

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Book review

### A medical education

#### Bloodletting & miraculous cures

Vincent Lam

Toronto: Doubleday Canada; 2006

350 pp \$29.95 (cloth) ISBN 0-385-66143-6

This collection of interconnected stories is very much a first book, but an excellent first book nonetheless. The main subject is medicine, the process of becoming a doctor, and for the most part this process is dramatized admirably. The book is accessible to all; although medicine is this work's central subject, even its love and ubiquitous theme, it is not exclusive. There is incest, love, grief and a lot of other fine topics, and I feel it can be enjoyed by anyone. If Lam, an emergency physician, occasionally overuses medical terms, as he does in the following passage —

Beneath the shield of diaphragm, the liver and spleen were wet and heavy. There was a stickiness to the smell where formalin had seeped into hepatocytes and gelled the lobes of the liver into a single pungent mass.

— for the most part they are placed so well that the layperson might admire the language without feeling left out or

& *Miraculous Cures* will obviously appeal to the medically inclined, moving as it does from the halcyon days of struggling to get into medical school through the *de rigueur* portrayal of anatomy class to the drama of a cardiopulmonary arrest.

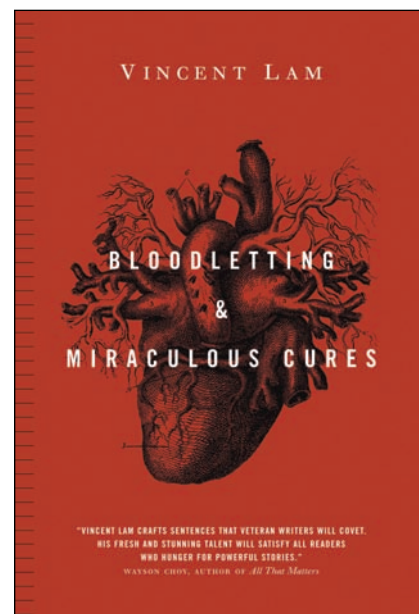
But the real star of this book is Lam's style. Though misdirected at times, there's a real stateliness to his writing, a fully-formed quality that belies the fact that this is a first book. And that book? It's a med-school opus that treats medical themes with seriousness and dignity and serves as a better, more spiritual manual on how to become a physician than the terminally cynical *House Of God*.

Lam has talent, particularly in the area of crafting individual sentences. Less developed is his handling of character. Sometimes the people in these stories are cardboard, two-dimensional figures he moves through various scenes. This occurs infrequently, however. Another first-book tip-off is Lam's penchant for authorial overelaboration. Minor incidents take pages to resolve, and characters stay stuck in their own heads at length while they think circles around a problem. Lam's sentences stay true; it's his paragraphs

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patronized. After all, there's a certain amount of poetry in medical lingo, and Lam mines this. That said, *Bloodletting*

that get into trouble. Sometimes these exercises take up an entire page or more to resolve, as in this passage



from "How To Get Into Medical School, Part 1," in which the main protagonists, Fitz and Ling, meet:

During the previous month, Ming and Fitzgerald had studied at the same table in the library. For self-identified "med school keepers" (the label was inherently self-designated even for those who publicly denied it), study tables were the monks' cells of exam time. Adherents arrived early in the morning and sat silently except for whispered exchanges. There was a desperate devotion to the impending sacrament and judgment of the exam. The faithful departed late at night, and returned upon the library's opening. At first Ming and Fitzgerald sat at the same table coincidentally, but gradually the third table from the corner window became their table. One day they courteously acknowledged that they were studying for the same examinations, and then later that day murmured about phosphorylation reactions.

I know, this is a first meeting, and therefore of importance, a core incident. The trouble is that the rest of the book is like this, its paragraphs hampered and delayed by big fat middles. A case could be made that the author is merely trying to show that his characters have inner lives, and this is true up to a point, but all this overelaboration becomes a distraction and is more than a little frustrating.

This is not to say that, speedbumps of authorial exposition aside, nothing happens in these stories; far from it. When he opts for pure narrative momentum, as in “Code Clock,” which centres around the chronology of a cardiac arrest, Lam finds his form, being forced to move forward without perpetually looking back. He’s on a hurtling schedule: the code proceeds, the clock ticks. This story is breathless and is also the best, its literary description of an intubation a perfect adrenaline-pure moment. It’s also very honest; at one point the student running the code thinks about his own bodily functions:

The four of them stand. Fitz pounds back and forth. He feels thirsty and also needs to urinate. He can never get away to pee, and then always more coffee, more coffee through the night. He feels the compressions in his bladder as he jolts forward again.

In *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures*, Lam has chronicled medicine with wide-open eyes, sensitively and viscerally. Canada has so few physician writers (Kevin Patterson comes to mind) capable of the task. This collection whets the appetite for what will come next, regardless of subject matter. (The dust jacket announces that his first novel, about a compulsive gambler and set in Saigon during the Vietnam War, will be published next year.) Refining his story structure is really all that is left for Lam to do; he must begin to trust the reader to intuit what he finds it necessary to say, so that big heaps of exposition become what is necessary and unsaid.

**Shane Neilson**  
Family Physician  
Guelph, Ont.

## Book review

### Lives lived

**The boys, or,  
Waiting for the electrician’s daughter**

John Terpstra  
Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press; 2005  
Unpaginated. \$25.95. ISBN 1-55447-011-0  
Smyth-sewn paperback, card binding,  
letterpress-printed jacket.

Every family has a “geography,” as poet and writer John Terpstra terms it. Families arrange themselves like maps. Each member shares similarities with the others, but has defining characteristics of his or her own. In this outstanding memoir, Terpstra guides us through the geography of an extraordinary family.

More than 30 years ago, Terpstra met and married Mary Ann, a writer and the daughter of an electrician. He also met “the boys”: Neil, Paul and Eric, Mary Ann’s three younger brothers, only a few years apart in age and each afflicted with Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

In a style that combines economy with beauty, Terpstra recounts the events of a pivotal year, the last in the life of the boys. He plots out their social relationships, including those with a spectrum of medical staff and caregivers who became crucial to their well-being.

And they do enjoy well-being, despite their disease. Their limited physical capacity cannot constrain their active imaginations or their lively personalities. At the outset of the story they are able to play a form of road hockey adapted to their bodies, but as their disease progresses they concentrate on fiction-writing, role-playing (as sports stars and broadcasters), board games, conversation and prayer. The verbal exchanges that Terpstra presents between the boys and a constant stream of visitors and medical professionals shines with intelligence and humour.

Terpstra also conveys, in a clear-eyed, unembarrassed way, the uniqueness of their physicality — how their

bodies express their disease, and all the improvisations of medical instruments and equipment required. He relates their therapeutic needs, every step of the “ratcheted-up” demands that the boys’ condition places on them, their family and medical professionals, without melodrama but with plenty of emotional investment. In one of the longer descriptive passages in the book, readers watch as the author helps one of the boys get fitted for a “custom brace.” Terpstra details the meticulous care and physical exertion required as the attendants apply the “sodden gauze” and plaster.

With the death of grandparents and the departure of more distant relatives from their New Jersey town, the familial geography begins to shift. Rather than capturing these shifts in long-form prose and sequential narrative, Terpstra structures his book like a prose-poem, broken up into short, numbered passages reminiscent of the Epistles. (Terpstra is a practising Catholic, as were the boys and their family.) This allows the author to change tone, style and import as quickly and often as the story requires. In passage 32, a textbook definition of Duchenne’s unique manifestations speaks for itself, setting out how the disease “begins insidiously, between ages 3 and 5” and progresses to “muscular deterioration” and finally “progressive weakening of the cardiac muscle.” This stark passage is followed by the moment when Mary Ann, watching comedian Jerry Lewis’s inaugural telethon for children with muscular dystrophy, “realized for the first time that her brothers were going to die.”

And yet there is much living still for the boys to do. In this compelling book, shortlisted for the 2006 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction, Terpstra celebrates the victory of three fiercely imaginative and mindful lives.

**Sean Flinn**  
Writer  
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