

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Physician Writers Share Their Zeal for Storytelling

Dr. Robert H. Bartlett was so mad that he had to find a way to channel his anger—he chose written words.

It was the late 1970s and Dr. Bartlett was on the surgery faculty at the University of California, Irvine. He also directed the university's burn center. A lawyer asked him to review the case of a local man charged with child abuse for allegedly burning a child.

"When I reviewed the case, I was sure the man was innocent based on how things looked, but the man had already been convicted, as he was in prison," said Dr. Bartlett, who is now professor emeritus of surgery in the division of trauma burn/critical care at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. "This was a retrial on appeal. I testified, saying it was clear to me that this was an accident. But the jurors didn't believe me, and they sent him back to prison."

Furious, Dr. Bartlett wrote a few editorials for local newspapers noting that no physician with an expertise in burns had ever evaluated the victim. No one had ever taken a medical history. The charges against the man were "all based on assumptions that were incorrect," he said. "So in the editorials I wrote [that] before you accuse somebody of child abuse, you better make sure there's a basis for it medically. Because once someone's accused, it's one of those crimes that runs wild, and it's very hard to prove innocence."

He continued to write, but in a fictional form, based on this case and other burn injury cases that he had seen that showed signs of child abuse. The effort culminated in his first novel, "The Salem Syndrome: A Novel of Medicine and Law" (Livonia, Mich.: First Page Publications, 2005). The manuscript collected dust for more than 25 years before being published in 2005.

"I had an agent in New York and [had] come close to getting it published at that time, but it never was," he said. However, "about a year ago I met another small publisher ... who read the book [and] thought it was good. So we published."

Dr. Bartlett, who listed John Updike and George Garrett among his favorite authors, said that most of the book was written on airplanes or in hotel rooms during his travels for work. "I really didn't have time to [write] when I was in town and running my practice," he said, adding that the majority of the story was dictated. "I have great secretaries. All of my grants and scientific papers are dictated, so I got into the habit of dictating full paragraphs or full pages at a time."

He said that the hardest part was writing the first sentence each time he sat down to devote time to the book. A metaphor he came across likens writing to driving from Detroit to Chicago at night. "You know where you're going, you know pretty much what the route is, but you can only see as far as your headlights shine," he said. "I found that helpful. Trying to write carefully to get the big picture isn't really the way it goes. You just need to get a small step for the story at a time."

Dr. Bartlett's second novel, "Piece of Mind," is due out later this year. He called it a novel of medicine and philosophy. "The story is about a neurosurgeon who wants to know where the anatomical localization of the soul is," he said. It follows four patients who are admitted to his service on the same weekend and who have various neurologic problems, "all of which affect their behavior and thinking and provide some insight into where the soul might exist—if indeed it does."

He is also working on a traveler's guide to medical history in Europe.

A 'Thinking Man's James Bond'

If medicine and law inspired Dr. Bartlett, medicine and politics inspired neurologist David B. Rosenfield, author of three books about protagonist Dick Swept, a neurologist whom he calls the "thinking man's James Bond."

In his first book, "Dick Swept, M.D.: Tomorrow the World" (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2003), Dr. Swept is recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to block ex-KGB agents from producing a drug intended to alter the minds of world leaders and media types. (A screenplay version of the book won awards at the Houston International Film Festival and the Austin Film Festival.)

In his second book, "History Became a Lie: Another Dick Swept M.D. Medical Espionage Thriller" (Xlibris, 2005), the CIA again summons Dr. Swept for help in retrieving Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that are thought to be in the hands of Chechen terrorists.

In his third book, "Blood of Beethoven," due out this summer, a group of terrorist musicians intend to obtain Beethoven's DNA and clone him.

The characters in his three-book series are "a bunch of people in my life whom I have made up, and I really like them, even the bad guys," said Dr. Rosenfield, a neurologist at the Methodist Hospital Neurological Institute in Houston. "It's a nifty thing to work your way through the world in it. It certainly teaches me a lot about the stuff I have to research and write about. I got on the Internet and figured out how to drive from Baghdad to Grozny. How many guys do that?"

Dr. Rosenfield had wanted to be a poet for as long as he could remember. During his freshman year of college at Brandeis University, he entered 86 poetry contests but never earned recognition from a single one.

"I wanted to be a poet, and I wanted to play rock music," he recalled. "I became

interested in becoming premed halfway through college."

Years later, finding time to write the books and juggle personal and professional obligations was an ongoing challenge, but it got easier with each book. The first book took 18 years to write. The second took 2 years and the third took less than a year, he said.

"What I had to do was have protected time where I could not be interrupted," said Dr. Rosenfield, who is also a professor of neurology at Cornell University, New York. "The best place for that is first class on a plane, because you cannot be interrupted. I learned the hard way that I could not dictate [the book]. That was a disaster."

In order to write effectively, "I have to have 4-6 hours and be alone. I will block out a day. I will get someone to cover for me that day. Then I will go to the office and no one's allowed in. The door is shut. I put on jeans and a T-shirt and my secretary understands 'I am not here. Pretend I'm in Dallas.'"

When asked how much of Dr. Swept's life is based on his own, he replied: "If he ever was, he isn't now."

He went on to explain that during a recent family trip, he was convinced that the airline had lost their luggage on a return

She describes the book as a personal journal that explores the emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects of the heart.

"I want people to look at the heart as more than a physical pump," said Dr. Guarneri, a cardiologist who is the founder and medical director of the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine in La Jolla, Calif. "When we think about heart disease, we have to look beyond cholesterol ... at whether or not someone is depressed or hostile or isolated—all of these other things that go into how well someone does, not only for the heart but for health in general."

She went on to credit her patients for teaching her that good care for the heart goes well beyond medicine and biomechanics. "I have evolved because of my patients," she said.

"I never came out of cardiology training thinking about the heart as an emotional organ. I never really thought about broken heart syndrome until I started talking to patients and they told me about the death of their child, or their arrhythmia began when they had X amount of stressful things happen. That's where the book came from. The hope for the book is that when you read someone else's story, you'll look at your own life through a different lens. From there, you can start to make change," she said.

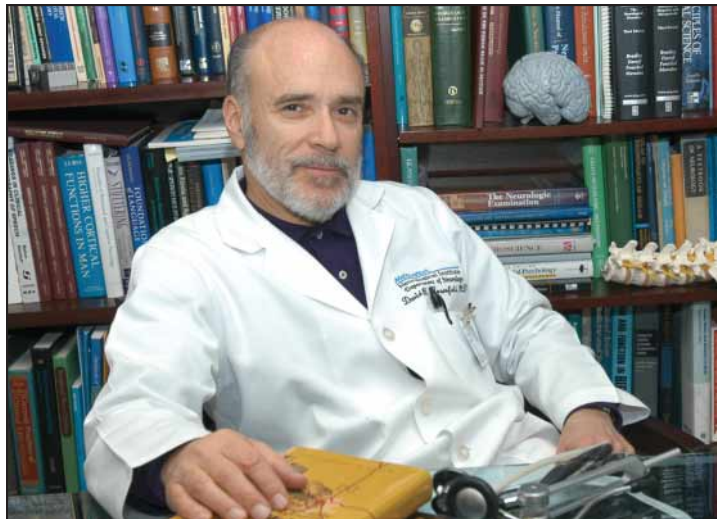
Dr. Guarneri, who majored in English literature as an undergraduate student at New York University, New York, started collecting patient stories on her personal computer at home. "It was in spurts, because there would be a moving story from the day, but not every day," she said. "I would go home, think about those things, and then I would write what happened. I would also write my reaction to it: what kind of effect this was having on me personally as a physician."

Assembling the stories took about a year and a half. The book includes her own account of the impact of heart disease in her life. Her mom died of a heart attack at age 40 in their Brooklyn home when Dr. Guarneri was only 8 years old. Almost 10 years later, her father died of heart disease.

"Part of the reason I became a heart doctor was to overcome the powerlessness I felt as a young girl that night in Brooklyn when my mother was taken from me," she writes in her book. "Perhaps by becoming a cardiologist, I was trying in some symbolic way to reach back in time and heal the hearts in the middle of my family that had stopped beating far too soon."

Dr. Guarneri advises aspiring physician writers to keep a journal. "Start to put your thoughts down, even if it's a little bit every day," she said. "Take what your passion is and write from there. Don't write for anyone else but you. I wrote this [book] for me. I never intended to publish it. I was amazed how Simon & Schuster bought this book in less than a week, because it never occurred to me that a physician hadn't done anything like this before." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau



When he's in his office writing, Houston neurologist David B. Rosenfield tells his secretary: "Pretend I'm in Dallas."

flight home. Once he arrived at the airport's baggage carousel, his wife said to him: "Let's just go home. They'll find the luggage and send it."

Dr. Rosenfield refused. He wanted to stay until the luggage surfaced.

"What would Swept do?" his wife asked.

He thought about this. Then Dr. Rosenfield realized he'd been standing at the wrong baggage carousel the entire time.

"Swept would never be at the wrong carousel," he said.

The Speaking Heart

Other physician writers take a more personal approach to their work. Dr. Mimi Guarneri drew from a combination of scientific research, her own experiences, and stories about her patients to create "The Heart Speaks: A Cardiologist Reveals the Secret Language of Healing" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).