

My take home from this is that we perceive and empathise with the suffering of others, but feel the pain ourselves. However, if we return this with compassionate kindness, this eases our own pain. As doctors, if we give compassionate care, we are better able to cope. Tickbox medicine is not a good thing for either patients or doctors.

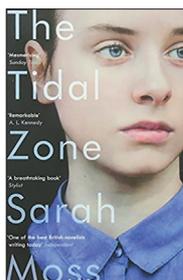
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### The Tidal Zone Sarah Moss

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### LIFE AND DEATH, PARENTAL LOVE, GENDER POLITICS, AND THE NHS

I've always believed that doctors and medical students have much to learn from works of fiction, and here is a case in point.

Sarah Moss has boldly adopted the first-person narrative voice of a stay-at-home father, Adam, who is married to workaholic

GP Emma. They have two daughters, 8-year-old Rose and her 15-year-old sister Miriam. Miriam has had a few episodes of wheezing, but one day, on the playing field at school, she has a cardiac arrest, is resuscitated, and taken into hospital.

The book explores the effect of this crisis and its aftermath on the whole family, emphasising the anguish of uncertainty. Adam is desperate to know what caused the incident, whether it might recur, and what can be done to lessen the risk; his wife's professional knowledge that there may never be any clear answers is of little reassurance, nor does it do much for their increasingly strained relationship.

The attitudes and communication skills of the hospital staff range from empathy to (all too believable) crass dismissiveness, and it is here that Adam's perspective has much to teach us. For the staff, Miriam is one case among an ever-moving procession of patients; for Adam and the rest of the family, she is uniquely precious. And for doctors, uncertainty is endemic. For Adam it is terrifying. When the time comes for Miriam to be discharged her parents dread taking her away from the perceived safety of the hospital environment, and it takes months for them to let her resume anything like a normal life. Set against the trauma that his own family is going through, Adam constantly reminds himself — and us — that for much of the world's population fear, illness, disease, disaster, and death are the backdrop of daily existence.

Aside from the unfolding medical drama, the novel explores a number of other themes. Adam's wry, and often funny, observations about his role as the main childcarer will resonate with anyone in a similar position. In a scene both painful and comical, Adam escorts his younger daughter to a party at a

swimming pool and finds himself shunned as a suspected paedophile. He harbours a suspicion that his wife's devotion to her patients and her work might actually be the easier role in their marriage. He has some part-time work in the university as an architectural historian, and we learn a lot about the genesis and construction of the new Coventry Cathedral. Miriam's acerbic conversation contributes an entertaining running commentary on the hypocrisies, outrages, and sheer ghastliness of what she might call our late-capitalist consumerist society. By contrast, Adam's father, a Jewish-American ex-hippy, offers wisdom through his experience of living for many years in a series of 'intentional communities' (what used to be called communes), including the one in Cornwall in which Adam himself was raised. At times these threads jostle awkwardly with each other, but there is such richness in them all that it hardly matters.

Ultimately, this book is about the vulnerability and unpredictability of human life, and about confronting the unexpected.

Adam tells his story, but concludes:

*'Stories have endings; that's why we tell them, for reassurance that there is meaning in our lives. But like a diagnosis, a story can become a prison, a straight road mapped out by the people who went before. Stories are not the truth.'*

Maybe so, but this one at least contains many truths.

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