatively affluent class of peasant farmers in Russia were exterminated by Stalin. The word has a link to meaning 'tight-fisted'. Therefore, kulakism is perhaps a derogatory term perhaps meaning upstart, or greedy, peasant).

However, if this book is an intellectually-stretching read then it's also a stimulating

one. In the preface, Bamforth quotes the poet Robert Lowell:

'Doctors are translators, interpreters, and sign readers, sure; but sometimes their simple presence counts for something else.'

If there is a unifying thread running through these essays it is perhaps the exploration of that 'something else' that we dimly, or sometimes with a startled epiphany, are aware of as we listen to patients, or as we stand back to think about our role in society as doctors.

Andrew Sharp,

Trust Grade surgeon and retired GP, Leicester.

E-mail: asharp@doctors.org.uk

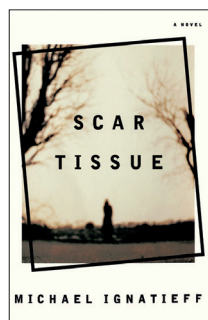
DOI: 10.3399/bjgp16X683281

Scar Tissue

Michael Ignatieff

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001
PB, 212pp, \$18.00, 978-0374527693

DETACHMENT OR EMPATHY?



Dementia can be a devastating neurological disorder which many of us fear. Michael Ignatieff, a Canadian academic, author and politician, explores the territory of dementia in this thoughtful novel, which was shortlisted for the Booker prize. This is a son's story of his mother's dementia and a moving meditation on the effects of loss and the nature of personhood. The narrator is a philosophy professor whose observation of his mother's intellectual deterioration and its effects is contrasted with his brother's views as a neuroscientist. Ignatieff explores the meaning of care and of memory.

The narrator observes a nurse, Miranda, caring for his mother and is perplexed that:

'... some nurses seemed possessed of an intuitive natural tenderness towards their patients while others did not ... There were others, not necessarily less decent people, who had to have procedures to behave decently, who had no natural intuition for what would insult the honour of strangers.'

He contrasts the detachment of some healthcare professionals with the empathy of those like Miranda:

'It was as if some knew how to feel the pain of their patients without being frightened of it, while others had to keep it at a proper professional distance.'

Doctors continue to struggle to balance detachment and connection with their patients. It is salutary to read that as a relative, the narrator can tell as soon as a nurse approached his mother whether they had this 'secret capacity' or whether it was 'just a job for them'.

Friends often ask the relatives of a person with dementia, does she recognise you? As the narrator's brother said '... if she failed to recognise you, you ceased to exist'.

The narrator explores the complex process implicit in recognising a face by referring to the last Act in *King Lear*. The confused Lear whispers to his daughter Cordelia and his trusted Kent: 'Methinks I should know you ...' As the narrator points out, his mother was simultaneously aware that she should recognise him and yet was sometimes unable to do so; vision and recognition are distinct capacities.

Scar Tissue is a profound novel which deepens our understanding of dementia and its effects on a family. It is a powerful teaching resource for doctors, nurses, and students. It challenges our practice and stimulates our thinking on empathy. It is a powerful and moving exploration of a son's experience of his mother's dementia.

David Jeffrey,

Honorary Lecturer in Palliative Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

E-mail: dijeffery@btinternet.com

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp16X683293