

*The Doctor in Literature: Satisfaction or Resentment* by Solomon Posen, a physician who taught general medicine and endocrinology at Sydney University for 30 years, is intended as a reference text that considers the representations of physicians in literature, “their attitudes and their activities.” The sheer scope of this work deserves acknowledgment. The book reviews approximately 600 works of literature, historical and contemporary, classics and popular fiction, and encompasses a time frame from the ancient Greeks to contemporary novels. Notably, the book includes not only English language texts, but also pays extensive attention to works from France, Spain, and Germany. Further, this endeavor is conceived as a four volume series, with this volume focusing on doctor-patient interactions, and the others to address various other aspects such as the physician’s personal life, job satisfaction, and the portrayal of different kinds of specialists.

This particular book identifies and attempts to analyze 11 important themes in the doctor-patient relationship, with from 3-13 additional categories subsumed under each heading. The themes include the exchange of financial compensation for medical attention, time allocation and management, bedside manner, the balance between emotional detachment and involvement, conducting the history and physical examination, the effects of physician and patient social status on rendering and receiving care, and physician communication with patients about such issues as diagnosis, proposed treatment, and prognosis.

Posen reaches an intriguing conclusion. Regardless of historical era, type of literature, or nationality of author, the portrait of the physician remains surprisingly constant. And the portrait is not a flattering one. More often than not, the physician in

literature is arrogant, paternalistic, irreligious (although ethical), contentious with colleagues, impatient with bureaucratic systems (while tolerant of noncompliant patients), a person of action, not reflection, who possesses status, power, and considerable income and abuses all three. In short, in terms of the question posed by the book's title, the physician's literary representation generally seems to be one that expresses resentment, rather than satisfaction.

What is inevitably sacrificed in a work so wide-ranging is any in-depth exploration of or reflection about *why* authors choose to highlight certain issues, or adopt certain perspectives. *Why*, for example, do authors so consistently portray physicians in a censorious light? It may have to do with envy of the doctor's power, dislike of the physician role, negative personal experiences, or any other number of factors. But there is insufficient textual analysis to probe any of these hypotheses.

The reader may feel disappointed that while we become acquainted with the text's various themes, we do not develop sufficient insight about what motivates the authors toward one presentation or another. Further, since little background is provided about either authors or excerpted passages, it is often impossible, especially in the case of obscure references, to adequately grasp the context in which these portrayals occur, which makes it difficult to know how to interpret them. Where do the author's sympathies lie? How do other characters perceive the physician? In most cases, we remain in the dark on these and similar points.

These concerns having been noted, the book is usefully organized for easy identification of wide-ranging literary sources pertinent to the thematic issues addressed. The breadth of this investigation leaves the reader confident that no textual stone has

been left unturned to provide an exhaustive view of physicians as they are represented in literature. However, we may still wonder about the *meaning* of what we discover.