

Book Review

Literary Medicine: Brain Disease and Doctors in Novels, Theater, and Film (Frontiers of Neurology and Neuroscience, Vol. 31), by J. Bogousslavsky (Editor, Series Editor), S. Dieguez (Editor), Karger, Basel, 2013; ISBN-10:3318022713

On the whole, the essays in this collection are competently executed in the sense that they document the appearance of a variety of mental disorders in fictional characters. Documentation of the novelist's/playwright's often keen assessment of the role of mental illness in modern societies would make this collection useful, even if it accomplished nothing else. (It is worth noting that the contributors' reference authors are much more recognizable by readers educated in Europe.) Augmenting this value is the fact that occasionally the contributors attempt to raise issues that take us beyond the raw facts, with varying degrees of success. For instance, the most interesting aspect of the Dieguez and Annoni essay is a disquisition on the uses of amnesia in fiction. In this essay, authors of fictional works are relieved of the necessity to build the "broader message of the work at hand" from the bricks and mortar of scientific and medical descriptive accuracy. The principal criterion, these contributors argue, is whether the writers' conceptions of amnesia "work for a general audience." Memory disorders thus depicted are in a sense doubly fictional—the characters and their individual actions are "made up" and aspects of their mental conditions (symptoms, causes, and cures) are

not necessarily veridical either. Nor do they need to be, according to the contributors. Thus depictions of memory disorders in fiction might be constrained only by widespread preconceptions about memory, and the role of those depictions in the plot structure. Thus freed, memory disorders in fiction might well devolve into fantasy, which, though interesting (and maybe even useful as counterfactuals), would be likely to lead us astray, introducing descriptive and causative inaccuracies and reinforcing existing prejudices. If this model were followed by authors, it would detract from the utility of fiction as an indicator of the place of mental illness in broader society, which, as noted, is one value of these essays. For example, in Dieguez's essay on schizophrenia in Balzac's character, Louis Lambert, the hypothesis is suggested that schizophrenia is of recent origin based on the absence of schizophrenia-like symptoms in fictional literature before Balzac. If the literature of different periods did not represent the symptoms of schizophrenia as we know it today, whatever it might have been called then, with verisimilitude, it would provide little evidence pertaining to the hypothesis at all.

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