

privileged can attain: education, finances, and access to good medical care. No surprise there. The same goes for a good diet and adequate exercise. The book pursues this debate intently—fate versus personal responsibility. He notes that we can play a major role in prevention for some conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and Alzheimers.

Gifford works hard to balance the serious themes of the book with his tongue-in-cheek and self-deprecating style. That being said, the book could have been better organized; it is a sort of serpentine journey of incongruent themes. Not all topics seemed as strong in their science or relevance. In some cases the science is based on parabiosis experiments (sewing half of young and old mice together) and at other times he follows (and participates in!) more robust research like the Baltimore Longevity Study, which follows many people and health markers over decades. He oscillates between anecdotes and larger robust studies, not always discriminating between the two. He ends the book with a list of helpful possibilities like vitamin D and kale but offers scant evidence for these suggestions, thus contributing to such health myths.

Despite these criticisms, this book should be strongly considered by medical professionals and learners alike. It provokes deeper thoughts about what really makes one healthy and ultimately will challenge readers to contemplate what topics to cover when counseling patients about their pursuit of wellness, prevention, and longevity. The aging process is partially malleable and choices made during our middle years seem to have profound consequences later in life. I find myself using lessons learned to strengthen my resolve to help patients exercise, lose weight (especially central adipose tissue), and eat better before offering them a pill. I also find myself taking the advice to heart for my own health, like trying to get more sleep. Let's face it—many of us are not spring chickens anymore!

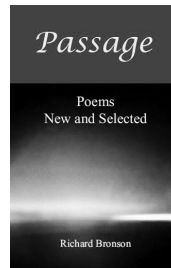
Hugh Silk, MD, MPH

Department of Family Medicine and Community Health
University of Massachusetts Medical School

Passage

Richard Bronson

Cold Spring Harbor, NY, Padishah Press, 2014, 83 pp., \$15, paperback



Richard Bronson's *Passage*, a collection of poems, unfolds like a film. It begins with vignettes for each month of the year, capturing a moment in each. January shares “the sadness of blue evenings, as dusk passes into darkness.” September brings the song of cicadas, “Come dance with us,” November an intimate Thanksgiving, and the year ends in December’s prayer in a cathedral. All are specific experiences but universal enough to bring a sigh of recognition.

The book continues with the section titled “GP,” where we follow his father’s career and his mother’s late life. Some of the themes are later mirrored as we watch the author himself progress from medical student to a more learned and cautious physician in the final section, “Congruences.”

In “GP,” we are returned to a post-war world with a wry look at a new doctor building his practice. To his wife’s dismay he refuses to pander to a worried patient, saying “I’m no Barnum”—yet “sporting those rimless glasses he didn’t need/but wore for a professional look!” The author presents the conflict in the wife’s practical concerns with the development of the new doctor’s professional persona, and the young couple starting out comes to life. As in many of the poems, a brief sketch says enough that the reader can’t help but color in the details, feeling she knows the subjects and their lives.

“GP” continues to follow the father’s career through its endless work, heart attacks, and death. Again we begin at a short distance, seeing the man mainly in his role as doctor. After a first intimation of mortality we glimpse some humanity as the color choices of his beloved Cadillacs branch out from stately black and as he becomes a patient himself. After his death, the author’s mother comes to the fore, her own passions and decline outlined, as she says “I would not go quiet into that good night.” Our own relatives and patients are summoned as we learn of her insistence on how to make chicken soup correctly and “The refusal to wear sneakers....She still wears heels-/It is her way/Though death lurks with every fall.”

Finally, in “Lament” we feel the pain of loss, the poet calling for guidance. This final poem in “GP” brings us to the author’s own progression as a physician in “Congruences.” Many will empathize with the astonishment at the trust granted to a student, the honor of being considered “su medico.” The poet goes on to embrace the role of witness and chronicler of his patients’ lives, accepting that sometimes this is the most he can do; “I could not be your Orpheus,/but now as your Vaseri,/ I shall tell of your short life.” His compassionate vignettes from patient lives also question medicine’s point of view, with the patient who hears voices being labeled, “bearing on your brow/the scarlet S.”

The burdens of being a physician are shown as he sleeps through a lecture in “At the New York Academy of Medicine” and has to break terrible news in “While Moonlighting.” After more beautiful and wrenching stories, the book ends with “First Do No Harm,” as the physician sails on, “Caution now his watchword.”

The cinematic quality of the book, zooming from the general to the touchingly specific, allows for it to be read straight through, almost

as a novel. This will appeal to readers who do not generally read poetry. However, it would be a mistake to skim over individual poems and not appreciate the craftsmanship and unique moods and images evoked. Those who prefer to dip into collections of poetry will find each poem to be a well crafted episode in its own right. They may be better appreciated in the larger context but can stand on their own. After reading this through I found myself feeling a part of a long lineage of doctors, yet returning to certain poems again to experience that particular moment. Many of the poems would lend themselves to discussion with learners about topics such as the extent of a physician’s responsibility, dealing with mortality, or how to deal with errors. I would recommend this poem to those beginning their medical career as well as to those of us in the midst or looking back in reflection. Each will resonate with different parts of the book and, as with many good books, may take something different away with each reading.

Andrea Gordon, MD

Tufts University Family Medicine Residency
Malden, MA

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