

# Speaking for Myself

## Books a doctor must read

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My choice of 'must-read books' for doctors may be unfamiliar to many. In order of priority they are Tarashankar Bandyopadhyaya's *Arogyaniketan*,<sup>1</sup> Richard Selzer's *Letters to a young doctor*,<sup>2</sup> Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The diving bell and the butterfly*<sup>3</sup> and Gustav Meyrink's *The golem*.<sup>4</sup>

I have chosen these four with a definite purpose<sup>5</sup>—*Arogyaniketan* for the sublime concepts in medicine, life and death. *The golem* for just the opposite reason—to point out that medicine could be used for the physician's lust for money, power and avarice. *Letters to a young doctor* to highlight a physician's perception that the 'events of the body mostly lie outside the precincts of language'. *The diving bell and the butterfly* for the indomitable courage of the human mind. Since these books are difficult to get in India, I will highlight the reasons for my choice.

I first read the Malayalam translation of *Arogyaniketan* (House of health) in 1961 when I had just entered Trivandrum Medical College as an undergraduate student. I must have read the book at least a dozen times over the past four decades. It is a doctor's perception of life and death. The exponent, Jeevan Mashay, was not an average medical man but he was well versed in both traditional Indian and modern medicine. Jeevan's father, Jagath Bandhu Mashay, was a great physician who learned to diagnose diseases by feeling the pulse of his patients and practised the same with great precision.

When his wayward son Jeevan's decision to study modern medicine in a medical college was doomed by a deceitful girl, Jagath introduced him to their hereditary profession of Ayurveda. He taught Jeevan the techniques of pulse analysis. Even before the death of Jagath, Jeevan became adept in Ayurvedic diagnosis and treatment. He was not content with this knowledge but learned modern medicine under the tutelage of the great doctor Rangalal. *Arogyaniketan* may perhaps be told as the travails of an Ayurvedic doctor in an era of emerging modern medicine, represented in the novel by the young energetic doctor Pradyot, with his superior knowledge of diseases and treatment. But what Pradyot failed to understand was the concept of death as a kind saviour to many and not always a dreaded enemy.

Jagath taught Jeevan to recognize the faint footsteps of death by feeling the pulse of the sick. Pradyot could never reconcile with this crazy idea of feeling the pulse to diagnose diseases and predict the arrival of death. But when Pradyot's wife fell ill and he could not make a diagnosis, Jeevan gently offered him the correct diagnosis to save her. Only then could Pradyot accept Jeevan Mashay's wisdom, though he could not understand its rationale. This novel taught me many things, which I would not have got from anywhere else.

Richard Selzer's *Letters to a young doctor* could be considered as a continuation of the first book in a different world. Selzer affirms that if a patient is examined well with total honesty and

humility, the divine powers of Augurs will be passed on to the examiner, however junior he is. The tiny vibrations of the chest felt by your palpating hand would tell you that the drawn breath doesn't reach the lungs or the stony dullness felt during percussion would indicate the water collected inside the chest. The soft rustles in the lungs, the delicate murmurs of the heart, the harsh grate, the slap of calcified heart valves and the whoosh of the leaking heart, all picked up by the stethoscope, could be identified like the songs of the birds—once learned, never forgotten.

Selzer (1928–) is a surgeon in New York whose books are recommended by some American universities for their first year medical students. I chose the story of Imelda from his book for you. When a pompous, arrogant, but brilliant plastic surgeon, Hugh Franciscus decides to go and operate in Honduras, he takes Selzer with him because of his knowledge of the Spanish language. Among the patients selected for surgery was the otherwise lovely 14-year-old Imelda hiding her utterly hideous cleft lip and palate by a torn cloth.

To the great surgeon the proposed surgery was a simple matter of dropping the upper lip into the normal position and then crossing the gap with two triangular flaps—making a 'perfect geometry'. But the surgery turned out to be a catastrophe with malignant hyperthermia killing her. The surgeon met her mother and explained. But to her mother it was God's decision and the next day her sons would come to take Imelda back—Imelda with her harelip fixed, so that she would go to heaven as a beautiful girl.

The pompousness and callousness of the surgeon melted away and the same night he stealthily entered the morgue and perfectly repaired Imelda's cleft lip and palate. When she was taken away for burial, she was like a lovely angel. The great surgeon returned home, continued his work for 15 more years, quieter, gentler and mellow, with all his ferocity gone. This story tells us about the unexpected, complete collapse of the superciliousness, arrogance and overconfidence of a vain professor by the ruthlessness of fate.

Jean-Dominique Bauby's book is of a different class altogether. It is a story of indomitable courage in a great, unrelenting tragedy. Bauby was the editor-in-chief of the French fashion magazine *Elle*. On 8 December 1995, at the age of 45, while test-driving his new BMW car with his son, he suddenly collapsed. When he awoke, he found himself in a room in the Naval Hospital at Berk-sur-Mer, totally paralysed except for the movements of his left eye and a little swivel movement of his head. For his doctors he was just another case of 'locked-in syndrome'—nothing more, nothing less.

For more than a year he remained there, perceiving, hearing and suffering but unable to respond in any manner except for closing, opening and moving his left eye. Slowly, he understood that he could communicate with his eye like Noirtier de Villefort in Alexander Dumas' novel *The count of Monte Christo*.

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Fortunately he found a young girl, Claude who learned his eye language and with immense wisdom wrote down the unspoken words his eye told. The result was a phenomenal book, not of sorrow, not of self-pity, not of dying, but of hope, acceptance and truth. When the book writing was over, one day he saw the half open wallet of Claude containing her room key, a metro ticket and a hundred franc note folded in four. He wondered whether he could get a key to open the diving bell he was in, a subway line with no terminus and money to buy his freedom back. He died a few days after the publication of his book. According to the *New York Times*, the book is 'a wistful, poetic, ironic and whimsically affirmative testament by a man who refused to die in spirit'.

The last in my selection is *The golem* by Gustav Meyrink, a contemporary of Franz Kafka. Gustav Meyrink's life (1868–1932) was as complex as many of the characters he depicted in his works. His nervous breakdown and a failed suicide attempt in his early twenties, his fascination with the occult arts including Cabalism (Jewish mystic practices), freemasonry, yoga, alchemy, his trials with *hashish* and his belief of spiritual indoctrination ruined his life as a successful banker. But the success of his serialized novel *The golem* in 1913–14 was phenomenal. When it was finally published as a book in 1915, 250 000 copies of the first edition were sold. Probably this is the most powerful work in the world literature deploring medical malpractice.

This novel is based on a Cabala myth. Rabbi Loew created a man-like monster, Golem from clay to help the poor Jews in ghettos. The clay figurine is given life by inscribing Emeth on the forehead (Sanskrit? *Amrith*—deathlessness). The creature is deactivated by removing the first letter and making it Meth (Sanskrit? *Mrith*—death). After some time, the Golem questioned why he should be under the control of the Rabbi to live or die. He escaped from the Rabbi, destroyed and killed people and played tricks. The protagonist of Meyrink's novel is Athanasius Pernath and the Golem is his doppelganger (double), manifesting itself in a room with no doors 'that is in an area of mind which is inaccessible to normal consciousness'.

But the medical relevance of this novel is in the character of Dr Wassory, an ophthalmologist. Wassory's father was Aaron Wassertrum, a hawker, cheat and womanizer. He doted on his son and made him a specialist in Ophthalmology. The son inherited the father's fraudulent habits but practised them with great sophistication. By cooking up data and manipulating facts he published several papers in trash medical journals, thus posing as an academic ophthalmologist. His gullible colleagues referred their cases to him.

He would 'examine' his patients in great detail making them say that they experience glare and pain when looking at bright light. He would record their statements meticulously. He would make them temporarily blind by throwing very bright light into their eyes. With the pretension of great sadness he would declare that they had glaucoma and unless operated without delay they would become permanently blind. However, he would tell them that he had some conferences to attend the next day and would not know what would happen to them when he returned in a few weeks' time.

The patients would then fall at his feet and beg that they should be operated immediately. Before they had a chance to rethink, he would do an iridectomy the same night, leaving them with a permanent visual haze. But the patients would be thankful to the doctor for saving their vision. His cheating would have gone unnoticed but for a medical student, Charousek, an illegitimate

son of Aaron Wassertrum. Charousek exposes the degenerate predator Dr Wassory to the police and this leads to the suicide of that cheat of a doctor. Though Dr Wassory's story is only a small part in this book, it is the central theme around which the rest of the novel is built. It tells us that cheating is likely to be exposed mercilessly and the marauder is likely to be caught in his own web.

I chose these books because I still believe that patients themselves offer the best diagnosis in almost all cases, provided we listen to them carefully and take adequate care to pick up subtle signs.

## REFERENCES

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- 2 Selzer R. *Letters to a young doctor*. San Diego: Harvest Books, Harcourt Brace, 1996.
- 3 Bauby JD. *The diving bell and the butterfly*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- 4 Meyrink G. *The golem*. Translated into English by Mike Mitchell. UK: Dedalus, 2000.
- 5 Cassel EJ. Why should doctors read medical books? *Ann Intern Med* 1997; **127**:576–8.

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## **PP SURYA KUMARI PRIZE**

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**PP Surya Kumari** prize is awarded by IPS every year for the best research paper published in any journal on "diabetes mellitus, other endocrinal and metabolic disorders" in the last five years. The prize is open to Indian scientists working in Indian laboratories. The award is presented to the winner at the annual conference of IPS.

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Talking With Myself? Isn't That a Sure Sign of Insanity? First of all, the best occasions for speaking English with yourself is when you're alone or when there's no-one in close proximity. That way you'll make sure no-one overhears you and you'll avoid embarrassing situations. I'm pretty sure that anyone has at least 10, 20 minutes a day when you're completely on our own and that time can be very well spent improving your spoken English. speak for myself " speak for myself/her/himself, etc. idiom to express what you think or want yourself, rather than sb else doing it for you " I m quite capable of speaking for myself, thank you! Main entry: "speakidiom | Useful english dictionary. for my part " As far as concerns me " " Main Entry: "part \* \* \* for my (or his, her, etc.) part used to focus attention on one person or group and distinguish them from others involved in a situation for my part I was glad when the end of September came \* " | Useful english dictionary. Speaking for myself, I' m glad you' re here. OpenSubtitles2018.v3. I can speak for myself. OpenSubtitles2018.v3. I can speak for myself, mate. OpenSubtitles2018.v3. I don't speak for myself. OpenSubtitles2018.v3. So, speaking for myself and the other members of the board, we hereby submit our resignations, effective immediately. OpenSubtitles2018.v3. And if it's all the same to you, I can speak for myself. opensubtitles2. Speaking for myself, I' d just as soon not. Speaking For Myself. 890 likes " 2 talking about this. A new documentary produced and directed by Bert Shapiro. See more of Speaking For Myself on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Speaking For Myself on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? Start reading Speaking for Myself on your Kindle in under a minute. Don't have a Kindle? Get your Kindle here, or download a FREE Kindle Reading App. However, as a mom myself, I was particularly interested in the anecdotes where she discusses the extra challenge of being a wife & mother while also being press secretary. There are several humorous ones, but she also shares how her position as a mom affected her view of events. The book certainly doesn't overstay its welcome at only 12 chapters.