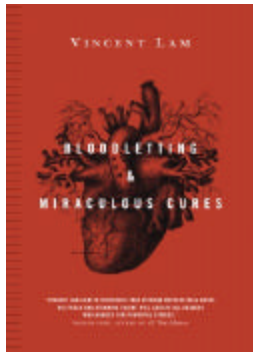


BOOK REVIEW



Book Review by Jennifer Clara Tang, University of Western Ontario, by Dr. Vincent Lam

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Dr. Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures* is a collection of twelve short stories chronicling the lives of four physicians and the patients that they encounter. *Bloodletting* is an honest and revealing work, which entertains while challenging the reader to reflect on some of the ethical issues presented. The characters have strong initial presentation, but this falters towards the denouement.

A scene in the anatomy lab introduces us to three of the protagonists as first-year medical students: Ming, the acerbic, scalpel-happy, left-brain dominant Type A personality, Sri, a sensitive soul who insists on naming the cadaver, and Chen, the peacekeeper who prevents Ming and Sri from vivisectioning each other. Fitzgerald, the fourth protagonist, is a loner who uses alcohol to exorcise his demons. The first few stories provide the reader with portraits of these physicians in their youth, while the rest diverge into crossroads following their respective professional and personal lives. *Bloodletting* is an intensely personal piece that reflects the author's experiences as a Toronto emergency physician, an Arctic research ship's doctor, and a son of immigrants. One of the stories, *A Long Migration*, is based on the author's experiences caring for his terminally ill grandfather. Dr. Lam paints poignant and often amusing sketches of the various lives touched by his protagonists; he does this most notably in *Afterwards*, with the embittered description of a recently widowed woman in search of the truth about her husband's death.

The most captivating aspect of *Bloodletting* is the author's gift for describing his characters. In the care of his prose, Ming, Sri, Chen and Fitz are more than words on a page. As a reader, one already feels acquainted with the protagonists: they are your colleagues, friends, and classmates. The first three stories, introducing his characters as medical students, are his strongest: *How to Get into Medical School Parts I and II*, and *Take All of Murphy*. Dr. Lam breathes life into his characters by revealing their flaws, vulnerabilities and humanity. He

allows the reader to become the character, suffering through the drama and anxieties they are faced with. One of the most memorable scenes is when the lovesick Fitzgerald imagines possible alternate endings to his romantic drama; the author describes this in a comical quasi-soap opera script format. The angst of applying to medical school is captured in a humorous and touching way: "They ate, clarified the puzzles of cell membrane physiology, and talked about their need to become physicians. Others were not genuine, they agreed, and transparently wanted to become doctors for money and prestige. Ming and Fitz wanted medicine for the right reasons, they told each other: service, humanity, giving. Because their motivations were clean, they were certain they deserved it more than those among them. They did not ask why they wanted to serve, be humane or to give. These simply felt like the right motivations and being correctly motivated should improve their chances of success. This was enough and these sentiments felt easy and immune from questioning." The description of the students' cadaver experience in *Take all of Murphy* is sure to stir memories of similar experiences in the minds of MJM readers. Dr. Lam skillfully intertwines various ethical questions throughout *Bloodletting* while still allowing his sense of humour and wit to shine through. As foreshadowed by the words of William Osler that the book begins with, the protagonists and their patients struggle with the fact that "Medicine is the science of uncertainty and the art of probability" (Osler).

Although the early stories succeed in making the reader care about the characters, the latter half of *Bloodletting* does not live up to its full potential for character development. The second half reduces the complex features of some of the protagonists into two-dimensional forms. Ming, a fascinating multifaceted character, was given a brilliant exposition in the first story. Yet after this, she seems to be forgotten, her character left to languish without any development. She reappears briefly in *An Insistent Tide*, but mostly as background to another storyline. It seems a waste to see such an interesting character left behind. The gap that the reader feels in the latter half is testament to the strength of the early stories; I felt as if I had lost touch with four old friends after knowing them so well in the beginning. Regardless of this, Dr. Lam's ability to convey moments and emotions makes this reading an enjoyable experience.

Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures is a well-crafted work that offers fresh perspectives on medicine through

the eyes and varied personalities of the characters. The reader is immersed in the world Dr. Lam has created through his short stories. *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures* is accessible enough to appeal to non-medical audiences while still keeping seasoned health professionals engaged. It has great potential for use in

medical education as a narrative that may spark interesting discussion of ethics and professionalism. In one of the stories, the author describes the thoughts of a character: "What would he be if not a doctor?" As a first novel, *Bloodletting* is proof that in addition to being a physician, Dr. Lam is an accomplished writer.

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