

**Medical College of Wisconsin
4-Week Elective
INHE-D3736-040 – Medical Humanities & Narrative**

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Introduction

Welcome to our online elective course in narrative medicine! We are happy that you will be taking this journey with us.

Narrative Medicine (NM) is a discipline committed to developing deep and accurate attention to the accounts of other people, told and heard in the context of healthcare. We will employ NM principles as developed, studied, and taught by the faculty at Columbia University's Program in Narrative Medicine.

The signature method of NM is Close Reading. This technique guides the reader to explore texts, paintings, music, video, dance, and other expressive forms to learn as much as possible about the creator's intent. We will discuss Close Reading's emphasis on Attention, Representation, and Affiliation. This will show us how we can best embrace and be moved to action by writers and artists. The benefit of exercising these creative muscles is to help us also be more attentive to the narratives of our patients.

While the course will include lectures, readings, and writing, much of the learning will take place as you engage in online discussions with your classmates, discovering things none of us knew we were looking for.

During the course, there will be a predictable schedule. You will choose a novel or literary work during the first week and create a reflection based on it during the final week. The course is designed to be asynchronous, but there will be activities you need to complete to move to the next. During each of the four weeks, we will share a lecture, then you will do some readings, write to prompts, and engage in interactive discussion boards. Part of your evaluation will include the level of engagement you demonstrate as you respond to your peers. After summarizing the week's discussions, we will move on to the next week. Depending on the size and interest of the class, we might try some synchronous activities, as well.

By the end of the month, you will have learned about Narrative Medicine, completed a great book, read interesting essays, poems, and papers, watched some videos, listened to some music, written some reflections, interacted with your colleagues in ways with which you have never had the opportunity and, hopefully, found new ways to view your patients. You will take away some skills to help you reflect on your busy lives.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns. I look forward to taking this journey with you.

Week 1: Introduction to Narrative Medicine

Write to a prompt

“Getting Acquainted” 4-minute prompt: Set a timer and write without stopping for four minutes to the prompt, “*Write the story of your name.*”

Edit, as desired, then post to the discussion board. After you post, you will be able to see other responses. Respond to two or more of your classmates.

Select a “literary novel” to read during the course

A literary novel is hard to define but generally includes one or more of the following characteristics:

- A concern with social commentary, political criticism, or the human condition
- Character-driven more than plot-driven
- A slower pace than in genre or popular fiction
- A concern with the style and complexity of the writing

Find a book by an author like Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, TC Boyle, F Scott Fitzgerald, Albert Camus, Margaret Atwood, Gabriel García Márquez, Marilynne Robinson, Paul Harding, Junot Díaz, Alice Walker, Walker Percy, or Jhumpa Lahiri. That said, find a book you have wanted to read but haven’t had the time. There will be a reflective assignment during week four related to your chosen book.

Watch the lecture

The lecture is an introduction to Narrative Medicine and Close Reading.

Complete the readings

- Charon R, Hermann N, Devlin MJ, Close reading and creative writing in clinical education: Teaching attention, representation, and affiliation, *Academic Medicine* 2016 (Mar): 91:345-350.
 - doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000000827.
- Bauby, D, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
 - (Excerpt attached)
- Story Corps interview: Living with Multiple Sclerosis – A conversation between Melanie Rowan and Kristina Wertz (Audio)
 - <https://www.kalw.org/post/storycorps-living-multiple-sclerosis#stream/0>

Complete the Close Reading and Narrative Response Exercise

Experience the excerpt and the video.

Write a 300 to 500-word response to: “*Imagine a day in the life of a person who is living with a disability, either someone you know or someone for whom you have cared.*” You may interpret the prompt in any way you like.

Post your essay to the Discussion Board. After you post, you will be able to see the other students' posts. Respond to two (or more) of the other responses. Refer to things you noticed in the readings as you respond.

You must post your essay before you can read and reply to others. You must respond to at two or more of your classmates.

Watch the summary video

A summary of the week’s writings and responses is posted over the weekend.

Week 2: Stories of Ambiguity

Write to a prompt

“Ambiguity” 3-minute prompt: Set a timer and write without stopping for three minutes to the prompt, “*Write about a time when you had to make a choice and no option was perfect.*”

Edit, as desired, then post to the discussion board. After you post, you will be able to see other responses. Respond to two or more of your classmates.

Continue reading your “literary novel”

Watch the lecture

The lecture discusses how tolerance of ambiguity is a desirable trait in medicine, allowing the care giver to accept that not all is knowable. The readings and the assignments for the week are described.

Complete the readings

- Poem: After the diagnosis – Christian Wiman (American; 1966-)
 - <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57354/after-the-diagnosis-56d23acac14ca>
- Poem: She does not remember – Anna Swir (Polish; 1909-1984)
 - <https://hellopoetry.com/poem/73579/she-does-not-remember/>
- Short video: Bear Story – Gabriel Osorio Vargas (Chilean; 1984-)
 - <https://bit.ly/2KQkkla>
- Short story: Brute – Richard Selzer, MD (American; 1928-2016)
 - pdf
- Music video: Eleanor Rigby – John Lennon & Paul McCartney (British; 1940-1980, 1942-)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuS5NuXRb5Y&feature=youtu.be>

Complete the Close Reading and Narrative Response Exercise

Experience the poems, short story, video, and music. If possible, read the poems aloud, slowly, and twice.

Write a 300 to 500-word response to: “*Write a story with two different endings.*” You may interpret the prompt in any way you like.

Post your essay to the Discussion Board. After you post, you will be able to see the other students' posts. Respond to two (or more) of the other responses. Refer to things you noticed in the readings as you respond.

You must post your essay before you can read and reply to others. You must respond to at two or more of your classmates.

Watch the summary video

A summary of the week's writings and responses is posted over the weekend.

Week 3: Stories of Pandemic

Write to a prompt

"Pandemic" 3-minute prompt: Set a timer and write without stopping for three minutes to the prompt, *"Write about a 'normal day' before and after the pandemic began."*

Edit, as desired, then post to the discussion board. After you post, you will be able to see other responses. Respond to two or more of your classmates.

Continue reading your "literary novel"

Watch the lecture

The lecture discusses how pandemics shape the creative response. We contrast the literary outpouring of the HIV/AIDS epidemic with the paucity of literature after the 1918 influenza pandemic. The readings and the assignments for the week are described.

Complete the readings

- Essay – Like a Prayer – Rafael Campo (American; 1964-)
 - Pdf
- Excerpt from novel – The Plague – Albert Camus (French; 1913-1960)
 - Attached
- Poem – Lockdown – Simon Armitage (British; 1963-)
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/21/lockdown-simon-armitage-writes-poem-about-coronavirus-outbreak>
- Poem – Death, be not proud (Holy Sonnet 10) – John Donne (British; 1571-1631)
 - <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44107/holy-sonnets-death-be-not-proud>
- Article – What Can We Learn from the Art of Pandemics Past – Megan O'Grady
 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/t-magazine/art-coronavirus.html>

Complete the Close Reading and Narrative Response Exercise

Experience the poems, short story, video, and music. If possible, read the poems aloud, slowly, and twice.

Write a 300 to 500-word response to: “*Where is the experience of living through a pandemic taking you?*” You may interpret the prompt in any way you like.

Post your essay to the Discussion Board. After you post, you will be able to see the other students' posts. Respond to two (or more) of the other responses. Refer to things you noticed in the readings as you respond.

You must post your essay before you can read and reply to others. You must respond to at two or more of your classmates.

Watch the summary video

A summary of the week's writings and responses is posted over the weekend.

Week 4: Stories of the World

Write to the prompt about the novel read during the course

Narrative in literary texts:

Prompt: *In a few sentences, answer the following:*

- *Which book did you read and who is the author?*
- *What is the main theme of the book?*
- *What surprised you about the book?*
- *What is your obligation now that you have read this book?*

Post to the discussion board. After you post, you will be able to see other responses. Respond to two or more of your classmates.

Watch the lecture

The lecture discusses how creative acts are related to health & the human condition since the medical humanities stand at the crossroads of medicine and everything else. We will encourage the students to continue their journeys in creativity and reflection. The readings and the assignments for the week are described.

Complete the readings

- Short story - Bullet in the Brain - Tobias Wolff (American; 1944-)
 - pdf
- Short story - Good Country People - Flannery O'Connor (American; 1925-1964)
 - pdf
- Graphic novel excerpt - Mom's Cancer - Brian Fies (American; 1960-)
 - pdf

Complete the Close Reading and Narrative Response Exercise

Experience the short stories and the graphic novel.

Write a 300 to 500-word response to: *Create a piece of any genre from a patient's perspective. You may interpret the prompt in any way you like.* You may interpret the prompt in any way you like.

Post your essay to the Discussion Board. After you post, you will be able to see the other students' posts. Respond to two (or more) of the other responses. Refer to things you noticed in the readings as you respond.

You must post your essay before you can read and reply to others. You must respond to at two or more of your classmates.

Complete a Learning Journal

The responses will be seen only by the faculty.

- Respond to the questions
 - What's your lived experience of being in this course?
 - Where is this course taking you?
 - Give an example of a discovery. What surprised you?

- Respond to the survey questions

(1 to 5 Likert Scale 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree)

- I am comfortable with creative and reflective writing
- Compared with my medical school peers, I took more than the average number of English and writing classes in high school and college
- My PEERS view writing, reflective, and narrative exercises as a waste of time
- In general, I view writing, reflective, and narrative exercises as a waste of time
- I had several encounters and experiences in my medical school clinical rotations that I will always remember

- I was surprised by the amount, quality, and/or insight of my writing in this course
- This course helped me think more clearly about some of my clinical encounters

There will be either a summary video or WebEx conversation to complete the course

Week 1

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (excerpt)

1997

Jean-Dominique Bauby

A patient in a French hospital, completely stripped of any ability to move or speak, offers an extraordinary perspective on the skillfulness of the doctors who attend to him, and on the world of the hospital, giving the reader of this excerpt a full measure of an utterly helpless patient's resentment and anger in the face of indifferent, "ungracious" care.

I have known gentler awakenings. When I came to that late-January morning, the hospital ophthalmologist was leaning over me and sewing my right eyelid shut with a needle and thread, just as if he were darning a sock. Irrational terror swept over me. What if this man got carried away and sewed up my left eye as well, my only link to the outside world, the only window to my cell, the one tiny opening of my diving bell? Luckily, as it turned out, I wasn't plunged into darkness. He carefully packed away his sewing kit in padded tin boxes. Then, in the tones of a prosecutor demanding a maximum sentence for a repeat offender, he barked out: "Six Months!" I fired off a series of questioning signals with my working eye, but this man – who spent his days peering into people's pupils – was apparently unable to interpret a simple look. With a big round head, a short body, and a fidgety manner, he was the very model of a couldn't-care-less doctor: arrogant, brusque, sarcastic – the kind who summons his patients for 8:00, arrives at 9:00, and departs at 9:05, after giving each of them forty-five seconds of his precious time. Disinclined to chat with normal patients, he turned thoroughly evasive in dealing with ghosts of my ilk, apparently incapable of finding words to offer the slightest explanation. But I finally discovered why he had put a six-

month seal on my eye: the lid was no longer fulfilling its function as a protective cover, and I ran the risk of an ulcerated cornea.

As the weeks went by, I wondered whether the hospital employed such an ungracious character deliberately — to serve as a focal point for the veiled mistrust the medical profession always arouses in long-term patients. A kind of scapegoat, in other words. If he leaves Berck, which seems likely, who will be left for me to sneer at? I shall no longer have the solitary, innocent pleasure of hearing his eternal question: “Do you see double?” and replying – deep inside – “Yes, I see two assholes, not one.”

I need to feel strongly, to love and to admire, just as desperately as I need to breathe. A letter from a friend, a Balthus painting on a postcard, a page of Saint-Simeon, give meaning to the passing hours. But to keep my mind sharp, to avoid descending into resigned indifference, I maintain a level of resentment and anger, neither too much nor too little, just as a pressure cooker has a safety valve to keep it from exploding.

And while we’re on the subject, *The Pressure Cooker* could be a title for the play I may write one day, based on my experiences here. I’ve also thought of calling it *The Eye* and, of course *The Diving Bell*. You already know the plot and the setting. A hospital room in which Mr. L, a family man in the prime of life, is learning to live with locked-in syndrome brought on by a serious cerebrovascular accident. The play follows Mr. L.’s adventures in the medical world and his shifting relationships with his wife, his children, his friends, and his associates from the leading advertising agency he helped to found. Ambitious, somewhat cynical, heretofore a stranger to failure, Mr. L. takes his first steps into distress, sees all the certainties that buttressed him collapse, and discovers that his nearest and dearest are strangers. We could carry this slow transformation to the front seats of the balcony: a voice offstage would reproduce Mr. L.’s unspoken inner monologue as he faces each new situation. All that is left is to write the play. I have the final scene already: the stage is in darkness, except for a halo of light around the bed in center stage. Nighttime. Everyone is asleep. Suddenly Mr. L., inert since the curtain first rose, throws aside the sheets and blankets, jumps from the bed, and walks around the eerily lit stage. Then it grows dark again, and you hear the voice off stage – Mr. L.’s inner voice – one last time:

“Damn! It was only a dream!”

Jean-Dominique Bauby (1952-1997) was the 43-year-old editor-in-chief of *Elle* when he suffered a stroke that decimated his brain stem. After weeks in a coma, he awoke to find that he suffered from a rare condition known as “locked in syndrome,” which left his mind intact, but his body almost completely paralyzed. Bauby “dictated” this story by blinking his one still-functioning eye, one letter at a time. He died two days after *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* was published in France.

This excerpt was reprinted in A Life in Medicine: A Literary Anthology. Robert Coles and Randy Testa, eds. The New Press, New York. 2002.

Week 3

The Plague (excerpt)

1947

Albert Camus

It is in the early 1940s. Dr. Bernard Rieux is a mid-30's physician in Oran, a small port in Algeria. The plague has arrived and is devastating the town. At the point of the story when this conversation takes place, the city gates have been closed to all entry and exit, the epidemic has upended everything, and about 100 people are dying each day. There is no end in sight. The doctor works from sunrise to sunset caring for patients with very limited resources.

Late one evening, Rieux is visited by Jean Tarrou, a visitor to Oran who was caught within the walls when the quarantine was imposed. Tarrou knows that Rieux is working with the local leaders on planning although the politicians have been hesitant to act. Tarrou proposed that, in the face of the local government's indecision, he can organize and lead brigades of volunteers to take care of everything from sanitation to patient care to social services support. He wants Rieux's support.

The conversation takes place a few days after a well-attended and widely discussed sermon by Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest, scholar, and powerful orator, who told the congregation that the plague is a scourge sent by God to those who have hardened their hearts against Him.

Rieux approves of Tarrou's plan but realizes that it will put all of the volunteers, including Tarrou, at risk.

"But I take it you know that work of this kind may prove fatal to the worker. And I feel I should ask you this; have you weighed the dangers?"

Tarrou's gray eyes met the doctor's gaze serenely.

“What did you think of Paneloux’s sermon, doctor?”

The question was asked in a quite ordinary tone, and Rieux answered in the same tone. “I’ve seen too much of hospitals to relish any kind of collective punishment. But, as you know, Christians sometimes say that sort of thing without really thinking it. They’re better than they seem.”

“However, you think, like Paneloux, that the plague has its good side; it opens men’s eyes and forces them to take thought?”

The doctor tossed his head impatiently. “So does every ill that flesh is heir too. What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves. All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague.”

Rieux had hardly raised his voice at all; but Tarrou made a slight gesture as if to calm him. He was smiling.

“Yes.” Rieux shrugged his shoulders. “But you haven’t answered my question yet. Have you weighed the consequences?”

Tarrou squared his shoulders against the back of the chair, then moved his head forward into the light.

“Do you believe in God, doctor?”

Again the question was put in an ordinary tone. But this time Rieux took longer to find his answer.

“No---but what does that really mean? I’m fumbling in the dark, struggling to make something out. But I’ve long ceased finding that original.”

“Isn’t that it---the gulf between Paneloux and you?”

“I doubt it. Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn’t come in contact with death; that’s why he can speak with such assurance of the truth---with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He’d try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence.” Rieux stood up; his face was now in shadow. “Let’s drop the subject,” he said, “as you won’t answer.”

Tarrou remained seated in his chair; he was smiling again.

“Suppose I answer with a question.”

The doctor now smiled, too.

"You like being mysterious, don't you? Yes, fire away."

"My question is this," said Tarrou. "Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don't believe in God? I suspect your answer may help me to mine."

His face still in shadow, Rieux said that he'd already answered: that if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God. And this was proved by the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely. Anyhow, in this respect Rieux believed himself to be on the right road---in fighting against creation as he found it.

"Ah," Tarrou remarked. "So that's the idea you have of your profession?"

"More or less." The doctor came back into the light.

Tarrou made a faint whistling noise with his lips, and the doctor gazed at him.

"Yes, you're thinking it calls for pride to feel this way. But I assure you I've no more than the pride that's needed to keep me going. I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they'll think things over; and so shall I. But what's wanted now is to make them well. I defend them as best I can, that's all."

"Against whom?"

Rieux turned to the window. A shadow-line on the horizon told of the presence of the sea. He was conscious only of his exhaustion, and at the same time was struggling against a sudden, irrational impulse to unburden himself a little more to his companion; an eccentric, perhaps, but who, he guessed was one of his own kind.

"I haven't a notion, Tarrou; I assure you I haven't a notion. When I entered this profession, I did it 'abstractly,' so to speak, because I had a desire for it, because it meant a career like another, one that young men often aspire to. Perhaps, too, because it was particularly difficult for a workman's son, like myself. And then I had to see people die. Do you know that there are some who refuse to die? Have you ever heard a woman scream 'Never!' with her last gasp? Well, I have. And then I saw that I could never get hardened to it. I was young then, and I was outraged by the whole scheme of things, or so I thought. Subsequently I grew more modest. Only, I've never managed to get used to seeing people die. That's all I know. Yet after all---"

Rieux fell silent and sat down. He felt his mouth dry.

"After all---?" Tarrou prompted softly.

"After all," the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on Tarrou, "it's something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence."

Tarrou nodded.

"Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all."

Rieux's face darkened.

"Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle."

"No reason, I agree. Only, I now can picture what this plague must mean for you."

"Yes. A never ending defeat."

Tarrou stared at the doctor for a moment, then turned and tramped heavily toward the door. Rieux followed him and was almost at his side when Tarrou, who was staring at the floor, suddenly said:

"Who taught you all this, doctor?"

The reply came promptly:

"Suffering."

Albert Camus (7 November 1913 – 4 January 1960) was a French Algerian philosopher, author, and journalist.

Camus was born in Algeria and studied philosophy at the University of Algiers. He was in Paris when the Germans invaded France during World War II and became editor of an underground newspaper for the French Resistance. After the war, he remained politically active and was known for his support for tolerance, dialogue, and civil rights. He published novels, non-fiction, essay, and plays. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature at the age of 44 in 1957.

The Plague was originally published in French as La Peste in 1947. It was translated into English the following year.

Camus died in a car crash at age 46.