

Book Review

Sandra Cavallo Miller. *Out of Patients: A Novel*. Lincoln, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2022. 256 pages. Paperback.

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An Entangled Web of Relations: A middle-aged family doctor searches for herself within/out her lifelong career.

Do doctors find remedy for their own afflictions? What if these burdens are rooted in their lifelong pursuits of medicine, careers that suddenly feel too overwhelming to endure for even one more day? Sandra Cavallo Miller's fifth novel, *Out of Patients*, introduces Norah Waters, MD, a 58-year-old family physician contemplating early retirement. Throughout the narrative, the midlife crisis subtly permeates the storyline as a subconscious motif. While presenting the realities of gendered experiences in the medical profession, however, Miller reconstructs Norah's midlife beyond conventional myths, transcending stereotypes associated with both her profession and age.

In the initial six chapters, Miller deftly unfurls eight strands of Norah's narrative, dissecting each layer in the multi-angular portrait of her not just as a family doctor, but also a business partner, a mentor, a romantic partner, a daughter, a dog mom, a friend, and a victim. As a retired academic family physician herself, Miller vigorously extends her narrative beyond the routine practice of the doctor's office, the façade of the medical profession. Much like Norah's approach to diagnosing her patients' symptoms from different vantage points, the episodic structure of the novel enables Miller to craft a cubist-style portrayal of a middle-aged physician. Within this framework, Norah's multifaceted identity emerges through the intricate interplay of diverse relationships.

The novel begins in the midst of an appointment with one of Norah's elderly patients, Ana Merriweather, who is suffering from a hip problem. The 35-minute appointment is not, however, predominantly consumed by medical advice, but by listening to Ana's complaints about her daughter's parenting of her grandson. Norah, whose downtown Phoenix clinic closed due to funding loss, recently relocated to a clinic on the Phoenix-Scottsdale border, where she finds herself serving "a mixed population of clients" (p.2). Despite treating fewer uninsured patients, Norah's new practice hasn't become easier, as she observes that neither "the affluent patients" nor "the less fortunate ones" listen to her (p.2). Merriweather's prolonged appointment, for which only 15 minutes was allocated, leads to delays in all subsequent appointments and post-appointment tasks. Later in the novel, when sympathizing with her overburdened clinic colleague Dr. Wanda Cunningham, a 30-year-old hard-working physician and mother of four, Norah lays it out candidly: "Once upon a time we became physicians, but now we also must perform as secretaries and transcriptionists and file clerks and coding authorities and billing experts and regulations enforcers" (p.55).

Amidst Norah's daily juggling act, required for any semblance of time management, she confronts a multitude of unanticipated crises, arising from other professional responsibilities

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at the clinic, each tempting her to resign on a regular basis. As a business partner co-running a clinic with three other physicians, her role is afflicted by a puzzling decline in their income despite a surge in patients. This anomaly prompts the intervention of Wanda's husband, Dale, who meticulously investigates the financial discrepancies and uncovers a startling truth about one of their colleagues. Further complicating her clinic life, Norah, alongside her senior partner and friend, Dr. Zane Grayson, and Betsy, the receptionist, finds herself subjected to relentless harassment by an unknown villain, who persistently leaves black-bordered index cards under her windshield wiper with threatening messages. Adding to this turmoil, after reluctantly following Norah's advice to prioritize his own health—not just patients', Zane is hospitalized for colon tumor surgery. Here, Miller reveals the ironic vulnerability inherent in the medical profession, where the boundary between healer and patient is liminal—especially as they age. Now that Zane has seen *his* doctor, the next person to sit before a doctor should be Norah.

Deeper into the novel, the fragmentary episodes that define the opening narrative gradually coalesce into a broader pseudo-family dynamic involving Norah's 86-year-old mother, a retired anatomy professor, and two first-year medical school mentees, the timid George Clark and the rebellious Jeremy Newell, sandwiching Norah between two generations. Norah's mother frequently updates her on her budding romantic relationship with a mailman, occasionally nudging Norah to reconnect with her ex-boyfriend Austin. With her mentees, tensions persistently pester Norah throughout much of the novel, but the strain intensifies when she discovers Jeremy's inappropriate social media post about one of his patients, violating patient confidentiality regulations. While George embraces Norah's teachings and takes proactive steps to establish "a forty-five-minute group session about quitting tobacco" (p.175), Jeremy's disdain for family medicine undermines Norah's efforts and ultimately leads her to terminate her mentorship with him. Norah's troubles escalate further when she becomes the target of an anonymous online reviewer, whose negative feedback damages her reputation and deters potential patients from scheduling appointments with her.

Norah advises us that "[a] really important skill for family physicians is knowing how to find good answers" (p.23), and Miller's narrative provides good answers to counterbalance Norah's exhausting clinic life, as well as the reader's exhaustion from experiencing a physician's challenges, by weaving in a joyful thread of canine friendship. Emcee, a lab-retriever mix named after Marie Curie, is Norah's foremost companion, brightening her tiring life.

What happens to Norah in the end? Miller's witty yet precise and analytical prose doesn't intend to neatly narrativize Norah's yet-to-be-experienced life. We are compelled to leave her in the middle of her life, reminiscent of how we encountered her in the doctor's office at the novel's outset. One change is evident: stepping out of her office to solve communal problems, Norah becomes more integrated into the broader medical community, where the weight of seeking solutions for her patients, colleagues, and herself can be shared among her fellow healthcare providers.

Norah's first-person narrative parallels the interactions between doctors and patients during consultations, thus offering readers of *Out of Patients* a thorough glimpse into the life of a woman physician. Miller's narrative invites readers to participate in the novel's role-play, with Norah representing a patient elucidating the challenges of her circumstances, and readers listening as doctors, evaluating and diagnosing characters. This approach affords readers the opportunity to consider the complexities of the doctor-patient relationship and the broader dynamics within the healthcare system.