Reviews

Books


This important book may be viewed as a companion to Dr. Nuland's previous work, How We Die (1994), which unspARINGLY traced the various paths of human mortality. Its title is derived from works written by fellow physicians Ernest Starling, Walter B. Cannon, and Charles Sherrington. Indebted to his scientist and physician predecessors, Nuland is awestruck as he contemplates the power and intricacies of the interdependent functions and forces at work in the body.

What does Nuland see when he peers within? He observes and then strikingly describes organs and tissues down to their molecular structure. He outlines the organic relationship of the parts of the body to its whole, to its wisdom. It is for him a gorgeous mosaic with capacities for adaptation, regeneration, and self-regulation. These qualities have made it possible for human-kind to evolve and develop.

Nuland expends considerable effort elaborating the body's constituent parts: the lymph system and its struggles with disease, the nervous system, the blood, the heart, the reproductive organs, the miracle of gestation and birth, and, finally, the brain. Each lives in sync with the others and with the whole. Or, as Nuland puts it, “We live in rhythms because rhythms live in us” (p. 367). Some of Nuland's best writing is reserved for what he calls “A Voyage Through the Gut,” which reflects his career-long surgical association with this bodily region. In such descriptive writing, we gain an appreciation for medicine as an art as well as a science. The richness permits the reader to get through some quite lengthy sections of sheer biological background. Case histories and medical illustrations also make the text come alive as does a helpful glossary of technical terms.

If Nuland's literary gifts serve him well in depicting the clinical setting, they are also present in abundance as he turns to more philosophical speculation. He “tastes and sees” the presence of the spirit in the body's wisdom, but he remains a skeptical person imbued with a scientist's desire for proof, for replication of phenomena, for accurate understanding of cause and effect. His musings leave him, as he says, quoting Wordsworth, “Breathless with adoration” (p. 369). The eternal here is not hidden beyond time and history as much as it is revealed in the body's ability to survive assault, change, and loss.

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The present work in conjunction with How We Die places Nuland squarely within the meditative and confessional tradition of letters. Sharing a portion of his life’s journey with us, he rightly begins with a passage from St. Augustine’s Confessions which suggests that we pass our lives in awe of the outer world and nature without paying enough attention to our inner landscapes, to our souls and bodies. This book reminds us how crucial it is to know the body and to listen to its messages.

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It is not often that the persuasive powers of images are made evident so quickly or so consistently as they are in this splendid volume. From the first of the 150 illustrations—a drawing of a fresco from the third-century Dura-Europos synagogue of Job hunting and then reclining among his friends—to the last—a bronze statue by the twentieth-century sculptor Carl Milles of a naked man standing on the hand of God—the images support Professor Terrien’s words: “Artists, like poets and a few mystics, have been able to celebrate not the patience but the passion of Job” (p. xxxv).

What we have here, in this gathering of words and pictures by an authority on the Hebrew Bible, is not only the passion of Job but of Samuel Terrien. “Personal intimacy, day and night,” Terrien suggests, citing a passage from the Septuagint version of Job, “with ‘a God who made me and distinguishes me from the beasts of earth’ (35:10–11) calls to mind the image of the true artist, who will never give up the love for his ‘handiwork’ (cf. 10:8–12).” In the conversation of Job and his young friend Elihu that elicits this comment by Terrien, there is the “poetic inference” that Job’s “life of adoration for the divine lover cannot be spoiled by even the most offensive strokes of adversity” (p. 36). And so it is that in these pages we meet King Job and Saint Job, Job as priest and prophet, Job as street musician and jongleur. “Saint Job,” the chapter on his association with musicians concludes, “was the intercessor for street musicians and the defender of lepers” (p. 126).

It is Job as intercessor that particularly interests me, for my own reading of his book centers upon that role, assigned him by the Lord in the last chapter of his book. The Douay translation is very much to the point in its trenchant wording. The Lord tells his “friends” to bring him a burnt offering: “go to my servant Job, and offer for yourselves a holocaust: and my servant Job shall pray for you. . . .” Job is acceptable to the Lord but not his friends. Their behavior draws the imputation of folly, “for you,” the Lord tells them, “have