

## Celebrating Medicine in Literature

**Clare Matterson**, Wellcome Trust Director of Medical Humanities and Engagement, **Donna Renney**, Chief Executive of Cheltenham Festivals, **Christopher Cook**, BBC Radio 3 presenter and Chairman of the Cheltenham Music Festival, and Wellcome Trust Book Prize judges **Jo Brand**, **Raymond Tallis**, **Richard Barnett** and **Quentin Cooper** talk about the Prize and the 2009 shortlist.

**CM:** We strongly believe and really hope that this prize will become important, because medicine, I think we can all agree, has become so fully integrated into modern life.

**DR:** I think this prize is going to really highlight for the public the importance of medicine, the importance of medical developments, in probably some books that they're already reading but perhaps not thinking about.

**CC:** It seems to me that medicine actually is now central to all lives in its widest possible sense. In the end medicine is about life and about death, and if you think about literature, literature is about life and death.

[Caption: *Illness* by Havi Carel]

**RT:** It's a personal account of a very rare illness called LAM, suffered by Havi Carel, who's written it, and she describes the illness from three points of view: one is the objective description of the process as clinicians would see it; the other is the personal experiences that the illness brings about; and the third is the implications of having an illness like this for one's understanding of what it is to be an embodied individual.

**RB:** It's a very timeless kind of book. I mean this is the sort of thing that philosophers have been doing for thousands of years: trying to understand the human condition, using philosophy to understand life, death, mortality.

[Caption: *Keeper* by Andrea Gillies]

**QC:** Terrific, terrifying, absolutely powerful in every choice of word, every sentence and the whole thrust of this. This is non-fiction, it's the story of somebody who is turned into a carer for their mother-in-law who's got Alzheimer's, and as the story accumulates, not only do you get the individual tale of what it is like to be that person, and it's completely unflinching in this, you also get the science along the way.

**JB:** What I love about it is it's dark, it's humorous, it's very truthful, it's beautifully written, it is so readable, and it's the sort of book that's readable even if you're not really interested in the subject.

[Caption: *Intuition* by Allegra Goodman]

**QC:** This is a novel set in the world of medical research and chapter by chapter it fleshes out what's involved in trying to test new pharmaceuticals, new compounds, and get them to market,

and the pressures on individuals, on research labs, the economic factors, the psychological factors, the moral factors, why sometimes boundaries get crossed and borders get blurred and even lies get told. And as the story accumulates you get more insights into the nature of scientific research, not the kind of dream about, you know, you go out, you do the work, you discover, but about what it is like when you're working in a lab where you've got to have results and you're up against financial incentives as well. It builds it up very nicely but at the heart of it all it's a kind of thriller, it's almost a 'who discovered it', it's a new kind of medical genre. It's powerful in its way but it also takes you through the whole process of discovery.

[Caption: *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese]

**RB:** *Cutting for Stone* is in some ways the kind of novel that you don't imagine being written these days; it's massive, it's panoramic, it spans decades, it spans thousands of miles. It's the story of a young doctor born in Ethiopia who moves around the world and there are several parallel stories about trying to find his father, trying to find his twin brother. It's enormously moving.

**JB:** What I liked about it was, I mean, there's a lot of medical stuff in there but it's actually what I would say is a really good read.

[Caption: *Three Letter Plague* by Jonny Steinberg]

**QC:** This is over a two-year period and it cuts between the story of a Médecins Sans Frontières doctor and an individual in Africa who is HIV positive, and it deals with the attempts of Western medicine and other medicines to intervene, but it also deals with the cultural aspects, the cultural taboos about HIV and AIDS. It's a true story, although the patient's name has been changed, and strangely as it develops, there's a third character appears which is the author themselves, who has another story that fits into this. So it's got surprises, it's also got a lot that makes you think again about a subject like HIV and AIDS, which most of us probably think we've heard enough about.

**RB:** This really is a book that could have, I think, a major political impact were it more widely read.

[Caption: *Tormented Hope* by Brian Dillon]

**RT:** Brian Dillon, I think, is a brilliant essayist, it describes half a dozen well-known hypochondriacs, people like James Boswell, Glenn Gould, Andy Warhol and so on, but the way he drills down into the basis of their hypochondria, empathises with them, understands what it meant for them and very brilliantly describes the lives they built around their hypochondria, I think makes this a unique and very interesting book.

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