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Since the outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19, questions of health and illness, and the presence of medical terminology have become ubiquitous in our lives—that is why Elena Fratto’s book *Medical Storyworlds: Health, Illness, and Bodies in Russian and European Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* is so timely for the early 2020s. Fratto focuses on making sense of real-life stories of illness and treatment, as well as fiction that deals with the same themes. *Medical Storyworlds* begins with an examination of the concept of death as a plot trigger, an event that shapes a narrative, be it a case history or a fictional account. Working within the tradition of the medical humanities, Fratto examines this theme across narratives and disciplines, from the nineteenth-century idea of autopsy as the ultimate diagnosis to Cesare Lombroso’s study of criminals, which defined “criminal anatomy” and physiognomy. Death becomes the defining factor of a narrative, while “the surgeon—researcher, detective, reader, and writer—represents the sole authorial voice” (p. 44). This phenomenon is further explored as Fratto focuses on the prospect of death in fiction, examining, for example, Leo Tolstoy’s character Anna Karenina, as well as real-life stories of potential cancer patients. Anna’s obsessive belief in predestination is contrasted with the human tendency of “emplotting symptoms, feelings, and diagnostic information into a cohesive picture and a linear trajectory in which every element is endowed with a specific function and purpose” (p. 78). In addition, Fratto brings up the diary of Masha Gessen, a prominent Russian American journalist and activist, who chronicles the thoughts and fears of a person facing the threat of terminal illness.[1] Fratto shows how both fictional and real people view their lives through the prism of predestination, when all events, past, present, and future, contribute to this “script.” “Gessen figures as the structural equivalent of both Anna Karenina and oncology patients in that she lives her life under the influence of a feared ending” (p. 87).

From patients’ obsession over their physical and mental condition, the book moves on to the concept of preventive healthcare and medical enlightenment, seen through the prism of early Soviet public health campaigns of the 1920s, as well as a satirical play, *Doctor Knock, or The Triumph of Medicine*, written by Jules Romains in 1923. In this play, a new doctor convinces the entire population of a small town to undergo unnecessary and
expensive treatments. The idea of power and surveillance also comes up in the connection between Soviet hygienists and the propagandists in the early 1920s, who labeled their enemies as “vermin, filth, and pests, and described those of different political mindsets as suffering from illness” (p. 129). The final chapter of Medical Storyworlds deals with the sci-fi concept of a gland that acquires agency, creating a new entity/creature. Using the examples of Italo Svevo’s “Doctor Menghi’s Drug” (1904) and Mikhail Bulgakov’s “The Heart of a Dog” (1925), Fratto examines “how bodily glands, specifically the thyroid and the hypophysis (or pituitary), and their activities complicate our established notions of narrative time and agency” (p. 161). In Svevo’s story, an experimental endocrinologist extracts a hormone from a mysterious animal and creates a drug that he injects himself with to see its effect on his own body and mind, and indeed, this drug takes total control of his body and his narrative. Similarly, in Bulgakov’s story, the protagonist transplants a pituitary gland from the corpse of a dead criminal into a dog; as a result, the dog is transformed into a human with the moral traits of the dead criminal. Ultimately, these two stories represent “two major characteristics of modernism and the historical avant-garde” that center on the “biological redefinition of the human vis-à-vis machines and nonhuman entities, within and without our bodies” (p. 187).

Questioning the importance of narrative in medicine and the presence of medical themes in fiction and related nonfiction has long been central to the field of medical humanities.[2] Elena Fratto finds new angles to explore familiar “medical” narratives from a fresh perspective, such as looking at Anna Karenina’s descent into madness through the prism of patients who try to make sense of their condition by assembling symptoms, feelings, and diagnostic information into a coherent picture and linear trajectory in which each element is endowed with a specific function and purpose. By drawing such parallels between well-known and lesser-known fiction on the one hand and real-life examples on the other, the author shows us how universal this “emplotment” mechanism is, whether we are dealing with texts written almost two centuries ago or those created a few decades ago. From the powerful story of Boris Eikhenbaum’s sudden death in 1959 to the concept of invasive medical interventions that transform the human body, this book focuses on what it means to be human and how that can be changed, both in fiction and in real life.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which is discussed in the book’s epilogue, puts all the observations into a contemporary perspective: one is struck by how relatable some of the observations are to our own time. The shared experience of living through the pandemic shows how the medical discourse of the nineteenth century is still relevant today: for a person reading this book in 2023, the concept of an “asymptomatic” body carrying the threat of an invisible disease will surely ring a bell. Medical Storyworlds helps a contemporary reader make sense of both the ordinary health-related experiences in our lives and the extraordinary ones, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This book will be useful to anyone interested in medical discourse, as well as to students of the medical humanities, a field that reaffirms the need to pay attention to patient narratives, as well as to sickness-related fiction as a whole.

Notes

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