

HCB 510 Literature, Compassion, and Health Care
Stony Brook Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics, Spring 2023
3 Credits

Class meetings: Tuesdays, 6 PM, from January 24 through May 02.

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OVERVIEW

How does literature help us understand the nature of human illness and suffering? Can written works of art, classic and contemporary, that depict moments of compassion and compassionate acts lay bare the moral, spiritual, psychological, and physical reality of suffering? There is a long association between literature and medicine, from the viewpoint of physician-writers, such as Anton Chekov, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Seltzer whose literary skills have eclipsed their medical backgrounds. Understanding how physicians are portrayed in literature, such as in Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, can help us explore the relationship between patient and doctor, between doctor and society, and the nature of healing. What is your role in healing, and how does reading and reflection help you in this role? In this full semester graduate-level course, we will study these relationships through the reading of poetry, drama, fiction, memoir, and essay and reflect on the nature of suffering, the intrinsic human need for compassion, and the implications for health and healing.

Educational objectives: Students who successfully complete this course will be able to

1. Discuss and demonstrate the use of literature as one method of enhancing empathy, imaginative identification, and the moral imagination.
2. Understand and explain literary, cultural, and religious attempts to find meaning in human suffering.
3. Demonstrate enhanced skills of “reading” patients and clinical situations through close reading of literary texts.
4. Describe how the arts and humanities provide insight into the human condition, suffering, and compassion.
5. Demonstrate an understanding of physicians’ responsibilities to patients, colleagues, and themselves.

READINGS

Required Texts:

- Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*, Vintage Books, 2010.
- Robert Coles & Randy Testa (Eds.) *A Life in Medicine: A Literary Anthology*. New York, The New Press, 2002
- Irvin & Marilyn Yalom, *A Matter of Death and Life*. Stanford University Press, 2021 (paperback available in March 2022)
- Victoria Sweet, *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine*, Riverhead Trade, 2013 (selected chapters)
- Heinrich Ibsen. *An Enemy of the People* (PDF)
- Additional poems (to be distributed)
- Additional stories (pdf attachments)

CALENDAR

Date	Topic	Readings
January 24, 2023	Introduction to Course	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Film: <i>Why Doctors Write</i> 2. Course Syllabus (handout) 3. Poems for discussion (handout) 4. Poetry prompt 5. Discussion Questions, <i>Cutting for Stone</i> (handout)
January 31	Healer-Patient Relationship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Rosalind Warren, "Outpatient," David Hilfiker, "Not All of Us Are Saints," David Loxtercamp, "Facing Our Mortality: The Virtue of a Common Life," William Carlos Williams, "The Girl with the Pimple Face," 2. <i>A Life in Medicine (poems)</i>: Jack Coulehan, "The Man with Stars Inside," 3. Richard Bronson, "I Shall be Your Vasari" (pdf) 4. "Metamorphosis," John Updike (pdf)
February 7	Experience of illness and suffering	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Jean-Dominique Bauby, "from <i>The Diving Bell and the Butterfly</i>," Wendell Berry, "Health Is Membership." 2. <i>A Life in Medicine (poems)</i>: Theodore Deppe, "Admission, Children's Unit," Lucia Cordell Getsi, "Letter from the Rehabilitation Institute," 3. Maria Basile, "Oatmeal Love" (pdf) 4. Jack Coulehan, "Heart Blockages" (pdf) 5. Richard Bronson "Another Country" (pdf) 6. Semezdin Mehmedinovic "My Heart" (pdf, excerpt)

February 14	Gender and Medicine	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Audre Lorde, “Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis,” 2. <i>A Life in Medicine (poems)</i>: Jeanne Bryner, “This Red Oozing,” Veneta Masson, “Another Case of Chronic Pelvic Pain,” 3. Charlotte P. Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 4. Maria Basile, “Goodnight Womb,” “Cracked Hands.”(pdf) <p>READING MILESTONE: By this week, you should complete reading <i>Cutting for Stone</i>, PART 1</p>
February 21	The Healer’s Vulnerability (Less Than Perfect)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Susan Mates, “The Good Doctor,” Mikhail Bulgakov, “Baptism by Rotation,” 2. Sylvia Plath “<i>The Surgeon at 2a.m.</i>” (pdf) Maria Basile “To Sylvia” (pdf) 3. Richard Bronson “Sin and Absolution” (pdf) 4. Atul Gawande, “The Case of the Red Mask,” a chapter from <i>Complications</i> (pdf)
February 28	The Tyranny of the Normal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Terry Tempest Williams, “The Village Watchman,” Bernard Pomerance, “from <i>The Elephant Man</i>,” 2. <i>A Life in Medicine (poems)</i>: 3. Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People” (pdf) 4. Andre Dubus, “The Fat Girl” (short story, pdf) 5. Poems: Jack Coulehan, “The Six Hundred Pound Man”; Patricia Goedicke, “Weight Bearing”; Sharon Olds, “The Pull”; Marilyn Davis, “Song for My Son”; and Miller Williams, “The Ones That Are Thrown Out”

March 7	Poetry Workshop STUDENT POEMS DUE	Student poems READING MILESTONE: Before Break, you should COMPLETE READING <i>Cutting for Stone</i>, PART 2. Over Break, if you haven't already, review the discussion questions and consider which you might choose as the basis for your FINAL PAPER.
SEMESTER BREAK		
March 21	Death and Dying	David Rabe, "A Question of Mercy: A Play Based on the Essay by Richard Selzer"
March 28	Death and Dying	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Rafael Campo, "Like a Prayer," Raymond Carver, "A Small Good Thing" 2. <i>A Life in Medicine (poems)</i>: Raymond Carver, "What the Doctor Said," 3. Emily Dickinson poems; Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle"; Denise Levertov, "Talking to Grief"; Raymond Carver, "My Death" 4. Donald Hall poems 5. "Vegetative States," Nona Caspers
April 4	Medicine and Society	"Enemy of the People" (drama)

		READING MILESTONE: By this week you should COMPLETE READING <i>Cutting for Stone</i> PART 3.
April 11	Medicine and Society	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: “from <i>The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down</i>,” Lori Arviso Alvord, “from <i>The Scalpel and the Silver Bear</i>.” 2. <i>A Life in Medicine (poems)</i>: James Wright, “In Terror of Hospital Bills,” 3. Selections from <i>God’s Hotel</i> (memoir)
April 18	Mental Health	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Kay Redfield Jamison, “from <i>An Unquiet Mind</i>,” 2. Additional Readings and film, TBA
April 25	Society and Medicine	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>A Life in Medicine (stories)</i>: Robert Jay Lifton, “from <i>The Nazi Doctors</i>,” 2. Additional Readings and film, TBA <p>READING MILESTONE: By this week, you should have COMPLETED READING the entire novel, <i>Cutting for Stone</i> and be putting the final touches on your FINAL PAPER.</p>
May 2	Synthesis and Analysis FINAL PAPER DUE	<i>Cutting for Stone</i>

May 9	EXAM WEEK – NO CLASS	

A note on the workload: The required readings average about 50 pages per week, although they vary dramatically from zero (the poetry workshop) to several hundred (*Cutting for Stone*). This is why we have excerpted larger works appropriate to the session topics as indicated, as well as woven reading milestones throughout the course so that you can read the longest work in the most organized and efficient way. We encourage you to read additional material from *A Life in Medicine* if you have the time and interest. Most of the topics are interrelated. The more you read the more you can grasp the “big picture.” Each student will have the opportunity to explore in more detail a topic of special interest and lead a class discussion on that topic (see below).

These websites may be helpful in finding more material for your research or for creative inspiration.

- NYU Literature, Arts, and Medicine Database (<http://medhum.med.nyu.edu>)
- The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org)
- The Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org)
- The Poetry Archive (www.poetryarchive.org)

ASSIGNMENTS

In addition to reading and class discussion, there are three specific assignments in this course. Each assignment is worth 20% of your final grade.

1. **Creative writing.** The first written assignment (due March 7) is to write a poem prompted by an activity that we will discuss on the first day of class. Our class on Tuesday, March 7 will consist of a poetry workshop in which each student will read his/her poem and receive constructive feedback from classmates and faculty members. We will provide further details on this assignment at the introductory class on January 24.

2. **Oral presentation.** The second assignment is an oral presentation based on a short story, poem, essay, or other piece of literature. During a 20-minute class segment, each student will give a short talk and lead the discussion. The presentations must: (a) be related to the week's topic, but not based on one of the assigned readings; (b) provide some background about the author; and (c) include an illustrative handout. PowerPoint slides or other media are optional. The poem or other text to be presented, along with the handout, should be emailed to fellow students and faculty at least 24 hours before class. These presentations will take place during selected classes between February 21 and April 25. This assignment will also be described in more detail on January 24.
3. **Final essay.** The final assignment (due May 2) is a 5 to 8-page paper, in which you reflect on aspects of Abraham Verghese's novel *Cutting for Stone*. It should be based on your answers to one of 12 Discussion Questions that were circulated on the first day of class.

GRADING POLICY

Your grade for the course will be based on 100 points.

1. Knowledgeable participation in class discussions (40 points, 40% of your grade). This aspect of the course may require some explanation since students often consider discussion grades to be subjective or arbitrary. We expect students to demonstrate that they have read the material by speaking up, offering their interpretations, and defending their points of view. We are looking for quality of thinking and expression, rather than simply quantity or frequency of speech. A person who speaks a moderate amount, but makes very thoughtful comments can score highly, while someone who talks frequently but doesn't contribute to deepening the discussion may not score highly. The Zoom/hybrid format can present a barrier to participation for those who may not speak up as quickly as others. If you wish to say something, but haven't been able to "jump in," please indicate that in Chat so the facilitator will recognize you.
2. Each of the three assignments is worth 20 points. In total, they constitute 60% of your grade.
3. In borderline grading cases, we will consider a pattern of consistent improvement in performance over time in either, or both, discussion forum and specific assignments. A student who demonstrates such a pattern may receive extra consideration.

Student Accessibility Support Center Statement

If you have a physical, psychological, medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact the Student Accessibility Support Center, Stony Brook Union Suite 107, (631) 632-6748, or at sasc@stonybrook.edu. They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and the Student Accessibility Support Center. For procedures and information go to the following website: <https://ehs.stonybrook.edu/programs/fire-safety/emergency-evacuation/evacuation-guide-disabilities> and search Fire Safety and Evacuation and Disabilities.

Academic Integrity Statement

Each student must pursue his or her academic goals honestly and be personally accountable for all submitted work. Representing another person's work as your own is always wrong. Faculty is required to report any suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Faculty in the Health Sciences Center (School of Health Professions, Nursing, Social Welfare, Dental Medicine) and School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty please refer to the academic judiciary website at http://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/academic_integrity/index.html

Critical Incident Management

Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn. Faculty in the HSC Schools and the School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. Further information about most academic matters can be found in the Undergraduate Bulletin, the Undergraduate Class Schedule, and the Faculty-Employee Handbook.