Human Conditions: Narratives of Illness and Disease

Course description: The two disciplines this seminar in interdisciplinary study juxtaposes are medicine and literature, but our investigations will proceed from a vision of these ostensibly quite different disciplines as two related paradigms of inquiry in one overarching meta-discipline: the study of patterns of living and dying. Within this larger, single discipline, we will focus on the narrative patterns through which both biological processes of disease and human experiences of illness are recognized and understood. These patterns fall into a range of generic categories—from anecdote to case study to a new sub-species of autobiography, pathography—and encompass a fascinating array of narrative types: here are detective stories and war stories, accounts of restitution and rebirth, tales of quests, epic journeys, of rites of passage, and passing on. In turn, these stories draw from a cast of stock characters, and it is this collection of personae that will provide the organizational structure for the seminar. In this way, we will begin with a look at “stories” epidemiologists tell, move on to doctors’ stories—particularly in their role as diagnosticians—turning thence to narratives of nurses, and, last but not least, “patients” of both human and metaphorical types. As scheduling and availability permits, this course will include several guest speakers and a field trip to one session of Columbia University’s “Narrative Medicine Rounds.”

Required texts:
Course packet: available at New University Copy and Graphics, 11 Waverly Place
Jacalyn Duffin, The History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction
Daniel Defoe, Journal of the Plague Year, Norton Critical Edition
Sinclair Lewis, Arrowsmith, Signet Classics Edition
Louisa May Alcott, Hospital Sketches, Bedford/St. Martin’s Edition
Veneta Masson, Ninth Street Notebook
Audre Lorde, The Cancer Journals
John Callahan, Don’t Worry He Won’t Get Far on Foot
Herodotus, Histories

Recommended text:

Supplies:
One empty book or notebook (your contribution to the class’s circulating library of seminar journals).
Course requirements:
1. Field trip to Columbia University’s Narrative Medicine Rounds--time and date TBA.
2. Weekly entries in one of the class’s circulating notebooks.
3. One turn at beginning class discussion.
4. One 7-10 minute in-class presentation.
7. One short (~5 page) paper on an item in the NYU’s special collections library (Fales library).
8. One long (12-15 page) paper that takes an interdisciplinary approach to a topic of your choice.

Attendance: The success of our investigations this semester will depend in part on the work of building intellectual community together; for this reason, regular attendance by all seminar participants will be crucial. While an occasional absence (two at the most) or late arrival in the case of an emergency won’t lower your grade (or, worse, deprive our community of your insights!) more than that certainly will. Do your best to attend every single class session!

Grades: Your grade will be computed as follows:
Class participation: 20%
(a reflection of your attendance, preparation for beginning class discussion on your day, and your contributions to discussion and circulating notebooks)
Short paper: 20%
In-class presentation: 10%
Long paper: 50%
total: 100%
Seminar Schedule

September 12
   Introduction: Stories and the health-care delivery situation--reading ER

   **Semiotics - Illness - Disease - Narrative**

   September 19
   Jacalyn Duffin, “The Fabricated Body” and “Technology and Disease” [from *The History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction*]
   Berton Rouche, “A Game of Wild Indians” and “Sandy”

   **Epidemiologists’ Stories**

   September 26
   Duffin, “Plagues and Peoples”
   Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*
   Benjamin Jonson, “On My First Sonne”

   *guest: Patrick Phillips*

October 3
   film: *The Band Played On*
   Duffin, “Interrogating Life,” “Science of Suffering,” and “Why is Blood Special?”
   *last hour: meet in Fales Library; first paper assigned*

[October 10--no class]

   **Doctors’ Stories**

   October 17
   Duffin, “On Being a Doctor” and “A Many Faceted Gem”
   Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith*

   October 24
   Duffin, “First Do No Harm” and “Work of the Hand”
   Richard Selzer, “Fetish” and “Toenails”
   Atul Gawande, “The Case of the Red Leg”

   **Nurses’ Stories**

   October 31
   Duffin, “Women’s Medicine and Medicine’s Women”
   Walt Whitman, “The Wound Dresser”
   Florence Nightingale, selections from *Letters from the Crimea* and *Notes on Nursing*
   Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*

   *first paper due*

November 7
   Duffin, “No Baby, No Nation”
   Veneta Masson, *Ninth Street Notebook*
Patients’ Stories

November 14
Duffin, “Wrestling with Demons”
Audre Lorde, The Cancer Journals

November 21
Arthur Frank, “Asking the Right Question about Pain: Narrative and Phronesis”
John Callahan, Don’t Worry He Won’t Get Far on Foot

November 23
No class; field trip will replace (time, destination TBA) second paper assigned

Charting a Novel

November 28
Herodotus, Histories (book 1)
Gerald Weissman, “The Chart of the Novel”

December 5
The English Patient
“Living with the Bomb”

December 12
film, The English Patient
guest: Professor Patrick Deer

December 19: final paper due