

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Five Best

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Abraham Verghese prescribes these books on doctors' lives

The Life of Sir William Osler

By Harvey Cushing

Oxford, 1925

This two-volume work tops my list not just because William Osler is endlessly fascinating but because his biographer was the pioneering neurosurgeon Harvey Cushing, himself the subject of more than one biography. Cushing won the 1926 Pulitzer Prize for this meaty but immensely readable work. It captures not only the character of the charismatic physician and teacher who shaped American academic medicine but also a late 19th-century era when Europe and America were waking to germ theory and antiseptics. Osler went from naughty Canadian schoolboy to Regius Professor at Oxford, his last position. He was brilliant, inspiring and kind but also a practical joker: Under the pseudonym of Edgerton York Davis of Caughnawaga, Quebec, he once submitted a case report of "penis captivus," claiming that an amorous couple was unable to disengage. It astonished Osler no end that a medical editor published the piece.

Mortal Lessons

By Richard Selzer

Simon & Schuster, 1976

I read "Mortal Lessons" as a medical student and was astonished by the prose, the introspection, the lyricism of this practicing surgeon. Richard Selzer is the model "physician-writer," if there is such a thing, in that he does so much more than cater to readers' sometimes prurient interest in things medical; his language is baroque and musical, his epiphanies profound and personal. Here he is writing about the stomach: "Yet, interrupt for a time the care and feeding of this sack of appetite, do it insult with no matter how imagined a slight, then turns the worm to serpent that poisons the intellect for thought, the soul for poetry, the heart for love."

The Puzzle People

By Thomas Starzl

University of Pittsburgh, 1992

From humble beginnings in Le Mars, Iowa, where he was born in 1926, Thomas Starzl became one of the most recognizable names in American medicine, truly the father of modern transplantation, the liver transplant in particular. As he recalls in this engrossing memoir—which is essentially a history of transplantation itself—his first few liver transplants were failures, and he was vilified by the media as engaging in human experimentation. Had Starzl given up at that point, hundreds of patients now living

with a new liver wouldn't be. He perfected the technically complex operation to remove the damaged liver and put in the new, but he also advanced our understanding of rejection and how to overcome it.

Adventures in Two Worlds

By A.J. Cronin

McGraw-Hill, 1952

Doctors often speak of a book that "called" them to medicine. The novels of A.J. Cronin, such as "The Keys to the Kingdom" and "The Citadel," had that effect on many budding doctors of earlier generations. Even better is Cronin's "Adventures in Two Worlds," a memoir by this gifted writer and doctor. As a young physician in the 1920s, he worked in a gritty Welsh mining town and became a medical inspector of mines. The hard lives of the coal miners sharpened his sense of injustice. But we also learn that he was concerned with matters of faith and temptation. Retiring from medicine in 1926 due to ill health, he began writing novels—work with themes that were also the themes of his life.

Henry Kaplan and the Story of Hodgkin's Disease

By Charlotte Jacobs

Stanford, 2010

Charlotte Jacobs, an oncologist and biographer, tells the story of the man who was instrumental in making Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph glands, a curable condition. In Dr. Jacobs's capable hands we experience the thrill of clinical research and the hard slog of clinical trials, which are the only way to tell if treatment is beneficial. We also meet the maverick doctors—Kaplan's colleagues and rivals—who helped bring about the cure's discovery. Most people know about Jonas Salk and the polio cure, but Kaplan and the Hodgkin's-disease tale is even more compelling—and wonderfully told in these pages. A budding Kaplan out there, one hopes, might read this book (or one of the others on this list) and be "called" to medicine. It's a great journey, and I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat.

— Dr. Verghese is a professor of medicine at Stanford University. His books include the novel "Cutting for Stone" and the memoir "My Own Country." Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page W8

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