

## REVIEW: Reading *Eucalyptus*:

### Topic's Significance

This essay is significant for linking the value of narrative education in medicine and health professions to the author's interpretation of an Australian novel/fable. It is an interesting and thought-provoking essay.

### Theoretical Framework

As an essay, an explicit theoretical framework is not necessary nor is one provided. However, the work is situated implicitly within the theoretical framework of narrative medicine. For example, the discussion of knowing vs. labeling resonates with concepts developed within the narrative medicine literature.

### Research Design and Methods

This is a narrative essay. Research design and methods are not relevant.

### Interpretation/Analysis/Description

This essay uses an Australian novel/fable *Eucalyptus* to unpack the significance of storytelling in medical and health professional education. Overall, the analogy is a useful one, but there are logical and organizational problems with the essay that should be addressed before it is accepted.

- 1) The author summarizes aspects of the novel in the second paragraph. The focus is on the father's challenge to his daughter Ellen's suitors to prove themselves worthy by identifying all the different varieties of eucalyptus grown on his farm. This is an intriguing task in the tradition of myth and fable, but nothing in the essay explains what this has to do with storytelling in medical education.
- 2) Rather than this challenge, the more relevant aspect of the novel seems to be that Ellen suffers from a mysterious illness which the physician cannot name and therefore cannot cure. It is very puzzling that the author only introduces in passing the existence of this illness. This dimension of the novel would seem to offer great opportunities for developing parallels between the themes in *Eucalyptus* and medical education, but it is not addressed very clearly. The author might consider introducing this information about Ellen earlier in the essay, and make it more central.
- 3) The essay goes on to say that medicine, like the father, is suspicious of storytelling. This implies that medicine is suspicious of the storytelling of patients. But the main thrust of the essay seems to be the value of using narrative writing by physicians and health professionals to explore their own emotions and stories. So what are the parallels being drawn? Are they between Ellen as a patient who needs storytelling in the novel and other patients who need storytelling in real life? Or between Ellen and health professionals, who are also often "sick" from a malady that has no clear name (burn-

out, disillusionment, compassion fatigue) and similarly cannot be cured through biomedical means? These are both intriguing points, but they need to be developed more clearly.

- 4) The author asserts that medicine has a history of resistance to story. I think it is a more complicated relationship, with attention to the patient's story having played a prominent role in early medicine. (After all, it is called "taking a hi-story"). I know there is limited time to include nuance in a short essay, but it would be nice if the dichotomy between medicine and narrative were not drawn in quite so stark and simplistic terms.
- 5) The discussion of knowing vs. labeling/naming is a fascinating and insightful one. However, it seems to refer to diagnosis of patients. I don't think its connection to the medical professionals who use writing to "process difficult emotions and voice their unique stories" is well delineated. Again, this has to do with an unclear focus in the essay regarding what sort of application of narrative is being discussed and to whom. Eventually, the distinction between naming and knowing I think makes the point through the physician who cannot cure Ellen that medicine cannot cure when it cannot name (and hence the need for story), but this could be expressed more clearly.
- 6) It was confusing to me how the roles of the physician and the suitors interdigitate. I'd like the author to do a better job of showing how the physician aligns with certain empirical suitors, and is opposed by the more narrative "stranger" suitor.
- 7) After reading the essay these are the ideas I identify. They are all consonant with medical humanities preoccupations, but they need to be tied together, one building on the other, with a little more structure:
  - a) Medicine is suspicious of story, just as the father is suspicious of men who tell stories.
  - b) We (people, patients, health professionals, all of us?) need stories when we feel "frail at the edges"
  - c) Stories seem arbitrary and round-about, but they contain larger truths
  - d) Stories can save and empower
  - e) Physicians and health professionals can benefit from processing their own emotions and experience through stories
  - f) Knowing is not the same as labeling or naming (does this refer to a clinical context, to health professionals using writing as a form of knowing, or both?)
  - g) We need to ensure that narrative ways of knowing are not crowded out in medical/health professional education

### **Organization/Quality of Writing/Presentation**

The essay is very well-written in an elegant literary style. However, there are some problems with its organization and logic per above.

### **Contributions to the Field/Appropriateness and Overall Interest for this Audience**

My judgment is that the essay offers an interesting premise which would be of interest to readers engaged with the medical/health humanities literature.

**Overall Recommendation:**

Accept \_\_\_\_\_

Accept with Revisions \_\_\_\_\_

Submit for Re-review  The essay requires major revisions before it is reconsidered

Submit Elsewhere \_\_\_\_\_

Decline \_\_\_\_\_