

# VIEWS & REVIEWS

## MEDICAL CLASSICS

# The Illness Narratives

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### The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition

A book by Arthur Kleinman

First published in 1988

You could be forgiven for thinking this book was written in 2011. An epidemic of chronic pain, a sense of existential doom pervading society, and patients presenting with ever more weird and wonderful neurological symptoms that just don't add up. Not to mention the doctors: deprofessionalised, exhausted, and helpless in the face of a workload increasingly made up of "medically unexplained symptoms."

But this is the 1980s. And Kleinman, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, is drawing on his interviews and research across years of contact with patients in the United States and China.

We meet Howie, a giant of a man, a veteran of the Korean war, crippled by back pain. But the pain is untreatable. Despite four operations and copious painkillers, he remains in constant agony. We are reminded that surgery results in physical scars, but it also provides the patient with a badge of honour: the scars of suffering—what Kleinman calls "the latent social function of surgery."

We learn of Yen, a teacher rendered immobile from chronic "neurasthenia." Rejected from mainstream life during the Cultural Revolution as an intellectual, she is introverted where she was once assertive, inadequate where she was once capable. No doctor, Eastern or Western, can provide relief from her lethargy, dizziness, and appalling headaches. After a year's leave from her job, she subsists with long term disability status in rural China. Despite its setting, the story is familiar to every general practitioner in Britain.

Then Kleinman turns the spotlight on doctors. The happiest is the one who thinks of medicine primarily as a caring profession.

"This is not simply a job," he reflects. "It is a way of life, a moral discipline." Others are more cynical, more beaten down, with the threat of litigation ever present: "The medical-legal crisis makes all of us run scared—not just of malpractice, but failure to provide fully informed consent about medications." How can he practise medicine with one eye on the patient, the other on "a potential jury trial"? Another is wearied from delivering health in "economic units," bullied by management to get patients through the system ever more quickly. And I thought things were bad now.

What is articulated throughout the book is how physical symptoms are so often a manifestation of a life trajectory. As a patient's personal crises resolve or deepen, so their illness abates or intensifies. Chronic illness, where unexplainable medically, is really a reflection of just how disappointing life is for so many people.

As a GP at the coalface in working class Britain, what I draw most from this book is its permanence. Despite advances in drugs, in therapy, in imaging; despite the profound change in the NHS's political landscape; despite the idea that the world has never been more complex, we find that nothing has really changed since the 1980s. But Michael Balint showed us that symptomatology was much the same in the 1950s. So each generation of doctors that thinks that medicine is different, and the world is different, are fooled: the human condition remains the same.

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