Medicine Men Short Guide

Medicine Men by Alice Adams

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Characters

Although the novel is set in California, many of the characters are really from the East Coast, New England, or the South, with their more defined social codes and ethic of self-reliance and reserve. Molly Bonner "had grown up in Richmond, Virginia, trained to listen to men and to laugh at their jokes—true of all women, of course, but even more so if they are Southern." This evasive, overtly submissive Southern inclination is tested by time and geography in her short-lived early marriage to hard-drinking Henry, the consummate New Englander who could offset Southernness: "Molly had fallen in love with New England, along with Henry, or perhaps the other way around," and later to Paul, from adventurous, wide-open Montana, more Western even than California itself. Molly herself, although intelligent and resourceful, is in many ways a damaged character—overly nice and compliant, perhaps because of having lived so long with those who were not—Paul, her distant, cold father and drunken, ineffective mother. Her recovery from cancer mirrors her recovery from Paul's estrangement and death, and the novel ends with Molly back in control and in good spirits.

Her friend Felicia Flood, by contrast, is a native Californian—more assertive, forthright, and hearty compared with Molly's eagerness to please, an eagerness she loses in the process of combating not only her illness, but the medical processes and people which threaten to dominate her life. Although Molly is dark and slight and Felicia large and blonde, the two women share a common profession— temporary office workers—houses on the same block, and a common contempt for and interest in doctors, both for medical and personal reasons. Other women, such as Sandy's wife Connie and Jane Springer, another doctor's wife, become friends at their AA meetings and support one another in the process of getting their domineering doctor husbands out of their lives. Nurses, although they inhabit the same medical universe as doctors, are defined more by their gender than their occupation. Secondary and subservient, they are expected to render sexual service on demand, and Sandy does not even place "laying" nurses, which he does commonly after successful surgery in a celebration of male pride and dominance of the body of the patient, in the same category as sleeping with women. Even the few female doctors are marginalized and intimidated by their male colleagues.

Dave Jacobs and Raleigh Sanderson, the doctors in question, share attributes common to their profession—they are pushy, self-assured, superior, and often downright mean. They have the sense of power and automatic entitlement which comes with control over people and resources, especially Sandy, a wildly successful surgeon. When the "neatly towelwrapped" ice pack he brings for Felicia's bruised face fails to place him in power again: "'Just hold this against your face,' he instructed, once more believing himself in charge, in control of himself, as well as of her"—Sandy begins his nightly surveillance of her house intended to intimidate her. A racist as well as a sexist, Raleigh believes automatically in his own superiority and right to dominate all around him, until he is caught in a trap of his own making one night in Felicia's garden. Because doctors are associated with a sterile, unimaginative authority, others who remain flexible, responsive, and human, fight back with imagination and finesse.

Dave Jacobs, the doctor-lover who manages Molly's cancer treatment, shares Sandy's assumption that his doctor status places him above others, even though his careful, domestic nature is much different than Sandy's exuberant flamboyance.

Adams often examines the situation of women in relationships with men they basically dislike, and this is the case of Dave and Molly. In the struggle over Molly's life, Dave at one point banishes Felicia from her friend's sick room, a move Molly is unable to contradict: "Never mind that she would very much have liked to see Felicia right then. At that point Molly felt herself given over to the care of doctors, and Dave was a doctor. He was one of them." As Molly begins to regain her health and sense of self-worth, she is able to reduce Dave's control over her life, until he wanders off to another woman more inclined to indulge his own inflated view of himself—bad Dr. Stinger's former wife Jane.

Although he shares the superior selfimportance of most doctors, Dave is saved from Sandy's fate because he has a good heart, in spite of the way his doctor's mask forces him to hide it.

It is perhaps Adams' portrayal of the medical profession which causes most notice for Medicine Men." Although the novel is dedicated to a doctor friend "who was always kind and often brilliant," the same cannot be said of most of her fictional physicians, characterized by one critic as "Hippocratic Oafs." Whereas the standard portrayal of the medical profession in recent decades has been valorization as heroic, unconventional, adventurous, and mercurially multifaceted, Adams's physicians are complacent, self-satisfied, and clueless, like Dave, or heavy-handed, overbearing controllers, like Sandy. One doctor, Douglas Macklin, escapes this paradigm, as does Molly's psychiatrist, Dr. Shapiro, but even these two benign medicine men are largely ineffective in recognizing and treating Molly's condition, whether physical or psychological, and both remain distant from the emotional center of the novel.

Doctors are boring, self-centered, obsessive: the novel's first line is: "For a long time Molly Bonner's strongest reaction to doctors was a fear that they would bore her to death." The lack intuition, imagination, and empathy. Molly says, "They don't put things together, Doctors don't. Don't see a whole picture. I think that's what sometimes gets them into trouble." Her dead husband, Paul, was a wild, changeable, creative film maker, the polar opposite of doctors. Too richly rewarded for their self-absorbed specialties, they are unable to sense others' reactions or change to meet new demands. Some, like Sandy, even use their "expertise" to deny and stigmatize others, as when Sandy labels his rebellious children as FAS (fetal alcohol syndrome) victims, even though their mother did not drink when they were young. The women characters, on the other hand, are resilient and practical, self-preserving in the faces other people who would control them, like Felicia, or even the rebellion of their own bodies, like Molly, whose growing self-confidence after the blows of Paul's defection and death, parallels her struggle against and triumph over her cancer.

Social Concerns

InMedicine Men, Alice Adams examines the impermanence of life through crises in the lives of two friends, Molly Bonner and Felicia Flood, Disease and death precipitate traumatic times as Molly endures one shock after another. Just as her marriage is at the breaking point, her filmmaker husband unexpectedly dies.

Then, her life is threatened by a brain tumor that plunges her into a nightmare world of doctors, hospitals, and treatments. Felicia, who breaks off an affair with Dr. Raleigh Sanderson, becomes the object of his abuse, threats, and stalking.

The medical background to the novel —Molly's disease and treatment, and the fact that both women are in relationships with doctors—pits the medical establishment and its universe of diagnosis, treatment, and trauma against the more human world of friendship, food, and conversation represented by the two women.

Molly's doctor boyfriend, Dave Jacobs, moves quickly to control her life by controlling her disease when her tumor is diagnosed, and Raleigh ("Sandy") Sanderson's obsessive dominance explodes into violence when he discovers Felicia talking to another man on the phone. His vengeful stalking and murderous fantasies continue to demonstrate his rage to control both Felicia and his wife Connie, whose recent recovery from alcoholism is leading her out of a painfully demeaning relationship with him. Power relationships between doctors and patients, men and women, provide the social backdrop, epitomized in the O. J. Simpson-Nicole Brown murder case, which Sandy obsessively likens to his own stormy relationship with Felicia.

In many ways, the relationship between Molly and Felicia and these two medical men is emblematic of the way in which most of us encounter the monolithic institutions which increasingly control our lives. Even that most personal encounter with our own mortality becomes a struggle between the individual and a gendered distribution of power and social status. Adams uses the contemporary medical establishment as a metaphor for the insensitivity of our institutions in general, and the issues of power and control located there. Force and coercion, through outright threats, as in the case of O. J. and Nicole Simpson, or more subtle ways of inspiring fear, such as Sandy's stalking of Felicia, are dark undercurrents of surface normality. Both Felicia and Sandy think of the O.J.-Nicole Brown Simpson murder case during the stalking incidents, but Felicia identifies with Nicole, while Sandy thinks he might murder Felicia: "He [O.J.] got off, is what Sandy was thinking. And Nicole did not get by with sleeping around—blonde spoiled bitch." Although Molly and Felicia hate guns, Felicia's Seattle boyfriend, Will, has a wall covered with them—one of which he uses to commit suicide—and a membership in the NRA. An atmosphere of anger and hostility lurks beneath the surface everywhere, like Sandy prowling in Felicia's garden—epitomized by the hostility and contempt doctors feel towards their patients and towards women.

To reverse the imbalance of power faced by patients (and women), the doctors themselves need to experience their same loss of control and helplessness.

After her surgery and radiation, Molly is virtually imprisoned in a Southern California hospital, Alta Linda, by her doctors, escaping only through Felicia's intervention. Incapacitated by a broken ankle he incurred in Felicia's garden, and undergoing radiation for prostate cancer in the same hospital where he practices, Raleigh Sanderson gets a patient's taste of institutional indifference: "And he thought, as Molly Bonner had before him, This is the worst place I've ever been. This is hell."

But unlike Molly, who regains her health and escapes Dave Jacobs's control, Sandy ends despairing of any return to wholeness for himself, an appalling vision of his own powerlessness:"—suddenly he knew with a terrible clarity that all these treatments would not work for him; he would have to have the surgery, and after that he would be—useless." Deprived of the power which comes from a domineering sexuality and the quasi-priestly status accorded a doctor, Sandy's humiliation is complete. Others, who derive their sense of self not from dominance but from sharing, continue to grow and discover new possibilities.

Techniques

Medicine Men is another of Adams's San Francisco novels. For San Franciscans, and other Northern Californians, Alta Linda, in Southern California, which Molly compares to the women's prisons in 1930s movies, is clearly hell, with its dry, brown hills, very different from the lush greenness of northern California and the gardens of San Francisco itself. Dave even insists on taking ugly Highway 5, "that highway from hell," rather than the scenic coast drive that Molly and Felicia follow in their escape. Molly thinks that hospitals themselves, with their sterile, cell-like rooms where patients wait interminably to be tested by forbidding machinery like the MRI white tubes are "a medical hell". Even Raleigh Sanderson exclaims "Alta Linda! That scumbag hellhole of a hospital from hell!" when contemplating his prostate treatment, even though he sent patients there all the time. The antidote to Alta Linda and the medical environment generally lies in surroundings more human and more natural—Felicia's garden and the lifeaffirming properties of good food, drink, and comradeship. For the most complete healing, however, characters must find a setting which is deeper and more reflective, wilder even, than the lush surface of San Francisco, as Felicia does in Seattle, also on the ocean.

As the external scene shifts between the human world of domestic interiors and city gardens and the world of hospitals, doctor's offices, and examination rooms, the private lives of the characters are reflected in a larger society where disease and healing, power, and control are also issues. Adams builds dramatic irony from the juxtaposition of interminable conversations (termed "consultations," when doctors have them) and the contrast between the doctor's perceptions and those of the despised "lay people." Doctors are a new priesthood— impatient, judgmental, and sanctimonious, especially towards women. Encounters with them are enervating, ritualistic, incomprehensible, demeaning, and infantilizing to the patient: "Different, widely differing (male) doctors were visited, but the format was much the same. First, a long wait in the doctor's waiting room, followed by a nurse's summons to an examining room. At last, the doctor's entrance ..." The doctor-patient relationship becomes a metaphor for the dyad of male dominance and female dependency wherever it occurs, a dependency from which Molly must escape, as from Alta Linda: ". . . she had taken charge of her own life, she had listened to her own clear inner voice. She had freed herself, at least temporarily, from the ruling tyrants, from Dave, from doctors."

Adams's ironic treatment of the manners and mores of the medical community and the social world generated by it reminds many commentators of Jane Austen. Her scenes of "doctor's parties" and the conversation between doctors, their wives, girlfriends, and patients capture the smug, self-satisfied aura of the shamanistic atmosphere evoked by the title, Medicine Men—part science, part sham. The fresh, funny, irreverent voices of Felicia and of Molly on her better days, along with their non-doctor allies and renegade wives like Connie and Jane, counterbalance this oppressive presence.

Felicia's description of her first impressions of Sandy shows how Adams's characters both criticize and are engrossed in the atmosphere of power and competence

surrounding doctors, especially the erotic possibilities offered to them: He's terrifically attractive . . . And wow, he really knows it. That swashbuckling walk. I've heard he was a football star at Harvard. The other surgeons all imitate the way he walks, it's funny to watch them crossing the street behind him. His team . . . I've heard his wife is an alcoholic, and really rich. Doctors, honestly . . . I'm so weak that way, and I do have this thing about doctors.

The classical function of satire is to ridicule behavior or character by magnifying weakness or faults, and although many characters, even doctors, are redeemed by their own resilient natures and their neighbor's generosity some, like Sandy, are beyond the pale of redemption, and must be cast off to Alta Linda, outside the circle of the healed.

Themes

Healing, both physical and emotional, is the dominant theme of the novel, as characters confront their own mortality, both in body and in spirit. The tumor in Molly's brain has a parallel in the emotional wound created by the death of her husband, Paul, a death made doubly hurtful by the fact that the two had decided to separate only shortly before.

Cancer becomes a metaphor for a kind of unfocused doom which has become endemic to the modern landscape, ultimately affecting not only Molly, but the great Sandy Sanderson himself, whose prostate cancer also brings him to a new awareness of mortality, subverting the "mad male pride" which keep doctors above the realm of disease and fear they try to govern. As Susan Sontag points out in her ground-breaking essay "Illness as Metaphor," cancer has become a signifier for many kinds of social and psychological diseases, as was tuberculosis in the nineteenth century. There is even a dominant cultural myth suggesting that certain kinds of people—anxious, repressed worriers—are more vulnerable to cancer, and that cancer itself is to some degree a psychological affliction.

The other modern disease in Medicine Men is alcoholism. Drinking is a prevalent pastime and topic of conversation, and most of the characters are or have been heavy drinkers. Most families have a history of alcoholism—both Molly's parents and Henry Starck's are alcoholics—and the alcoholic marriage is a common motif. Alcoholic wives are particularly common, and both Sandy's wife Connie and Dr. Mark Stinger's wife, Jane, are AA members in recovery. The alcoholism motif mirrors the total loss of personal agency and sense of self experienced in cancer, while healing for both is present in recovery. Addiction itself is a metaphor, since even those seemingly above common dependency, the doctors, are addicted to power and control, selfabsorbed and insensitive to others.

The counterbalance to the destructive effects of uncaring institutions and domineering doctors is Adams's most familiar life-affirming theme of friendship. Concern and sharing between individuals is essential for healthy emotional, and even physical lives. Molly and Felicia talk every day, bring one another soup, and rescue one another from horrible hospitals.

Friendship itself is a healing agent in this novel, as Molly "heard an inner voice that urged her toward Felicia. She would find Felicia out in her garden, she knew she would, and they could just sit out there for a while and talk." Molly imagines she and Felicia extending this healing power to "homeless people, men and women, children, anyone" by establishing a "warm bright clean new shelter." Conversation, food, and friendship are all celebrated. Sandy, on the other hand, hates and fears "women's conversations," along with cats and female intuition. Friendship is extended to a particular kind of sympathetic romantic love, as those recovering from alcoholism or ruined marriages find new, more supportive, accepting relationships, as do Connie and Molly's first husband Henry, and even Jane Stinger and Molly's Dr. Jacobs.

One of Adams's overriding concerns in all her books is people's need to connect with others, to assume a broad focus which takes the periphery into account.

Doctors are criticized because of their obtuseness, their self-focusing, which comes in large part from their tendency to distrust feelings and intuitions, to make a fetish of their own specializations and special niche in society. Unable to make connections or to see through others' eyes, they are cut off from real life and experience. The need to connect brings unlikely people into proximity—Connie and Molly's first husband, Henry, and later Felicia and Paul's brother, Matthew who, unlike Paul, is modest and shy, not exciting or dangerous, but who escapes the doctor's disease of tediousness because of his unassuming nature, his ability to unobtrusively make himself part of the present, and his not needing to control others.

Sex, along with food and flowers, is a major topic in the novel because sexuality can be either destructive or restorative depending on how it is used. Although some characters who use sexuality to dominate and overpower others regard themselves as tremendously sexual, as Sandy does, it is usually the women who respond most fervently, even initiating many sexual encounters. Felicia Flood is, of course, an icon of exuberant fertility, as her wonderful cuisine and fruitful garden show, but even proper Connie Sanderson was a tremendously sexual being before Sandy's influence drained her of all feeling. Sexuality is an expression of connection, sharing, humanness, and healing, as well as of physical joy, for the characters.

Key Questions

The general state of health care and the medical profession is of widespread concern, as is popular awareness of the need for people to take control of their own health care, making the issues addressed in Medicine Men very timely. Humanities courses which make health care and social service professionals aware of patients' and clients' point of view have become part of the premed or professional curriculum in many institutions, and this novel would be a good choice for such a course. Discussion would focus on the doctor-patient relationship and on the power relationships involved there.

1. In Medicine Men, doctors are often presented as narrow-minded, self-important characters who adopt a superior attitude towards their patients. How do Adams's medical professionals fit or not fit this stereotype?

2. Physical and emotional well-being are often thought of as going together.

How does Molly's medical condition mirror her emotional state, and how does she recover?

3. Examine the friendship between Felicia and Molly and show how each helps the other through hard times.

4. Alta Linda is a "hospital from hell."

What makes it so, and how is it in contrast to northern California? How can Molly escape, while Sandy is trapped there?

5. Raleigh Sanderson epitomizes the convergence of power, sexuality, and the need to dominate within the doctor image. Is Dave Jacobs the same? Why or why not? What about other doctors in the novel?

6. What does the cancer metaphor mean to you as a reader? Why is it such a compelling disease, and how does Molly's cancer lead her to change her life?

7. An unintended consequence of her husband Paul's death leaves Molly rich from insurance money. How does money, especially this money, affect the novel?

8. What about the masculine image present in the contrast between Paul and his brother Matthew?

9. Why is the medical establishment and modern medicine itself an apt metaphor for modern life, especially when character's confront their own mortality?

Literary Precedents

In American literature and popular culture, physicians generally appear as one of two stereotypes. The first is like the doctors of Medicine Men, selfish, self-important people more concerned with their own aggrandizement than with the people they are supposed to help. These sorts of doctors often serve as symbols of inhumane, remote industries or government organizations, as in Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961; see separate entry). Most such portrayals of doctors reflect the public's dissatisfaction with medical professionals who too often seem dispassionate or more concerned with making money and living luxuriously than with practicing medicine.

The second stereotype is of the physician as demigod, a supercompassionate being who fights mightily to help the helpless and heal the sick. Max Brand's Doctor Kildare series of books (beginning with Calling Dr. Kildare, 1940), and the subsequent motion pictures and television episodes adapted from his books, exemplifies this stereotype, with young Dr. Kildare not only healing the body, but the spirit, as well, while working for a gruff but goodhearted hospital administrator. This stereotype seems to answer an audience's need for comfort, for reassurance that when they suffer, there are people who will care about them and who will understand their problems. Both stereotypes of physicians seem to have their origins in a broader social issue, that of individual people feeling disconnected from one another and from the institutions of society—-one reflects the public's anger and the other its hope.

Related Titles

Medical professionals occur often in Adams's stories. Clyde Drake, the incompetent psychiatrist whose botched shock treatments kill Sally Jane in A Southern Exposure (1995), is the epitome of Adams's questionable doctors, along with the idea of the doctor as an authority figure. The California setting and the focus on friendship are frequent Adams motifs. Women's friendship has been a staple since her earliest novels, and the concerns presented in Superior Women (1984; see separate entry), extending from the 1940s until the 1980s, continuing the tradition of friendship and pleasure as women on the margins of a male-dominated, life-threatening larger society, are still present, although transformed by the apocalyptic themes of terminal illness and mechanical medicine in Medicine Men. A character in Second Chances (1988) dies from a brain tumor similar to Molly's own (and similar, too, some sources say, to Adams's own experience), while disease and death, as well as difficult doctors, are motifs in that novel, as well.

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