

Medicine, literature and writing

Priya Sharma

People become doctors for lots of reasons. An interest in science, status, security, money, or the perennial answer in medical school interviews of *wanting to help others*. Some of those things are on my list but everyone has their own more specific motivations.

I grew up in a non-medical family. We lived in a small market town in Cheshire during the 1970s, one of only two Asian families. My parents emigrated from India in the 1960s, my father to study physics as a postgraduate.

I wasn't friendless but I was geeky. It was era when casual (and not so casual) racism was more acceptable than it is now. My mum is Anglo-Indian which taught me that racism cuts both ways. My parents didn't teach me Hindi for fear of confusing me. To help me assimilate they called me Pippa rather than Priya. I hated Pippa. It invalidated my real name and enhanced my sense of otherness. I was more liked for being less myself. Whatever that meant. With the magic of the retrospectoscope I think medicine was a means to becoming not just accepted but

respected. Once a patient said, after seeing my name, then meeting me, 'You're just like us.' I'm still not sure how to unpack that statement.

Medicine was also a way to leave home in the halcyon days of paid tuition fees and full grants. I wanted to be independent. I wanted to remake myself. Medicine was more than an aptitude for science. I was fascinated by the darker side of life and had a morbid nosiness for secrets. I always wanted to know what the adults were saying. The hidden meanings of things. The private parts of life.

This is where medicine and literature converge for me. In truth. One is about expressing it, the other seeking it. My mother left behind her career as a short story writer for India's *Eve's Weekly*. She never wrote again but she always had a book in her hands. She took us to the library every week. She loved film too. Nothing was censored. She introduced me to Alfred Hitchcock and Thomas Hardy at a relatively young age.

Both shocked me. In Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) a man sells his wife and daughter. It confirmed what I suspected. Our capacity for wicked deeds and our possibility for redemption. I wanted to understand the whole range of human emotions.

I watched Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) from behind a cushion. Yes, it was violent but there was more to interest me. Marion's temptation, her flight. What marked a 'good' woman from a 'bad'. More than the beautiful lighting, the long shots, the cutting dialogue, was the psychology in every Hitchcock film.

I knew that I wanted to be a GP even before I really understood what the job entailed. I think I made the right choice. Being a GP makes me privy to patient's stories from cradle to grave. I see humanity at its most vulnerable. This isn't voyeurism on my part. It's a duty and a privilege to care for people during these times.

It's my job to help patients make informed choices; knowing treatment protocols and algorithms isn't enough. The wise words of my GP trainer chime in my ear. *General Practice is an art, not a science.* Again, writing and medicine align. Both are acts of empathy. *What's this person's story? How does this problem affect them?* Understanding is at the root of both shared decision-making with a patient and negotiating with a character in a story.

There's a long history of doctors becoming authors. I'd commend *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (2014) by Atul Gawande to everyone. It's an excellent dissection of how we care for the aging and dying. In *The Man who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* (1985), neurologist Oliver Sacks gives us a series of case studies that are beautifully observed.

Those who have turned from writing about medicine to writing fiction include Anton Chekhov, Arthur Conan Doyle, Khaled Hosseini and Robin Cook. Michael Crichton and W. Somerset Maugham trained as doctors but never practised. The ones that interest me the most go further in their speculation, taking their work deeper into the realms of the fantastic.

Vikram Paralkar is a Mumbai-born haematologist who practises at the University of Pennsylvania. His first book, *The Afflictions* (2014), follows young librarian Máximo into the great Central Library of an unnamed city. It's a pseudo-medieval world where it's not enough to be a physician, 'now you must know alchemy and cartography. Even the traffic of the stars.'

Máximo is shown a medical encyclopaedia. What follows isn't a traditional narrative but an elegant exploration of what it is to be human through a series of fictitious diseases that explore our faculty for language, our senses and memory. On migratory blindness, for example, the fictional encyclopaedia tells us that certain Arctic tribes always have a member who is temporarily blind. Their condition lasts several months and the community cares for them, because who knows who will be next? The encyclopaedia gives a religious reading of it, a single person atoning for the collective's sins- but I see its message as one of communal responsibility. I don't believe in survival of the fittest. It's too simplistic. We survive best in packs.

Another example is Mnemosyne's affliction, which runs in families. Patients are struck down in their forties. Their memory becomes prodigious; unable to forget even details of the mundane, the sufferer is overwhelmed. Other faculties are displaced, eventually resulting in paralysis and death. Paralkar shows us that forgetting can be a gift. How else would we be able to carry on without being overawed by life's beauty and pain?

Vikram Paralkar followed this up with the novel *Night Theater* (2017). A disgraced surgeon takes a job in a clinic in rural India, working on a shoe-string budget. A couple and their young son come in before he closes one night. They've been violently murdered but will be granted another chance at life if the surgeon can mend their wounds by daybreak. It's a story of scepticism versus belief played out in the face of death, of the responsibility of doctors, and of the afterlife.

Writing fiction is a powerful way to explore our own pain, as well as the pain of others. Medicine is full of suffering and it's only in being comfortable with it that I can do my job. The pain isn't only my patient's, it's also my own. I have a professional face, a professional dispassion that allows me to work, but when I go home and reflect on the events of the day I have to process how I feel. That includes helplessness in the face of what I can't change.

I would never betray a patient's confidence. I took an oath on that. What I can write about is my own feelings about birth, aging, illness, death, fertility, infertility, disability, parenthood, family dysfunction, abuse, deprivation, and addiction.

One thing I am liberal with in my writing is my own and family's experiences of ill health. When I was a junior doctor my dad started to have falls. Coupled with his emotional volatility and the strange decisions he'd been making, I asked the cardiologist whom he'd been referred to if he could have a brain scan. He laughed at me, but said he'd humour me. He wasn't laughing when he bleeped me at work to tell me my father had a parieto-frontal brain tumour. It was benign but he would

have had only another three months to live if it had gone undetected. He's fine now. He made a good recovery. We're programmed to forget pain. A way to survive it. Dad jokes I'm always killing him off in my fiction. That fear, that pain is still somewhere inside me. The moment I stood with the phone in my hand after the cardiologist hung up. I thought I'd gone deaf. The world was suspended. All of the shock, my fear of losing him, manifests in words.

Some doctors cite a sibling's illness, disability, or death as a reason for joining the profession. My brother has learning disabilities. Even at a young age I felt the weight of responsibility for him. I sometimes resented it, which made me feel guilty. He's a gentle person, easy to look after, but for a long time I feared the future and what it would look like. How would I care for him?

My own health is in my writing too. I have severe endometriosis and uterine fibroids, which left me with debilitating pain and other menstrual symptoms. It took years and several hospital admissions to get a definitive diagnosis. Intermittently the blood supply to one of the fibroids got cut off. I'd lie on the bathroom floor, doubled up, sweat dripping onto the tiles.

In 2013 I was asked to submit a story for an anthology of new fairy tales. I chose the common theme of longing for a child. In 'Egg' a rich woman meets a squatter in her barn, whom she calls 'the hag'. The hag divines the woman's greatest wish and questions her on why she has failed to conceive:

'My pelvis contains a tangled mess of lumps and adhesions that renders my reproductive tract defunct. I'm still outraged by my body's betrayal. It's

failed in the most basic of female functions...My own salvaged eggs, fertilized and implanted, failed to take as if they'd fallen on stony ground.'

The woman makes an unwise bargain and the hag gives her an egg. It hatches and inside is a girl, nicknamed Chick. Chick has an unidentified syndrome and needs constant care and challenges the woman's ideas of motherhood and disability.

'Chick doesn't like cuddles. Once I thought she was trying to kiss me. I leant down, eager to receive it, and got a mouthful of chewed spider instead. Her attempt at affection.

She never looks at me directly. Sometimes I want to shake her and shout, just to make her meet my gaze.

I spoon the porridge into her small mouth, set in its receding jaw. Chick's face is narrow, her eyes large, ears low, and her nose beaked. People find nothing endearing there. They either look away or simply stare...

I try and imagine this life stretching out ahead of us. I'll wring the hag's neck if I ever see her again.'

'Egg' isn't the story of me or my brother, but it contains parts of both of us and our experiences. Some of my feelings are there because I can't write fiction without my own truths. Or at least emotional honesty.

I later wrote a story called 'Papa Eye' prompted by a visit to a nursing home. One of the residents had died and the contents of their room had been dumped into a skip. Seeing the discarded photos of family events, faces laughing into the lens, felt like the final indignity of death to me. I went through a phase of being angry

at the body's inbuilt obsolescence. If the flesh doesn't betray you, then the mind or spirit does. Sometimes I forgot that there was a whole cohort of well people out there because I was dealing with those affected by dementia, cancer or depression. I began to fear losing my autonomy in old age. Me or my loved one dying a painful, protracted, undignified death. Losing myself to depression. The world seemed sour and sad. So I wrote about mortality and memory.

A character in 'Papa Eye' tells his therapist:

'My father used to say that we live on in memories of those whose lives we touched. When I tried to explain this to my ex-wife she called me maudlin. She told me that this was the function of children, the genetic code that lived on. It's not enough. I have all these moments inside me related to my parents, to strangers, all that's left of them. When I am gone, those will be gone too.'

Another of my stories, 'The Rising Tide', is about a doctor struggling to recover from a medical error that resulted in a patient's death.

'The tide has carved out caves. We imagine that we can do what stone can't; that we can hold back the rising tide and remain whole and unaffected. So much for my grandiose plans of helping people. I can't even help myself.'

At first I thought telling stories was just escapism but it's more essential to my wellbeing than that. It's taken me the best part of a decade to realize that I write myself over and over again. It's my response to *physician heal thyself*.

Priya Sharma

Priya Sharma's fiction has appeared in venues such as *Interzone*, *Black Static*, *Nightmare*, *The Dark* and *Tor*. She's been anthologised in several of Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year* series and Paula Guran's *Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror* series, among others. Her short story 'Fabulous Beasts' was a Shirley Jackson Award finalist and won a British Fantasy Award. *All the Fabulous Beasts*, a collection of her some of her work, available from Undertow Publications, was a Locus Award Finalist, and won a British Fantasy Award and Shirley Jackson Award. *Ormeshadow*, her first novella (available from Tor), won a Shirley Jackson Award and a British Fantasy Award.

<http://www.priyasharmafiction.wordpress.com/>

A recording of this piece can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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