

"This is a book that celebrates the old-fashioned way—by chronicling the progressive triumph of science over superstition. Nuland is a gifted and inspiring storyteller."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

Doctors



The Biography of Medicine

SHERWIN B. NULAND

Author of How We Die
and The Wisdom of the Body

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From the author of *How We Die*, the extraordinary story of the development of modern medicine, told through the lives of the physician-scientists who paved the way.

How does medical science advance? Popular historians would have us believe that a few heroic individuals, possessing superhuman talents, lead an unselfish quest to better the human condition. But as renowned Yale surgeon and medical historian Sherwin B. Nuland shows in this brilliant collection of linked life portraits, the theory bears little resemblance to the truth. Through the centuries, the men and women who have shaped the world of medicine have been not only very human, but also very much the products of their own times and places. Presenting compelling studies of great medical innovators and pioneers, *Doctors* gives us a fascinating history of modern medicine. Ranging from the legendary Father of Medicine, Hippocrates, to Andreas Vesalius, whose Renaissance masterwork on anatomy offered invaluable new insight into the human body, to Helen Taussig, founder of pediatric cardiology and co-inventor of the original "blue baby" operation, here is a volume filled with the spirit of ideas and the thrill of discovery.

Doctors: The Biography of Medicine Details

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L. says

Whiggish history, at its worst. This book did contain a lot of information, I just wish Nuland had kept his opinions about how science and medicine "should be" out of it. Also, his writing had far too many poetical flourishes for my taste. It was really quite annoying to hear him go on page-long love notes to the scientific methods of certain surgeons and doctors. I was also annoyed by the focus on surgeons, the inherent Western bias, and the complete absence of any mention of the contributions of nurses to medicine. It should be titled Doctors (Well, Really, Surgeons): The Biography of a Very Small Portion of Western Medicine.

Jim says

Dr Nuland presents a very good overview of the progress of medical science from the early Hippocratic views of natural medical practices that were based on observation (often getting things wrong) to Galen, (who brought both systematic examination and often dangerous dogma) and finally into the evolution of the scientific method in the field of medical sciences in the near-modern era. The lectures were pleasant and informative. Nuland provides a bit of a bias toward surgery, but it is no way distracting from the point of the lectures...which, in my opinion, deals with the scientific progress of medical profession exemplified by the innovative founding doctors and intellectuals.

Another good course and well worth the time. As always, recommended when on sale, with a coupon....

Essam Munir says

This course is one of the best courses !
The stories of names we read about in books become alive in this course...

Jonathan says

Not bad as what it is, but not my thing. The style, which is supposed to be ingratiating, struck me as affected.

Gretchen Stokes says

Although I am only halfway through, my renewed enthusiasm for Sherwin Nuland could no longer be contained. Every time I read a book by Dr. Nuland, I find myself again looking for someone to quote passages aloud to- luckily my husband complies, despite occasionally falling asleep. I cannot keep the perfection and sublime meaning of his stories to myself.

This is no exception. While ostensibly the story of medicine, of rather the great personalities who took the

big steps to changes the way medicine was practiced, understood and taught,- this book is so much more. As Nuland himself points out in the dedication, (to paraphrase) the history of medicine is the history of humankind's search for meaning. It is the tale of us caring for each other.... A great book; alternately entertaining, tragic, uplifting, and enhancing understanding of our roots. Kinda like life. Thank you, Dr. Nuland.

Sohvi says

Very basic, and contains several rather silly mistakes. Yes, it makes perfect sense that the sports clothing company Nike was named after Aelius Nicon, the father of Galen and not Nike, the goddess of victory. Seriously.

Also, the narrator was so slow I had to listen this at 1.25 speed. And even that was kinda slow.

David P says

"Doctors " is a passionate history of surgery. There is much more to medicine: drugs, vaccines, epidemics and many other side branches, only sketchily covered here, though they probably deserve their own histories and halls of fame. But the evolution of surgery is a fitting framework for tracing all medical history, and Dr. Nuland, a surgeon himself, knows enough stories to stitch together a fascinating narrative. It is a large book, heavy (4.2 lb), beautifully produced in China: savor it slowly, a chapter at a time.

Dr. Nuland is an experienced writer ("How we Die"), sensitive to nuances of personality ("Lost in America" is a touching account of his growing up) and a developed sense of history. The result is a highly personal account, not at all detached, illustrating his belief that medicine, though heavily relying on science and its methods, is primarily an art.

Today's educated citizen takes for granted our knowledge of the human body, and rarely appreciates how slow and hesitant was the acquisition of the even the most basic facts about it--e.g. the circulation of blood and the role of microbes in disease. Today's educated citizen might also be surprised at the number of medical problem still unsolved (how do we get headaches, arthritis, cancer? How does the brain work, and interpret what the eye sees?), without realizing that much of today's medicine only emerged in the 19th and 20th century. Nuland goes back to the foundations, to Hippocrates groping in ignorance, to Galen (1st century) who dissected animals (but never human bodies!) and who identified organs with no clear idea of what they did. Also to Vesalius, finally dissecting the dead human and, not having photography available, calling on some of the finest artists of the renaissance to produce careful drawings of what he saw. And to Ambroise Paré, the barber-surgeon who earned skill and knowledge by tending many of the wounded in the religious wars of the 16th century.

Even today, surgeons still know far too little of what makes the body tick. Imagine yourself in a similar position--given a working computer and asked to figure out its operation, at first without even opening its case. When you finally do open it, you face a bewildering array of wires and encased circuits, and opening these is still not enough: even to trace the circuitry inside "chips" requires a good microscope, and after that you still need to understand what they do. The task facing medical science is not much easier, and one ought to be amazed at the limited headway achieved.

Progress accelerated in the 1600s with understanding of blood circulation and of the heart, though it remained for some determined men and women in the 20th century to perform heart surgery and save lives of "blue babies." The story of Ignac Semmelweis illustrates the uncertainty of progress. Given an insight--through a fatal incident to a fellow surgeon--of the deadly infection which killed mothers after childbirth, he was prevented by his timid character and lack of writing skills from applying his finding on a wider scale and thus saving thousands of lives. You read of Joseph Lister, the gentle Quaker surgeon of Edinburgh, and of Robert Virchow, pursuing twin goals of improving surgery and bettering society. And about the contested origins of anesthesia, about the sprouting of the first modern American school of medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, and about surgeries made possible only by heart-lung machines and anti-rejection drugs. This book was first published in 1988; had it been written more recently, it would at least cover laparoscopic surgery, remotely conducted through tiny incisions.

It is a story well told, because the author has an insider's insight and information, has traced history to its details (credit the Yale Historical Medicine Library!) and because his style is personal and engaging. If you have a favorite physician, this book may make an appropriate gift. But first, read it yourself!

Kathryn says

Interesting, though not as detailed in some areas as I would like. Heavy on surgical history, as you would expect from a surgeon ;)

Xiaoqin says

Engrossing

Jon A. says

Nuland was a wonderful writer. When reading Nuland one believes they are reading a high profile non-fiction author. His words flow easily and precisely. He was a wonderful storyteller. RIP Sherwin.

Juli Kinrich says

I didn't think I'd like this book (I'm more of a novel and memoir kind of reader), but I was on vacation in a foreign country and desperate for something to read. It was so good, I almost wanted to be a doctor upon completing the book!

Zack says

Dr. Nuland's relatively lucid prose is instrumental in bringing to life the realities of the advancement of

medical science and knowledge over time. The journey that he takes readers on is one full of maybe even more blood and guts than would be expected with a medical book, as well as far more heart and human interest than such a book could perhaps be expected to provide. To a certain extent, the profiles that Nuland offers here can be a bit repetitive until they reach the more modern examples, but even these older ones aren't without interest with regard to both the medicine being practiced and the lives of the practitioners. What I appreciated towards the end of the book was his introduction of the shift in the overall culture of medicine that has occurred in the last several decades, where the whole of society is implicated in decisions regarding medical treatments and experimentation. This, I think, is the core concern of the book even if it doesn't emerge until the end--how does society view human life and well-being, how does culture define life and its antecedents, and how do we as fellow men assist our brother in retaining his health? These are critical questions that Nuland deftly introduces, even if he doesn't provide detailed answers to any of them.

All around this book could easily be shorter, but I don't regret any of the time spent in its pages. The characters here are well-rounded and interesting, and perhaps their only flaw is that they are all almost too smart to be believed--but then what did I expect in starting a book about great doctors and great discoveries.

James says

Surprisingly well written and hardly boring, despite the dense material covered in this comprehensive history of doctors and medicine.

Andrew says

I should clarify that my rating is for the Great Courses lectures from the Teaching Company. Apparently he also has a book on this topic and some of the reviews here seem to be regarding the book, not the lecture series.

Jeremy says

This was a fantastic course presented by a surgeon. It would be very hard to choose 12 figures that represent the rise of scientific medicine and the presenter being a surgeon, there is a notable bias towards favouring the evolution of surgery rather than medicine. For example it omits vaccination, antibiotics, and talks about Holstead instead of Osler. Nevertheless this course has revived my interest in the history of medicine and I would strongly recommend it to all doctors.
