

When the Doctor Is a Gardener: Victoria Sweet, Hildegard of Bingen, and the Genres of Physician-Writers.

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Abstract

Memoirs by physician-writers are typically analyzed for what they disclose about the emotional journey of medical training and practice. We can also read many of these memoirs as manifestos for the reform of medicine. Consider the work of the physician, historian, and writer Victoria Sweet. Sweet engages Hildegard of Bingen, as a practitioner of humoral medicine, to construct a proposal for a renewed medicine in which physicians would have dual roles, consider the seasons and cycles of time, and be like wise gardeners. Sweet's proposal is attractive, but it does not account for significant differences between her own genre and Hildegard's.

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Over the past half-century, the texts of physician-writers have become a cultural space in which physicians and patients can explore the dynamics of their relationship. As medicine becomes ever more specialized, humanistic physician-essayists as diverse as Pauline Chen, Sandeep Jauhar, and Jerome Groopman reflect upon and share thoughts about what it means to practice medicine. Physician-writers are widely read by laypeople eager to know how physicians view their profession, and how they view their patients. As a result, a reflective case report from *The New England Journal of Medicine* can be both the basis for a journal club at an academic medical center and, after it becomes a chapter in a bestselling book, the subject of a suburban book club. Physician-writers attract this dual audience because of their literary skill and the lay public's fascination with medicine.

In medical humanities scholarship, the memoirs of physician-writers are usually characterized as texts in which the authors, in the words of medical humanities scholar Suzanne Poirier, seek "emotional wholeness."¹ This description provides rhetorical support for medical educational initiatives like reflective writing, in which students and trainees are assigned life-writing exercises as a way to maintain or increase empathy and emotional engagement in medical practice.² While physician memoirs undoubtedly have emotional components, I assert here that many physician memoirs can also be analyzed as polemical manifestos that, following a clinical imperative, offer a diagnosis and a prescription for the reform of medical training and practice.

In this essay, I examine this aspect of physician memoirs by engaging the work of the historian, physician, and writer Victoria Sweet.



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