

BOOK REVIEW

The End of Healing by Jim Bailey

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We in SGIM are privileged to understand how our colleagues think. Presentation—both oral and written—is the beginning of peer review. Jim Bailey’s novel provides a vast amount of material to process. The journey through Bailey’s *The End of Healing* is compelling, sobering, and humbling. There is not one of us who will not nod his/her head in agreement or sigh in recognition of familiar tragedy. Bailey does his job and leaves the responsibility of response to us. This is a necessary read.

There are many layers to *The End of Healing*. First, this is homage to the Classics. Bailey has read the stories that are the basis of Western culture. There are countless explicit and implicit references to the mythology of the Greeks and Romans, the core values of Christianity, and the return in the early Renaissance of self-reflection. This both sets the tone of the novel—namely that the world we live in is the result of our own work, good and bad—and asserts the powerful insight that we are all deeply flawed by our quests for gain. *The End of Healing* parallels Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which was anything but humorous. Dante’s poetic work described his allegoric descent into Hell, led by the Roman writer Virgil, with repeated encounters with the consequences of indulgency. Dante’s imagery remains horrific to this day. Bailey takes us down into our personal Hell—health care delivery.

This is the story of Don (Dante) Newman who at the end of his medicine residency is drawn to the health policy program of Dr. Virgil Sampson in northern New England. Don has experienced all the intensity of medical training and endured his own experience with the siren appeals from the specialists to head into their fellowship programs. Don’s imagination has been captured by the notion that there may be a better way to think about the world of health care

delivery, so he leaves the safety of the traditional pathway to academic success and heads back to school. Thus begins our journey with Don.

Traveling through the twisted world of health care delivery, Bailey’s narrative reminds us of the painful truths. Health care has been distorted and influenced by those who exploit the many opportunities for profit. The book is built around a series of seminars directed by Dr. Sampson. Chapters are devoted to specific issues, such as “The Drug Pushers” and “Procedures for Profit.” Though this is a novel, there are countless citations in the extensive bibliography that support the fictionalized Socratic classroom discussion. These chapters stand alone, one by one, as a powerful series of indictments. Day-to-day life tends to push the painful reality of modern medicine to the background of our thinking and planning. Hearing the point/counterpoint classroom discussion of Don and his colleges, each with varying levels of support for the status quo, is a sobering reminder that we must not forget the huge and glaring mistakes that continue to haunt our work.

The seminar travels to Washington for its own Hill Day—an experience that many of us have had. There is a sad confrontation with near success and the moment of reflection, layers below the Capitol dome, on the personal incumbency placed on each of us by democracy. As he rails against the moneyed powers that have corrupted health care, Dr. Sampson declares, “Laws governing health care should be crafted to serve the interests of the people. Instead, American health care is in a state of near anarchy.” Later he optimistically offers that “change in American health care will come! The only question is, how will it come? Let us pray that it comes through common sacrifice, cooperation, and the triumph of

common sense... Will we care for our neighbors as ourselves?”

The End of Healing takes us deep into the world of health care’s injustices and distortions. Don is all of us. When the bright light of investigation shines on this or that failure—be it the profit motives that feed extreme wealth or the pretensions of those who have forced clunky electronic health records on the rank and file—all of us feel the pain. Bailey takes this revelation to a deeply personal level. Don is a true humanist. He feels the pain that we all acknowledge. “He is a wounded healer. And it’s okay. We are all wounded healers. And I’m wounded too.”

The End of Healing is a call to action. This is a summary of what we know to be true. The pain points are connected. All of us are served by Bailey’s extraordinary diligence and artful weaving of facts and painful epiphanies into a familiar story. Now we have work to do.