
In Richard Powers' novel, *Operation Wandering Soul,* a girl from south-east Asia who comes to Los Angeles needs medical treatment. We destroyed her culture. We then plunked her down, with all the randomness that only a godless culture can imagine, into the wasteland of inner city Los Angeles. And now, we will treat her bone cancer with all the scientific detachment and technical expertise that we used to treat communism in southeast Asia.

The basic contradiction in American pediatrics is the contrast between our modern, miraculous, expensive health care palaces, with their critical care units, gamma knives, magnetic resonance imaging devices and highly trained, well-dressed professionals working devotedly for the good of a few children; and the general neglect, squalor, child abuse, gang violence and despair in which we allow many of our nation's children to grow and develop. Explanations abound, and range from cynical views about the political power of the medical profession to more subtle analyses of the moral pull of the identifiable patient who makes claims on us that statistical lives cannot.

In any case, the fact remains that, in its extraordinary expense, modern American medicine inevitably becomes a luxury item, available to only a few lucky souls who have the bona fide diseases that medicine can treat, and that the suffering of American children is more and more related to social ills that are beyond the scope of medicine. Furthermore, children in less developed countries continue to suffer and die for want of simple medical technology – antibiotics, blood transfusions, intravenous fluids, measles vaccine, or antimalarial drugs. These resource misallocations and injustices seem almost beyond the scope of contemporary bioethics.

In *Operation Wandering Soul,* Powers examines this problem not just as a current American problem, but as one rooted in the ambiguous moral status of children throughout the ages. Always, we want children to be symbols, rather than reality, and since adults define the symbols, we make of the children whatever is most flattering to us. Today, we want to tell the tale of better living through biology and high technology, so children become the substrate of that tale. In other times, other tales were told. In each, Powers argues, careful readings reveal the profound ambivalence of our attitudes toward children.
Powers sets his tale in a children's hospital, Carver General, in the war zone of inner city Los Angeles. The atmosphere is techno-modern urban decay. There are no flowers, trees, or ball fields, just freeways, street gangs, and police helicopters. The wards at Carver are filled with the children of social neglect, and with the casualties of foreign and domestic wars. “Angel City charity shows him things that remain obscene rumor everywhere else, obsolete, vanquished, nineteenth century ailments. Consumption. Botulism. Pain poisonings. Bizarre abdomen-filling parasites.”

The surgeon protagonist, Kraft, came to surgery after a disconsolate childhood following his CIA-employed father from trouble spot to trouble spot around the third world. “He had lived everywhere, belonged nowhere, and had already seen hopelessness huge enough to glut the most jaded famine tourist. Misery was the rule in the two-thirds of the earth the boy had visited. Eight of the best pick starting eleven he had ever played with died of deficiencies. His friends lived in cardboard houses.”

The boy searches for moral answers. While in Thailand, he enters a monastery, where he learns to appreciate the enigma of the Buddha: “He is smiling, but there is nothing to smile about.” Kraft comes out of the monastery determined to do good for the world, and persuades his schoolteacher to allow the class to go to an isolated town on the border of Laos and Thailand, to build a new school for the village children. The do-good project starts as idealism, turns into hapless comedy, and ends in tragedy. At one point, an American news crew is helicoptered in to cover the event, “turning the simplified act of care into the usual broadcast circus.” The project ends with a little girl blowing herself up by stepping on a land mine, and the do-gooders are quickly hustled back to safety while the villagers go on trying to live their lives amid the shrapnel.

Young Kraft initially decides to become a musician, but eventually comes to believe that music is not enough. In a decision similar to that taken by Tarrou in Camus' *The Plague*, Kraft decides that medicine alone will allow him to balance his own moral books. The surgeon’s optimistic hope is that, with skill, technique, and craft, we can do some good in the world. With the tools of surgery and the magic of anesthesia, “Agony need no longer always have the last word. One might do more than abide. Technique, intuition, and hands-on knowledge might, in some sustainable future, begin to grow almost equal to the body gone wrong, the infinite, anonymous petition laid at his door.”

Another main character is Kraft’s patient, a 12 year-old southeast Asian refugee named Joy. Unaccountably, Joy has turned up on America’s shores, a survivor of the dislocations, wars and refugee camps that Kraft’s father spent his life adroitly engineering. She crossed the ocean in a leaky boat