

REVIEW: A HISTORY OF
THE PRESENT ILLNESS
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A History of the Present Illness
Louise Aronson
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A WOMAN IS OUT walking dogs when she sees a boy fall from a cliff. She is medically-trained but does not move to his aid quickly enough—what then is her code, and what causes her to hesitate? Is it possible for those in her life, and for us as readers, to come to terms with the training she left behind and the person she chose to become? Louise Aronson, herself a medical doctor, sheds light on such intimate questions in her debut collection *A History of the Present Illness*.

The opening sentence of the first story, “Snapshots from an Institution,” reveals what Aronson has set out to do: a patient, as of yet unnamed, “lies in bed the way a letter lies in its envelope.” In the context of the whole collection, this metaphor is striking—if unintended, it is prescient—for connecting the dots between patient and story. As a letter is a vehicle for meaningful narrative, in Aronson’s writing the patients and doctors are the medium through which meaning resonates.

Drawing from her own experiences of becoming and being a doctor, Aronson in sixteen stories chronicles both doctors and patients in and around San Francisco. The stories vary in content and character, in story circumstance and conflict, while sustaining the thread of their medical context; for example, a young daughter of Cambodian immigrants sees a psychiatrist at a public health clinic for wetting her bed in “An American Problem,” while “Becoming a Doctor” recounts a young woman’s medical school experiences that run the gamut from gruesome anatomy class to desperate sex. The sustained perspectives of patient and doctor lend these stories a sense of belonging together and compel the reader onward, pushing an overall narrative across the individual stories.

Some stories are in non-traditional literary forms. On the one hand, the form choices are thought-provoking; In “Blurred Boundary Disorder,” an alternate thread must be read in footnote, and “Twenty-five Things I Know About My Husband’s Mother” is an enumeration of those twenty-five in five pages or so. At times, however, such formal choices distract from and threaten to overwhelm the narrative.

A playful approach to story form is also present in what seems a flagship story, “Becoming a Doctor.” The story

is ambitious in its broad strokes of the spectrum between medical school acceptance and graduation. The concern with form, here, gets in the way of the reading experience. The story consists of an assemblage of meaningful but minute scenes. While these nineteen fractured pieces of “Becoming a Doctor” are individually very strong, and compelling, they are each deserving of more room. In one, for instance, Aronson has expertly set onstage a green medical student, war veteran patients, and a callous seasoned doctor. In another, an AIDS patient refuses antiretrovirals and is very much dying at the intersection of religion, guilt, and shame.

In this debut collection, Louise Aronson offers well-crafted, entertaining stories, many of which are breathtaking as they open windows to the worlds of medical school students and doctors and patients. Aronson has a knack for turning the flashlight on episodes when roles are reversed: doctor is patient, as in “Giving Good Death” in which an imprisoned doctor is probed by a woman psychiatrist on his views of life and death and suffering.

In “Heart Failure” a busy Latino physician, who is also a mother and a daughter, suffers through two tragic events: her father experiences a cardiac emergency,

and her attention-desperate rebellious teenage daughter runs away from home. Aronson negotiates the battle-worn weariness of the doctor with the raw emotions of daughter, wife, and mother. Some of the daughter’s last words before disappearing, “You two don’t even like me,” continue to haunt the doctor in quiet moments. From the moment she first learns from her husband of the disappearance, the doctor’s other children and her husband wrap themselves around her for emotional support. While Aronson catalogs the mechanics of the woman’s internal suffering, the future may not offer any respite from it.

Aronson’s techniques are honed. She is expert at mining her own experiences in medicine. Her stories here, and whatever she writes next, are prescriptions worth filling.