

A slippery slope

Many writers have been doctors; some have been medical students who never qualified; yet others contemplated medicine as a career but chose otherwise. In the third group is Shusako Endo, a Japanese novelist. He chose to study French literature instead of medicine.

One of his most powerful novels is *The Sea and Poison*, about a young doctor in wartime Japan who, through being too weak to refuse, takes part in a murderous experiment on an American prisoner to find out how much of the lung can be cut away before death ensues.

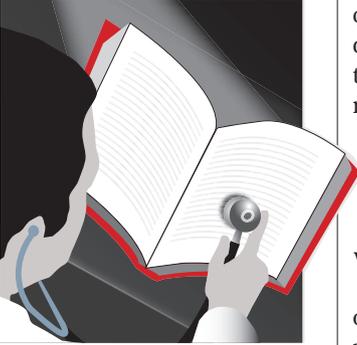
The book was published in 1958, well before the scale of Japanese forced experimentation on prisoners and others, mostly in Manchuria, was generally known. It was a brave book, for it tackled a subject that was about as uncomfortable as a subject can be. It won one of the most important literary prizes in Japan and was translated into English, but the subject was soon relegated to the back of the world's mind for another few decades.

The protagonist of the story is Dr Suguro, who works as a junior in a university unit devoted to the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis by surgical means. The author delineates the slippery slope down which not only Suguro but all the other doctors, including the chief, Dr Hashimoto, known as "The Old Man," slide.

Dr Hashimoto is determined to become dean of the medical school after the death of the former dean. He thinks he will strengthen his chances of election if he performs a successful and spectacular operation on a young female relative of the former dean who happens

**BETWEEN
THE LINES**

Theodore Dalrymple



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to have tuberculosis.

The operation is a catastrophe; the patient dies on the table. There is then a cover up: the patient, dead, is taken back to her room and her mother told that the operation went well, though the next days are so dangerous that no visits are allowed.

Endo's description of the operation is a masterpiece of compression; the tension is such that one's heart beats faster as one reads, like the heart of the sinking patient.

After the operation Dr Hashimoto's chances of being elected dean are slim. He tries to regain favour by agreeing

to the request of military doctors that he should experiment on US prisoners who are due to be executed anyway. One is rather reminded of the notorious Dr Kevorkian, who advocated medical experimentation on condemned prisoners in his book *Prescription: Medicine, the Goodness of Planned Death*.

Most of the doctors who take part in Dr Hashimoto's experiment are motivated by ambition and are discomfited not by their conscience but only by the prospect of exposure and disgrace, which they hope to avoid by a conspiracy of silence. They know shame but not guilt.

The book is all the more powerful for being quite short. Pascal once apologised for the length of his letter, saying that he had no time to write a shorter one. It is as wrong to suppose that the importance of a book is proportional to its length as to suppose that the moral deformations of which Endo writes are confined to one nation.

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MEDICAL CLASSICS

Tableau de l'Operation de la Taille (Picture of a Lithotomy), from the 5th Book for Bass Viol

By Marin Marais First published 1725

The bass viol (also known as the viola da gamba) is a supremely expressive but delicate musical instrument. It has been described as the closest an instrument can come to the human voice but was eclipsed by the more robust cello for several centuries

However, a renaissance over the past four decades has allowed us to enjoy again this subtle and emotionally direct instrument. Marin Marais (1656-1728) was one of the greatest of composers and performers of the viola da gamba, and his music gained a wider audience with the 1991 film *Tous les Matins du Monde*. Although little is known of Marais's personal life, through his work we glimpse a wonderfully flexible and humorous musical personality. For example, *La Gamme (The Scale)* is a wonderful fantasy based on the notes of the scale but incorporating all the latest fads from Italian opera.

Some of his works have medical themes, of which the most famous is the description of an operation to remove a bladder stone. The piece is short, as was the operation in those days—a skilled operator could perform the task in just under a minute. The course of the operation is easy to follow. Onomatopoeically there is a tremolo when the patient confronts the medical equipment; a rising diatonic scale when mounting the operating chair; descending parallel thirds when the catheter is introduced; fast and (for a viola da gamba) high pitched tremolo during the operation itself; punctuated rhythm in alternating fourths and rests finally dying away, representing the weakening flow of blood; and descending melodic movements when the patient is taken to bed.

The tonal structure mirrors the tension: the preparation of the operation in E minor, the preparation of the actual incision in a quasi-undulating harmony, the painful part of the operation in the subdominant A minor, and the care of the patient after the surgical treatment in a modulation back to E minor. The suite's next movement, *les Rélevailles*, pictures the recovery and joy on surviving the operation, not surprising considering that nearly half of those who underwent the procedure died. We do not know if Marais underwent lithotomy himself, but commentators suggest that the intensity of the musical experience is consistent with an intimate experience of this brief but brutal experience.



Did Marais undergo lithotomy?

For a doctor the fruits of listening to this piece are many. Apart from its innate musical pleasures it is in many senses a visceral time capsule of the origins of surgery, the ingenuity and hubris of our predecessors, and the importance of speed in medicine and surgery. Marais also caught some of the excitement of new developments in urology, which were propagated in France during his lifetime. The lateral perineal approach was pioneered by the surgeon Pierre Franco in the 16th century and popularised by an untrained pseudo-monk, Jacques de Beaulieu (1651-1714), possibly the Frère Jacques of nursery rhyme fame. Desmond O'Neill is a consultant in geriatric and stroke medicine, Dublin

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