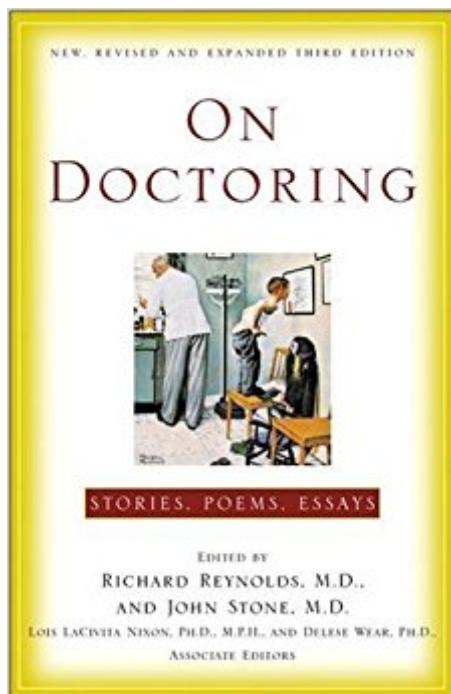


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# On Doctoring: New, Revised And Expanded Third Edition



## Synopsis

Few subjects hold more universal appeal than that of medicine, and surely few books have evoked medicine's drama and magic more powerfully than "On Doctoring." In its many forms, from age-old ritual to the cutting edge of modern science, medicine concerns us all. It is a human profession, practiced by people who have dedicated their lives not only to science but also to humanity. In the words of the great physician-writer Sir William Osler, "The physician needs a clear head and a kind heart; his work is arduous and complex, requiring the exercise of the very highest faculties of the mind, while constantly appealing to the emotions and higher feelings." It is the humanity in medicine that has inspired the pens of countless writers, and that has now been captured in this remarkable anthology of medical literature. This newly expanded edition of "On Doctoring" is an extraordinary collection of stories, poems, and essays written by physicians and non-physicians alike -- works that eloquently record what it is like to be sick, to be cured, to lose, or to triumph. Drawing on the full spectrum of human emotions, the editors have included selections from such important and diverse writers as Anton Chekhov, W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, John Keats, John Donne, Robert Coles, Pablo Neruda, Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Alice Walker, Kurt Vonnegut, and Abraham Verghese. Among the new authors included in this edition are Rainer Maria Rilke, Lisel Mueller, and May Sarton. In this era of managed healthcare, when medicine is becoming more institutionalized and impersonal, this book recaptures the breadth and the wonder of the medical profession. Presenting the issues, concerns, and challenges facing doctors and patients alike, "On Doctoring" is at once illuminating and provocative, a compelling record of the human spirit.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Few physicians and fewer medical students read novels. Nonetheless, literature has much to teach physicians and medical students about the type of work they have chosen. This anthology, aimed primarily at first-year medical students, is made up of bite-sized offerings. It includes 130 pieces (mostly poems, but also stories, essays, and one short play) by 81 authors, with all the pieces chosen because they illuminate an aspect of the practice of medicine. Although it is labeled as a third edition, the collection remains substantially similar to the 1991 first edition (about a dozen authors from the first and second editions do not appear here, and a few more than that have been added). Nonetheless, there is no better place than this book to begin an exploration of what literature tells us about physicians and what physicians have written that can qualify as literature. The core of the collection is made up of selections from writers whose stories will be familiar to many readers of the Journal; these include W. Somerset Maugham, William Carlos Williams, Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, Jorge Luis Borges, and Raymond Carver. Nor will the poets (writing mostly about death and suffering) surprise the reader; they include Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, Dylan Thomas, Denise Levertov, and one of the book's coeditors, John Stone. The best essays on medical practice in the collection were originally published in the Journal and include pieces by physician-writers Lewis Thomas, Robert Coles, Carola Eisenberg, Joseph Hardison, and David Hilfiker. Other contemporary physician-writers are also well represented, including Lawrence Altman, Melvin Konner, Abraham Verghese, Perry Klass, Jon Mukund, and Ethan Canin. Since 1991, when the first edition was published, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (of which coeditor Richard Reynolds was executive vice president at the time) has distributed the book free to all first-year medical students. The goal of trying to develop in physicians a lifelong habit of reading literature is a good one, since much of the practice of medicine involves understanding patients' narratives and listening to their stories. It is also difficult to quarrel with this book's content, although many of the selections over-romanticize the practice of medicine, and few hint at its economic and bureaucratic aspects. The inclusion of some less reverential pieces would have provided more insight into medical practice. Kurt Vonnegut's devastating short play, *Fortitude*, is the only entry with much humor. At least one excerpt from the novel that is most widely read by medical students, *The House of God* (New York: Dell, 1978), by Samuel Shem (the pen name of physician Stephen Bergman) and almost anything on medicine by Mark Leyner would have been welcome additions. Most of the fiction and virtually all the poetry is universal and aims deep.

Nonetheless, it is the essays in this collection that will attract medical students the most, since they speak directly to the experience of being (and becoming) a physician. Those included are all strong, but the addition of something like David Rothman's essay on medical professionalism, which appeared in the Journal (2000;342:1284-86), would have made the collection both more contemporary and more challenging to medical students. The introduction to the book insists that "physicians and patients must continue to talk and listen together -- and literature can help in that exchange." But I doubt that this book will have a readership among patients. It is much more an insider's book. Moreover, reading is a solitary activity, and as Jay Katz has eloquently argued in *The Silent World of Doctor and Patient* (New York: Free Press, 1984), there is seldom much in the way of real communication between doctor and patient. Reading literature will not change this situation, although group discussions about readings (including medical school seminars on literature and medicine) could help. In addition to medical students, then, the other major target audience for this book should be medical school faculty members. The book does have one glaring problem. Although it includes selections by women writers, the collection is dominated by white male physicians. This domination -- something literature should help to expose and correct -- is reinforced (but unexplained) by the titles given the editors themselves; the two male physicians are called "editors" and the two female Ph.D. humanists (Lois LaCivita Nixon and Delese Wear) are described (in much smaller type on the cover) as "associate editors." The photographs and biographies of the two male physician-editors appear on the book jacket; there are no photos or biographies of Nixon and Wear. The message to medical students is unmistakable and perverse: even in the world of literature, only physicians matter. Finally, the editors treat all their selections equally, and organize them (with no explanation) according to the author's date of birth. It does not help new medical students simply to be told to read this book because it is good for them. They should be told where to begin. I think they should be told explicitly to begin with Richard Selzer's story "Imelda," Robert Coles's essay "Medical Ethics and Living a Life," David Hellerstein's story "Touching," and two poems: Rafael Campo's "What the Body Told," and Gregory Edwards's "The Shot." They can figure out the rest by themselves. George J. Annas, J.D., M.P.H. Copyright © 2002 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.

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postgraduate training at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. After spending a number of years in private practice of internal medicine, he held academic appointments at the University of Florida College of Medicine and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

Every clinician regardless of field of practice should read this book

I bought this at the behest of a friend of mine, so I am trying to be fair with the rating. I'm sure others really appreciate this collection of work. However, I had to pull 1 star just because it seems like so much horse...stuff.

I ordered this book new and when I received it in the mail, everything looked good except for the back cover. The last 5 to 6 pages, along with paper lining on the inside of the back cover were all torn from being glued together somehow?? Besides that, the rest of the book was in perfect condition.

works as expected

Perfect copy! Thanks. RMC

This highly readable collection of essays and poems is a must read for all physicians in training, and for any physicians who may be losing their passion for healing.

I have read and re-read this book multiple times and it's relevance is timeless, especially given the upheavals the culture of medicine is undergoing. I plan to share it with my FMG residents.

I really didn't like this book. I thought it would be great based on the reviews, but maybe I just failed to read the description well enough. It really just seems like a book compiled with these little poems inside. Some people may like it, but it really wasn't my type of read.

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