

## HEALTH

## Camilla Cavendish

## STAYING ALIVE

How to Get the Best from the NHS  
by Dr PHIL HAMMOND  
*Quercus £14.99/ebook £7.49 pp320*

## DOCTORS DISSECTED

by JANE HAYNES and MARTIN SCURR  
*Quartet £20 pp392*

If you have ever wondered, sitting in the GP's office, what the view is like from the other side of the desk, these two excellent books will help – in very different ways.

Reading Phil Hammond's *Staying Alive* is like having a gossiping doctor friend to dinner. It spills the beans about how the NHS really works and how you, as a patient, can get the best out of it. From this book I have learnt how to access my own medical records. I have discovered that forcing my GP to shake my hand is the best way to ensure he or she focuses on me instead of staring at the computer screen. And that I should never, ever be too calm or laugh nervously when phoning for an ambulance or hospital midwife.

This is also a guide to avoiding the NHS, if you can, by staying healthy. Hammond argues that "most lives do not need medicalising, they need living". He prescribes "five portions of pleasure a day", including exercising, eating properly and maintaining friendships. He turns the ingredients for a good life into an acronym, Clangers, which is a bit too long to remember easily. But his point is well made. "For 90% of symptoms, you're better off with a dog than a doctor," he says (not because he is denigrating doctors, but because pets have such a soothing effect on humans). He argues persuasively that walking is hugely important. So persuasively, in fact, that since reading his book I have started getting off the Tube a stop early – and have remembered just how much I enjoy pounding the pavement while the sunlight filters through the trees.

As *Private Eye's* "MD" medical correspondent, Hammond writes with great clarity and passion about the NHS. In this book he treads with the same lightness and lucidity over what could otherwise be grim ground: fear, disease and death. It is peppered with very human case studies, told directly by patients, some of which are very uplifting.

I was particularly fascinated by his description of what goes through a GP's mind in that all too brief 10-minute appointment. Most incorrect diagnoses, he says, are down to what he calls "anchoring bias": locking onto a diagnosis too quickly and failing to adjust to new facts. But there are six other "thinking errors" that patients and doctors should watch out for. These include overreliance

It's good to laugh Dr Phil Hammond and resuscitation dummy during his stage show



## How to save your own life

You could be better off with a dog than a doctor, now that GPs feel unable to give their patients the kind of care they would like

on "our own ability, intuition and judgment rather than the evidence". The message is that we must take more responsibility for our health, and not blindly rely on "the system" to fix it. This is partly because prevention is better than cure, and partly because, as Hammond shows sympathetically, no doctor will be able to make a perfect diagnosis every time.

Three practical lessons from this guide to life will stick in my mind. First, always

Most lives don't need medicalising, they need living

carry an aspirin in a case you or anyone else suffers a mild heart attack (a 300mg tablet can halve the size of a heart attack). Second, be aware that, unlike in the movies, children and adults can choke or drown without making a sound. And third, if you find yourself needing to give CPR to someone, hum the Bee Gees' *Staying Alive* to time your chest compressions. I will be keeping this treasure trove of practical wisdom prominently on my

shelf, next to the Family Health Encyclopaedia, to give me courage and tips next time something goes wrong.

Like *Staying Alive*, *Doctors Dissected* provides valuable and startling insights into how doctors think. But the book is more of a philosophy, a wide-ranging meditation upon the meaning of medicine and what we are losing in a target-driven NHS. The doctor and columnist Martin Scurr, and the psychotherapist Jane Haynes, have conducted lengthy interviews with doctors, mostly GPs, about why they went into medicine, how they cope with making what can be very lonely decisions, and how, in some cases, they have dealt with their own illnesses (usually not well).

This is a deeply human, searching book, whose interviews roam far and wide in response to the life story of each doctor. Most of those interviewed are humble about what they do. "To become a patient is to fall into one of the most vulnerable states there is," says one. Another believes that "being a doctor provides a very privileged way into suffering".

The book is etched with the pain and regret of highly trained professionals who no longer feel able to give the kind of care they would like. Some have left the NHS for private practice, because of the bureaucracy and the inability to give continuity of care. The book claims that most GPs have only about 24 hours of patient contact time a week: the rest is

spent in administration and box-ticking.

The most powerful sections are by Scurr. He seems to be one of those old-fashioned family doctors we all wish we had: the kind who will wake up in the night and write a note about a patient to check the next day. A specialist in end-of-life care, who was the first Medical Director of St John's Hospice, he writes forcefully about the importance of knowing someone's medical history, and being intimately familiar with the patient. "There is little use to the examination," he says, "if a different doctor undertakes it each time." A different doctor will not be able to tell what has changed. Nor will a different doctor have the confidence and trust of the patient that is so vital.

The upsurge of homeopathy and complementary medicine, Scurr believes, reflects our deep hunger for "quality time, a listening ear, care and sympathy from someone who they believe to be professional, skilled and committed". In today's NHS, the ending of GPs' out-of-hours responsibilities means their "duty of care will end with the appointment of a locum". He argues that there should be "incentives for doctors who care for their own patients and families and who personally know their histories". Amen to that.

Available at the Bookshop price of £12.99 (Hammond) and £18 (including p&p) and £7.49 (Hammond ebook) on 0845 271 2135

Two tragic outcasts meet in a powerful debut set in the underbelly of New York

## FICTION

## Adam Lively

## PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT LIFE by ATTICUS LISH

*Oneworld £14.99  
ebook £6.99 pp417*

Atticus Lish's extraordinarily powerful first novel is a tragic love story set among the poorest outcasts of New York City. It tells of the relationship between Brad Skinner, an army veteran traumatised by three tours of Iraq, and Zou Lei, a Chinese-Muslim illegal immigrant. Then there is the embittered, prowling Jimmy, just released from a 10-year stretch, who will play a decisive role in their lives. These three characters move through a world of imploded globalisation: a stressful, exhausting, crowded, bafflingly multilingual and badly fed place of grinding, hand-to-mouth work and incipient mental breakdown.

It is easy to imagine this scenario being turned into a bad novel – a narrative overburdened with an outsider's journalistic detail, curdled with pious intentions and propped up by sentimental

stereotypes. That this novel avoids these traps is down to two things – first, the burning intensity of the prose, which fully absorbs all the detail (Lish has done his homework) into the subjectivity of the characters, and second, the classical simplicity of the underlying tragic plot.

We first see Skinner as a tiny dot hitchhiking across the vast expanses of America, making for Manhattan, where, with a piece of plastic holding his army pay-off, he plans to get wasted. We have already met Zou Lei: "She came by way of Archer, Bridgeport, Nanuet, worked off 95 in jeans and a denim jacket, carrying a plastic bag and shower shoes, a phone number, waiting beneath an underpass, the potato chips long gone, light-headed."

## FICTION

## Claire Lowdon

## IN THE NIGHT OF TIME by ANTONIO MUNOZ MOLINA trans EDITH GROSSMAN

*Tuskar Rock £16.99  
ebook £8.99 pp640*

The latest novel by the Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina is his sixth to be translated into English. The *Washington Post* has pronounced it: "One of the most eloquent monuments to the Spanish Civil War ever to be raised in fiction." The dust jacket

CHRISTOPHER JONES; REX FEATURES; JACOB BLICKENSTAFF; CORBIS

compares it to *War and Peace*. Like Tolstoy's novel it is very long and places war on the periphery of the personal. But there the parallels stop. *War and Peace* is a labyrinth of interlocking plotlines. In the *Night of Time* is, essentially, a simple love story.

The protagonist, Ignacio Abel, is a successful architect living in Madrid. He loves his two children but is unhappy in his marriage to Adela and falls in love with a young American, Judith. Their affair lasts several months before Adela finds their letters and attempts suicide. Distressed by the harm they have caused, Judith breaks off the affair. She

## The view from the other side



Atticus Lish Fuses raw realism with narrative poetry

lived in extremis: one key scene is set in a gym, where they support each other towards ever greater strength and endurance. Later Skinner tries to explain why he needs to numb himself with exercise and alcohol: "Headlights coming at me, crowds, whenever I hear the intercom radio on the subway... Potholes in the street. Car doors. You know what a bullet sounds like? Have you ever had a wasp flying really close to your ear?" And with the strange poetry that Lish gives Zou Lei's broken English, she replies: "Something has shook your mind. It could be some bruise inside the head."

Aristotle said of the tragic hero that he should be neither blameless and godlike nor despicable and lowly: we look up to him even through his downfall because his suffering captures the fragility and uncertain outcomes of all human life. The lonely, damaged Skinner is such a one, and as the psychopathic figure of Jimmy looms larger, and Skinner and Zou Lei are parted, events swiftly take on the shocking, random inevitability of classical tragedy. Lish's remarkable debut fuses raw realism with narrative poetry to truly memorable effect.

Lish manages their meeting in the ant-heap of the city without contrivance, largely because they have by now been powerfully established. With Skinner, above all, there is the sense of unremitting effort required to hold himself together: his vividly realised flashbacks threaten to tear apart his mind as comprehensively as he saw bombs and bullets tear open flesh in Iraq. For Zou Lei it is the lonely physical impulse just to survive, with no money, no legal status and the threat of Homeland Security always at your back.

Lish pulls off the difficult trick of evoking the growing tenderness between the pair, an oasis in a wasteland of alcohol, drugs and violence, without sentiment and without losing the sense of hard lives

Available at the Bookshop price of £12.99 (inc p&p) and £6.99 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135

## Love and infidelity in a time of civil war

Comparisons with Tolstoy have been made for this novel set in 1930s Spain

returns to America and Abel finds himself alone in his flat in Madrid as the Civil War breaks out. Eventually he escapes to America, using an old offer to design a university library to obtain his visa. Judith comes to the university to tell him she has decided to return to Spain to support the Republican cause. They spend one last night together and say many things that needed to be said.

That synopsis covers most of the plot. Muñoz Molina's insights into the moral and emotional

mechanics of adultery are astute, and the restrained, oblique portrayal of Adela's suffering is particularly good. But there isn't nearly enough material to fill 640 pages. (The original is even longer; the *Times Literary Supplement's* review of the American edition notes that Edith Grossman's translation cuts 300-plus pages from the Spanish.)

Some of the padding is made up of hectic passages on the war, which is just background to the love story. There is nothing as vivid as Hemingway on the execution of fascist sympathisers in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Most of the filler is writerly pontification. When we're not in the thick of the love story, sentences are routinely half a page long – too long for Muñoz Molina to handle.

Expect distended syntax such as: "The bald oval head of Professor Karl Ludwig Rossman, whom he had seen and recognised with difficulty one night early in September at the morgue in Madrid under the funeral light of a bulb hanging from a cord where flies clustered, fleetingly appeared to him one day among the passengers sitting in the weak October sun on the deck of the ship he'd taken to New York."

Most problematic, the first quarter is the hardest to get through. Perhaps the best way to enjoy this highly uneven novel is to start at page 159 – and be prepared to skip.

Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £14.99 (inc p&p) and £8.99 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135

His insights into adultery are good