BOOK REVIEW

Aisling Geoghegan
(4th year medicine, TCD)

The House of God
Samuel Shem

Rarely does comedy transcend multiple decades. However, ‘The House of God’, although written over thirty years ago, is still a laugh-out-loud piece of work. More than ever, popular comedy culture of the ‘noughties’ has been to celebrate the socially unacceptable, eccentric individuals created in programmes including ‘Black Books’, ‘Peep Show’, ‘Curb Your Enthusiasm’ and ‘Arrested Development’. The combination of anguish, torment and ridiculousness the characters of these shows endure is remarkably similar to that of Dr. Roy Basch on his journey through the much dreaded intern year at a prestigious teaching hospital in North America.

The reader is immediately immersed in Basch’s stream-of-consciousness, where there doesn’t seem to be a distinction between the medical and the non-medical world. He sees the natural world in terms of anatomy and physiology, demonstrating the purity of his love for medicine, which makes his descent to incredible cynicism a tragic one. Basch flickers from the real world, where he feels lost and trapped, to a much more alive, surreal world of sexual fantasy as a way to deal with the gloom of the ‘gomers’ – the in-patients who remain inbetween life and death seemingly forever.

The supporting characters act as a distraction for Basch from his own torment, and for the reader, as a distraction from the melancholy subplot of the story by injecting much of the book’s dark humour. The humour is often shocking due to the fact that it exposes the doctors as humans as opposed to the strived for image of the profession, that is, one of complete devotion to the patients at all times. This honesty gives a comforting sense of camaraderie and loyalty to the medical reader, and very possibly a sense of disbelief and disgust to the non-medical reader!

A similar breed of doctors is seen in ‘Scrubs’, which has a number of parallels with The House of God, including the fact that JD’s mentor Dr. Cox is closely modelled on Basch’s mentor, ‘the fat man’. Both characters act as a guide and role model for the heroes, who place their mentors on a pedestal which in turn gives the heroes a vulnerability, endearing them to the reader.

There are a plethora of films and books describing illness from a patient’s point of view but a distinct lack of well-known autobiographical accounts of the doctor’s experience of medicine. Samuel Shem bravely delved into the darker side of medicine and the result is an inspirational, very funny, surreal collection of thoughts. Having said that, might be a good idea to hold off on reading it until you’ve finished your intern year!

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Thank you for reading the TSMJ 2009!

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