

Doctor Olaf van Schuler's Brain

by Kristen Menger-Anderson; Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Algonquin Books, 2008, 290 pages, \$22.95

Jeffrey L. Geller, M.D., M.P.H.

The book *Doctor Olaf van Schuler's Brain* is the first novel by Kristen Menger-Anderson, and it's a gem. The novel traces the Steenwycks family from the arrival of Dr. Olaf van Schuler (1640–1680) in America in 1664 to the most recently arrived family member, Arabella Steenwycks-Klein, born in 2001.

Between Olaf and Arabella there are 12 generations. Each chapter has a date for the events' occurrences, from 1664 to 2006, and each generation is represented. Every generation has at least one physician member who appears in the chapter representing the era, but the physician is not necessarily the center of the chapter's plot. The first female physician appears in the 1970s. There are some exceptions to this mold—no physician in one generation—but here the generation includes a healer of some sort.

The chapters read like short stories. This comes as no surprise, since Menger-Anderson is a short-story writer. The stories are tied together by the family lineage. This is no ordinary family of physicians spanning 350 years. Each physician has his or her own eccentricities. The family is affected by a genetic predisposition to mental illness; Olaf's mother, who accompanies him to America, is a "lunatic."

The book is an adventure of medicine in historical context. The stories are fun; the history of medicine, fascinating. The book is helped immeasurably by the family genogram provided at the outset. I would have been lost without it and checked it out as I started each chapter.

Doctor Olaf van Schuler's Brain starts with a lunatic mother in 1664 and ends with a father, Dr. Stuart

Steenwycks II (born in 1932) proclaiming to his daughter, Dr. Elizabeth Steenwycks (born in 1970), that he has Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. In between, the reader is treated to

chapter after chapter that is both humorous and full of pathos. When the reader encounters Jack Steenwycks' daughter, Sheila Talbot, who had her silicone breast implants removed after they had defined most of her adult life, it will be hard for the reader to know if the tears are those of laughter or sadness.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

The Unit

by Ninni Holmqvist, with Marlaine Delargyare (translator); New York, Other Press, 2009, 272 pages, \$14.95

Lloyd I. Sederer, M.D.

What is the purpose of a life? the author ponders. Does a life—yours or mine—exist to sustain the collective and its well-being, where value is in what a person produces, or does life have intrinsic value, where purpose derives from who a person is?

In the society that Holmqvist creates for her readers the former has hegemony. If you are a woman of 50 or a man of 60, living alone, without a child, and not a critical worker, you are designated as "dispensable" and go with trepidation but without resistance to a "Reserve Bank Unit." There you become a source of biological material (which means your organs are harvested, one by one—a kidney, a cornea, a slice of your liver) and a subject for experimentation until your utility is complete, at which time you make your "final donation," ending your stay in the Unit.

In Holmqvist's eerie, chilling, yet almost plausible social order, all citizens exist to further the gross national product (GNP): lives either advance or diminish the "capital" of the nation. Value (and meaning) issues from an individual's contributions to the national capital; for some, that means disappearing one day from the community and entering the Unit, where they further the social good as donors of body parts and subjects for advancing the scientific knowledge thought useful to the GNP.

And the GNP has been prospering, so the Unit can afford to be an ideal setting where comfort prevails, everything is free, and people have the time to attend to one another as the burdens of everyday existence vanish—as did its entrants from their antecedent but dispensable lives. For the residents of the Unit having trouble adjusting, and they appear numerous, there is an ample supply of capable psychologists to assist with coping (when they are not busy performing mind or drug experiments); physicians are occupied removing organs and aiding in physical recovery to prepare a Dispensable for her or his next contribution.

One has hopes for the protagonist, Dorrit Weger, who falls in love with another resident of the Unit and whose life changes in a profound way. She rails against the pain she witnesses among those around her and the grief of those still alive. At one point, Dorrit's anguish enables her to see, through the veneer of this well-ordered society, that her accommodations are a "luxury slaughterhouse." Holmqvist maintains the tension throughout and draws the reader into resisting what seems on the surface so

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reasonable yet curdles the blood.

This moral tale may be more credible to persons from European or Asian cultures, where the individual is more subordinate to a community ethos, as we witness since health care and education are universal in all but one advanced (Western) culture. An ethos of community before individual would hardly fly in Texas, Oklahoma, or Montana, to mention but a few places in the United States. Yet Holmqvist gives us a lesson in human

nature and social engineering through a story that is spare, compelling, and all too human. I am reminded of what the great urbanist, Jane Jacobs, wrote, "Perhaps the greatest folly possible for a culture is to try to pass itself on using principles of efficiency." However adorned, the totalitarian state in waiting warrants vigilance since it seems to meet many a human need.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

Handle With Care

by Jodi Picoult; New York, Atria Books, 2009, 496 pages, \$27.95 hardcover, \$16 softcover

Susan E. Bailey, M.D.

Jodi Picoult's *Handle With Care* is a harrowing novel, its action moving ever more swiftly and relentlessly toward what the reader early on intuits will be disaster. It is also beautifully written, riveting in its creation of an unresolvable conflict not just within the main character, but between her and everyone else she loves, including her younger daughter, Willow, a child born with a spontaneous mutation leading to type III osteogenesis imperfecta (OI). In a bid to win the money that would make Willow's life easier, Charlotte files a "wrongful birth" lawsuit against her obstetrician—who is also her best friend. The lawsuit destroys the friendship and imperils every other meaningful relationship that Charlotte has.

Picoult's books routinely achieve the *New York Times*' bestseller list, and this one demonstrates why: she is a master of metaphor. Picoult intermittently leavens the narrative with pastry-chef Charlotte's recipes and reflections on the techniques of baking—tempering, folding, "blind-baking," the use of interfering agents—linking each technique or pastry product to the action of the novel. To

read *Handle With Care* is to learn a lot about OI, something about pastry making, and much about ordinary human mistake and heartbreak. Most maddening and saddening for the reader is Charlotte's blind insistence that five-and-a-half-year-old Willow will understand that Charlotte is lying when she implies that yes, she would have aborted her daughter had her obstetrician recognized the importance of the startlingly clear ultrasound of Willow's calvarium at 18 weeks.

Picoult's plot moves forward with dizzying speed under the impetus of Charlotte's stubbornness, and as the trial begins and rushes toward settlement, things spin more and more out of control—Willow attempts suicide, the obstetrician and Charlotte's husband share a furtive kiss, the obstetrician's orthodontist husband helps diagnose and bring to Charlotte's attention the cutting and bulimia of her older daughter, Amanda. And Amanda, it turns out, is a masterful ice-skater, but her own life has been so overshadowed by Willow's needs that the reader is surprised to learn this fact. Nevertheless, it fits: just as children with OI are always at risk of another bone break, the ice-skating imagery drives home the message throughout Picoult's novel of skating on thin ice.

The ending of the novel was a complete and utter surprise to me. Other than to say it also fits, I won't say more but will simply recommend *Handle With Care* as something to read with care, when not feeling fragile.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

Night Navigation: A Novel

by Ginnah Howard; New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009, 304 pages, \$24 hardcover, \$13.95 softcover

Curtis Adams, M.D.

The book *Night Navigation* is a journey into the murky present and a dark past. The reader follows an anxious mother named Del and her 37-year-old son Mark, who has a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance dependence, through a year-long slice of their chaotic lives. Both characters reflect on their very difficult pasts to determine why their lives are on hold. The reader eavesdrops on their thoughts and discussions as they grapple with the two-headed tyrant of mental illness and substance dependence. Mark's illness is a dark bully: clandestine, stealthy, relentless, unforgiving, and domineering. Both characters attempt to conquer it, but they struggle. If Del micromanages Mark's life just so, can she avoid a repeat of past disasters? Will she maintain her boundaries, or will she retreat, as her boyfriend predicts? Will Mark get clean, and if so, will he stay clean?

While watching Del's failed efforts to change the course of Mark's life, the reader is treated to her many anxious cognitions and her unalloyed, wishful thoughts. Some of her struggles will make the reader laugh out loud. At the same time, one can empathize with her as she bypasses the many opportunities for a broader,

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fuller life. She has a grasp of the “love” element of the tough-love dyad but not the “tough” part.

Ginnah Howard has facility with addiction lingo. Using Mark to think and blurt out addiction and recovery catch phrases suggests that she has either done a great deal of homework or has had first-hand experience with addiction and its meandering course. To Howard’s credit, Mark’s words are not forced, overdone, or grotesque. They are often ironic and at times

funny. What is less convincing is her depiction of Mark’s manic and psychotic processes.

Thankfully, Mark and Del’s tale doesn’t end with all of its loose ends accounted for. After all, the characters don’t live uncluttered lives. Instead, Ginnah Howard gives us an entertaining and worthwhile true-to-life story about complicated people grappling with vexing problems.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

Towards Another Summer

by Janet Frame; Berkeley, California, Counterpoint, 2009, 208 pages, \$24

David S. Heath

This is clearly an autobiographical novel, described on the fly leaf as “written in 1963 when New Zealand writer Janet Frame was in London, this is the first publication of a novel she considered too personal to be published in her lifetime” (she died in 2004).

Almost the only character in the book, Grace Cleave is a New Zealand writer living in London. Written in the third person, most of the content is mainly the turmoil in Grace’s head, as she struggles to relate to the admiring people intruding into her life. These thoughts are interspersed with reminiscences of her family and childhood. Most of the action is the neurotic nightmare of a weekend spent at the home of journalist Philip Thirkettle, his wife, and small children in Northern England.

Grace is both famous and mentally disturbed. This sets up a delicious and amusing irony. There are the trappings of the famous Grace, represented by the interview by Thirkettle, requests for book signings, an interview on BBC Radio, and admiring references to her stories in *The New Yorker*. Then there is the real Grace, whose sense of self is abysmally vague and inadequate. Grace does not keep

copies of her books; she has to borrow one for the BBC interview “to find out what it is about” and is completely tongue-tied in the face of admiring inquiries. My guess at the diagnosis of character Grace Cleave (and author Janet Frame) is at least severe social anxiety disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. But there is clearly more—schizotypal personality disorder, I thought; high-level autistic spectrum disorder, according to Abrahamson (1).

Throughout the book is the recurring motif that Grace is a “migratory bird.” This includes a description of her literally turning into a migratory bird, “as she felt on the skin of her arms and legs, her breasts and belly, and even the top of her head tiny prickling beginning of the growth of feathers.” I could not decide whether this was a delusion, magic realism, a comforting fantasy, or a metaphor for the lonely exile. Perhaps my confusion here is similar to that experienced by those who encountered the author, including her psychiatrists.

Frame’s psychiatric history is intriguing and confusing and inexorably intertwined with her writing and her literary life. In and out of New Zealand mental hospitals for nine years, she was diagnosed as having schizophrenia. She narrowly escaped a scheduled lobotomy—cancelled when news arrived that she had just

received New Zealand’s most prestigious literary prize for her first book. During Frame’s voluntary admission to London’s famous Maudsley hospital, an American psychiatrist told her that she did not have schizophrenia; no alternative diagnosis was offered, but she was then able to accept that she was different from other people. She was advised to live alone and to socialize only if she felt like it. For recovery advocates, there is a rich vein of recovery narrative to be tapped here.

Her autobiography *Angel at My Table* was made into a film, which won prizes at Venice and Toronto film festivals and launched Jane Campion’s career. Frame was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature in 2003.

Towards Another Summer is beautifully written: it offers poetic prose, sharp insights into family life, and the best description of the agony of social anxiety disorder you will ever read.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

Reference

1. Abrahamson S: Did Janet Frame have high-functioning autism? *New Zealand Medical Journal* 120(1263), 2007

Peripheral Vision

by Patricia Ferguson;
New York, Other Press,
2008, 376 pages, \$24.95

Jackie Goldstein, Ph.D.

Patricia Ferguson’s fifth novel, *Peripheral Vision*, led to her second nomination for the United Kingdom’s Orange Prize for Fiction. Ms. Ferguson’s background in nursing and midwifery is obvious in the clarity and accuracy of the medical scenes and themes. Also, her experience in dealing with individuals in a professional capacity is most likely responsible for her psychological insight into how we deal with disease, disaster, death, disappointment, and rejection—all factors

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present in the story lines of the diverse characters in this literary tapestry.

For me, reading *Peripheral Vision* was not something to be done in the presence of background distraction. After the opening chapter, this novel required my undivided attention to keep track of the beautifully written—albeit in the early stages hard to connect—story lines. The relatively long opening chapter, set in 1995, introduces one of three primary female characters. Sylvia is a successful eye surgeon whose life becomes more complicated when she attains the last two things on her list of “everything she had ever wanted”—a husband and a child. As the chapter ends, Sylvia is distraught to the point of despair at a lack of maternal love for her newborn daughter. Having been drawn into the drama of Sylvia’s story through the author’s insights and artistry, I was eager to learn more.

Instead, the next chapter, although still set in 1995, tells the story of Will, a key male character who is caring for his aged mother in her home. Sylvia’s

life is out of the picture, although it is in the periphery; Will clearly knows her, but the reader knows hardly anything about the nature of their friendship.

In the third chapter, the novel moves backward in time, to 1953, with new characters and story lines. And so it goes—from one seemingly unrelated character to another and back again, and from the 1950s to 1995 and back again. Then, just when I became anxious with literary confusion, Ms. Ferguson’s intent to integrate the stories of three women and their sons, husbands, or lovers came in focus.

Visual themes and problems are present throughout the novel, and the title of Ms. Ferguson’s book has metaphoric, not literal, meaning. Metaphorically speaking, whereas we may be aware of those who are in focus in our visual field, we are also connected, in significant ways, to others through our peripheral vision.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

falling down on the job (all of the victims of suicide were his patients) but recruits prey for the local unethical drug company. Even the medical student and his girlfriend, who both have mental illnesses, come across as less than fully human, as illustrated by the girlfriend’s painting of two people sitting back-to-back in a small boat, adrift in the North Sea.

I generally don’t watch movies about psychiatrists or persons with mental illness, nor am I in the habit of criticizing medical students. However, this author appears to have taken things about which I care deeply and set them in a cold, cruel world, to explore some concern that is totally lost on me. I worry that an uninformed reader could view this as yet another reason to mistrust our field of medicine. A philosopher, but not a psychiatrist, might find intellectual pleasure in this book.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

Fredrik’s Winter: A Novel About Love, Mental Illness, and Rebirth

by Omar Metwally; Bloomington, Indiana, iUniverse, Inc., 2008, 156 pages, \$12.95

Sharon Farmer, M.D.

The novel *Fredrik’s Winter* undoubtedly made it into this year’s book reviews because it was written by a medical student, Omar Metwally of the University of Michigan Medical School, and has a psychiatrist and a mentally ill medical student as two of the main characters. However, reader, beware. This book has nothing to do with psychiatry and mental illness, at least not as I understand them. Perhaps this is because the novel assumes that reincarnation is a reality. What would happen to the field of medicine if sick and dying pa-

tients were assured of coming back to life?

To explore this issue, the author writes of five suicides. To ensure the reader doesn’t view reincarnation in the context of suicide alone, he adds deaths by accident, homicide, and hypothermia. Given that these all occur in fewer than 150 pages, this is a terribly bleak book. Does one person really need to live through a plane crash, a murder, and two suicides? Furthermore, what is the point of all this cycling between living and dying? No conclusions are drawn—just another round of deaths.

All psychiatrists who read this book will be upset by the portrayal of physicians as self-absorbed and uncaring. The psychiatrist is not only

Testimony

by Anita Shreve; Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 2009, 320 pages, \$25.99 hardcover, \$14.99 softcover

Ann L. Hackman, M.D.

The book *Testimony* is the latest novel from Anita Shreve. I should admit from the outset that I find this author’s work compelling and have read many of her previous novels. In fact, I had read *Testimony* two weeks before it arrived in my mailbox for review.

Testimony could have been pulled out of recent headlines. It deals with a sex scandal at an exclusive private boarding school. In the first sentence of the first chapter, the headmaster of the Avery Academy receives a videotape. The tape shows three boys, (upperclassmen at the academy) and a 14-year-old female student drinking

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and engaged in a variety of graphically described sexual activities. This devastating event and the catastrophic fallout from the tape create the focal point for the novel, which considers the episode from the viewpoints of more than a dozen characters whose lives have been affected. Each chapter is told in a different voice: the headmaster, each of the boys, the girl, various parents, other students, a cafeteria worker at the academy, a reporter, an attorney, and a police officer. Sometimes the characters are prodded by questions from a researcher who is writing about the scandal several years later.

Anita Shreve succeeds in giving the reader multiple perspectives as the pieces of the story come together into a coherent narrative. Shreve has a keen understanding of group process and of psychopathology. I found myself constructing differential diagnoses for several of the central characters. And I liked the follow-up with the characters in the months after the

tape emerged. When such events occur in real life, they remain in the press for a few weeks, but the public does not usually learn much about what happens to the principals after the fact. Many of the characters are nuanced and multidimensional, and the voices of some of the Avery Academy parents ring particularly true.

The novel is not without its flaws. Some of the repercussions of the tape seem both melodramatic and disappointingly predictable. The “mystery” of who is behind the camera filming the video adds nothing to the story. Further, the 14-year-old girl in the tape is a manipulative and disturbing character; although this may be necessary for the novel to work, I found it disquieting.

Still the novel held my attention and is not a book I will soon forget. *Testimony* is thought provoking, psychologically sophisticated, and well worth reading.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

his mother and his struggle to make accommodation with authority receive inadequate attention to allow real appreciation of this character's struggles.

My Name Is Will should be most appreciated by those schooled both in psychological development and in Shakespeare. Without the latter, Winfield's genuine wit with his subject matter may not be appreciated. The placement of a climactic moment in a modern-day Renaissance Faire is only one several devices that make the book a remarkable work of creativity.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

A Reliable Wife

by Robert Goolrick; Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Algonquin Books, 2009, 291 pages, \$23.95

Alan D. Schmetzer, M.D.

The book *A Reliable Wife* is Mr. Goolrick's second published book but his first novel. Set in Wisconsin during the cold, snowy fall and winter of 1907–1908, it is a tragedy of ordinary life, revolving around the passions, desires, and madness of three people—Ralph Truitt, a wealthy Midwestern industrialist who places an advertisement for a “reliable wife” for a second marriage; Catherine Land, the woman whose answer to the ad intrigues Mr. Truitt; and Antonio Moretti, a young man who is most likely the offspring of the first Mrs. Truitt and her Italian piano tutor. The first few words of the book induce a sense of foreboding, encased as they are in the cold imagery of the moment and the fog of an enigmatic past. The story unfolds inexorably toward new tragedies earned by past deeds. But there is also change and redemption in this tale. The reader comes to know each major character ever so slowly. Each is likable and re-

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My Name Is Will: A Novel of Sex, Drugs, and Shakespeare

by Jess Winfield; Boston, Twelve Publishers, 2008, 320 pages, \$14.99

Drew Bridges, M.D.

Jess Winfield intends a “ripping yarn” told through the device of parallel stories 400 years apart. Alternating chapters describe the early life of playwright William Shakespeare and that of a college student named William Shakespeare Greenberg.

The plot sees both characters charged with the delivery of a package. Each confronts young adult developmental tasks along the way and grows in the completion of the task. The modern-day “Willie” Shakespeare's journey is set in the 1980s version of West Coast college drug culture, where he is attempting to write a master's thesis about religious influences in the course of

playwright Shakespeare's work.

The author characterizes his tale of the historical Shakespeare as part history, part legend; the rest is from his imagination. Although Winfield admits this is not scholarship in the usual sense of the word, I found his creation to be a thoughtful contemplation on how the bard became the “Bard of Avon.” He deserves applause for exercising his curiosity about the matter.

The other story line came across as less substantial in several ways. This rendering of the drug culture seems too reminiscent of previous works, such as those of Tom Robbins, Richard Farina, and the young Tom Wolfe. The character arc of college student Shakespeare toward maturity begins late in the book and may leave the reader unconvinced. Substantial themes such as unresolved grief for

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pellant in his or her own special ways.

The book is set in a time torn by insanity as a side effect of the Industrial Revolution. People who drift aimlessly with little or nothing to anchor them are pitted against those driven by their own internal wants and demands. One cuts off his own hand because he sees a "sign of the devil" on it, others murder their families or kill themselves, and yet another beats his son bloody over the sins of the mother. Some of these events are told in

passing, whereas others combine to outline the main thread or subplots of this novel. This is a book that any mental health clinician of today will likely find compelling, even though it is from a different time and mind state. The characters are quite well drawn; the writing exotically descriptive; and the story believable, nearly inevitable. I found it difficult to set aside until finishing the final word.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

The House of Widows: An Oral History

by Askold Melnyczuk; St. Paul, Minnesota, Graywolf Press, 2008, 253 pages, \$16

Allan E. Crandell, M.D.

In his third novel, author Askold Melnyczuk presents us with the primal themes of love and death as closely entwined as two strands of literary DNA. On one level the reader is presented with the narrator's first-person odyssey to try to understand his father's death. After he declines his father's offered gun, hence rejecting patricide, he then witnesses his father's suicide with the same gun. On another level the reader is

invited to consider sex and intimacy cloaked in the "syntax of deceit," as the tale is freighted with a cast of characters from New England to Kiev who are often in surprising relationships with one another, some of them involved in the international sex trade. However, the book remains markedly unsentimental in its treatment of relationships, both familial and intimate.

The book is an explicit critique of the failure of Americans to fully live in the present, as the protagonist's grandmother tells him, "There's a freedom you've never known . . . [L]iving in the moment without in-

surance policies or laws nibbling away at you. You people plan for death right from the start." In another passage a character named Kij says, "These things leave a mark. . . . In the charmed circle of your America people will soon live hundreds of years. . . . This is the outer dark; here we survive however we can." This 25-year-old American is struggling not only with his father's death but also with the power of history itself and what it means to be a young man in a young country, confronting Europe's formidable history of thousands of years.

Woven darkly throughout the novel, the central question remains: how to account for the suicide of a loved one, particularly of one's father. Poet Ted Hughes makes a brief allusive appearance, "Two suicides for wives. Quite a record. And me just one dad." The narrator opines, "The children of suicides do not necessarily repeat their father's mistakes. Sometimes they let others do it for them." We often encounter patients who survive as relatives of those who have committed suicide, and this is a novelistic portrayal of the search for meaning and attempted individuation within the penumbra of a completed suicide. Clinicians will find much to ponder in this novel with its several interwoven themes of fraternal betrayal, paternal suicide, and the search for self.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

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Additional Book Reviews Available Online

Reviews of two additional books are available as an online supplement to this month's book review section on the journal's Web site at ps.psychiatryonline.org:

- ♦ Jaak Rakfeldt, Ph.D., reviews *The Unraveling Thread*
- ♦ Chuck Joy, M.D., reviews *Oxygen: A Novel*