

A RICHARD SELZER READER

Blood and Ink

Edited by KEVIN KERRANE
Introduction by MARIE BORROFF

A *Richard Selzer Reader: Blood and Ink* is a career-spanning collection including short stories and essays by the renowned doctor-author. In the 1960s, while practicing as a general surgeon and teaching surgery at the Yale School of Medicine, Richard Selzer began publishing unique creative work in such magazines as *Harper's* and *Esquire*. By 1985, when he retired as a physician to devote himself completely to writing, Selzer was already recognized as a pioneer in the field of medical humanities. When he died in 2016, as the author of thirteen books, his influence was acknowledged by a younger generation of doctor-writers like Abraham Verghese and Atul Gawande.

Selzer's unusual style fuses scientific and poetic language. Drawing on favorite readings from the King James Bible to the tales of Edgar Allen Poe, he used this style to convey a sense of awe at the beauty and complexity of the human body, even in the midst of suffering. While describing himself as an atheist, Selzer always searched for "sacramental" moments of courtesy, courage, and grace in medical encounters. Because he often looked critically at the failure of doctors to regard the full humanity of their patients, Selzer's work has become required reading in many medical training programs.

A *Richard Selzer Reader* includes several of the author's most famous essays and stories, as well as two dozen selections that have not been collected in his previous books. Chronologically, the material ranges from apprenticeship stories (as far back as a high school composition) to two odd self-portraits that remained unpublished at the time of Selzer's death. Topically, the material ranges from meditations on the body—and on human mortality—to reflections on both medicine and writing as serious vocations. Along the way, Selzer celebrates the work of other doctor-writers, like Thomas Browne and Anton Chekhov, and in a series of previously unpublished diary entries discusses the joys of nature, art, and family as bulwarks against the difficulties of growing old.

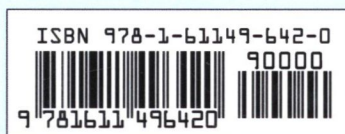
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A Richard Selzer Reader

Preface

With the cooperation of Richard Selzer, *A Richard Selzer Reader: Blood and Ink* has been designed as a career-spanning collection, reflecting the range and depth of the author's work over a period of about forty-five years. When Selzer began writing seriously in the late 1960s, he was practicing as a general surgeon in New Haven, Connecticut, and teaching surgery at the Yale School of Medicine. By the time he retired as a physician in 1985 to devote himself completely to writing, he had already achieved major recognition—a National Magazine Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, residencies at Yaddo, and acclaim by such literary luminaries as Cynthia Ozick, Denise Levertov, and Tom Wolfe. He had also helped to define the new field of medical humanities, and his influence would later be acknowledged by a younger generation of doctor-writers like Abraham Verghese and Atul Gawande. “Richard Selzer will always be my hero,” Verghese has said.

One reason that Selzer's stories and essays have become required reading in many medical programs is that he focuses so thoughtfully on doctor-patient relationships, looking critically at the ways that physicians (including himself) are liable to ignore the full humanity of those under their care. Contrasting examples of medical humility and courtesy highlight the author's portrayals of his father, Julius Louis Selzer, a general practitioner in Troy, New York. Julius died shortly before Richard turned thirteen, and the boy—who was already planning to become a doctor—now had an all-consuming mission. He worked his way through Union College and Albany Medical College, served in postwar Korea as a lieutenant in a medical detachment, returned to a surgical residency at Yale, and then established his own practice. Before being posted to Korea, Selzer had married Janet White, and in New Haven they raised three children in a big house on St. Ronan Terrace.

The birth of his second career is traced out by Selzer himself in “The Pen and the Scalpel,” the opening selection in this book—and is then illustrated in the first full unit, which surveys his writing apprenticeship. Subsequent units are arranged topically rather than chronologically, and each grouping is preceded by a brief overview of a theme or trend in Selzer’s work.

Limiting the selections was difficult, partly because of the sheer volume of Selzer’s work. He is the author of thirteen books—comprising short stories, essays, reportage, memoir, and diary entries—and the co-creator of two others edited by Peter Josyph: *What One Man Said to Another* (Michigan State University Press, 1994) and *Letters to a Best Friend* (State University of New York Press, 2009). Many boxes of additional material, either previously unanthologized or never published, are part of the Richard Selzer Archive in the Moody Medical Library at the University of Texas, Galveston. Selzer has also given dozens of public lectures, and *A Richard Selzer Reader* includes the texts for four of them, each slightly edited according to the author’s own recommendations. In addition, for this collection he made available more than a hundred pages of fresh material: new diary entries as well as notes for his writing workshops.

Final decisions about the table of contents gave priority to works that have been difficult, or impossible, for Selzer’s readers to find. But *A Richard Selzer Reader* also includes about a dozen pieces whose familiarity makes them even more essential as key texts in Selzer’s career, and some stories have been chosen for their sheer brilliance: “Whither Thou Goest” and “Imelda,” for example, are likely to be read, and treasured, into the twenty-second century—and beyond. “Imelda” has been mistakenly construed by some readers as a true story even though its fictional premises seem clear. More problematic is “Atrium: October 2001,” whose place in the zone between fact and fiction is discussed in the author’s explication at the end of the story. And Selzer has always been frank about his embellishments of fact even in “nonfiction” narratives, such as the chronicle of his illness in *Raising the Dead: A Doctor’s Encounter with His Own Mortality* (Whittle Communications, 1994). In general, his memoir writing owes as much to imagination as to memory.

In her introduction to this collection, Marie Borroff appraises Richard Selzer’s style with an expert eye. She has written major studies of language in medieval and modern literature, from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to works by Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost, and she is an estimable poet in her own right. Her poems in *Stars and Other Signs* (Yale University Press, 2002), written over the course of five decades, remain fresh—with a voice that shifts easily between the formal and the colloquial as it captures moments of splendor amid the details of daily life. It is easy to see why Professor Borroff would appreciate Selzer’s prose artistry. But the essential point in her commentary is that his distinctive style is a tool for expressing a distinc-

tive vision: of the human body as holy; of medicine as a compassionate craft; and of the aspiring doctor-writer as a recorder of sacramental moments in the lives of patients and caregivers.

"It is a paradox," Selzer wrote in his published *Diary*, "that I am both a religious writer and a skeptic." In fact, this conundrum is at the heart of his work. His entry continues: "I do not pray in any conventional sense, as I do not believe there is a god to receive prayer. . . . [But] I am attentive to everyone and every living creature, just as a nun includes all humankind in her prayers. That means listening and beholding with all of my might."¹ As this quote suggests, Selzer uses religious language metaphorically—finding "divine" qualities, for example, in purely human acts of profound sensitivity, courtesy, or generosity. His personality on the page is that of a humble searcher, always open to experiences that resist standard scientific explanations. In a 1975 essay, "The Surgeon as Priest," Selzer reported a visit to Yale by the Dalai Lama's personal physician, Yeshe Dhonden, whose astute diagnoses, offered in poetic language, were based on sensitive touching and the discernment of subtle odors. Afterward, in the course of his own hospital rounds, Selzer could sometimes hear the sound of Yeshe Dhonden's voice, "like an ancient Buddhist prayer, its meaning long since forgotten, only the music remaining. Then a jubilation possesses me, and I feel myself touched by something divine."²

Selzer's recent diary entries reveal deeper layers of an atheism that is modest rather than militant—especially when, in reflecting on his voluminous reading, he discovers kindred spirits in the past. One entry from 2011 describes his feeling of fellowship with Robert Louis Stevenson: "I cannot claim a rugged, adventurous experience such as that of RLS, but in a number of ways our two selves were interchangeable. We both shared a skepticism, actually a disbelief in religion, yet found ourselves thanking God for the greatness of the human spirit."

Marie Borroff's commentary suggests two other implications of Selzer's prose style. First, his medical expertise and his metaphorical skill often combine in passages of disturbing vividness, as seen here in "The Corpse" and "Emergency Medicine." The first, a dramatized essay, crystallizes the discomforting details of human mortality and decay; the second, a chapter from the semi-autobiographical novel *Knife Song Korea* (State University of New York Press, 2009), shows a young doctor in a remote outpost making snap decisions as he deals with horrific wounds. Both selections may prove challenging to read. "I would warn off the squeamish," Selzer wrote in a preface to *Mortal Lessons*, "or those who cannot see that the truth is at least as accessible in ugliness as it is in beauty."³ This aspect of Selzer's work recalls a tribute once paid to the journalist Martha Gellhorn, who was said to write "with a cold eye and a warm heart."⁴

Second, perhaps as a counterweight to his skill in describing ugly truths, Selzer's writing reveals a fine comic sensibility. His unusual word choices and surprising turns of phrase, as noted by Professor Borroff, are often the springboards for elegant wit. In *A Richard Selzer Reader*, that wit is evident in Selzer's lecture on Sherlock Holmes, in his new ending for Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and even in the digressive style of his essay on the liver. In his memoirs and diary entries, Selzer's humor is usually self-deprecating. In *Down from Troy*, he pictured himself as a spindly and wistful child: "Puny, ill-clothed so as to resemble an ungainly parcel, distracted, I dreamt of building a raft and sailing it all the way down the Hudson to New York Harbor."⁵ Seventy years later, as a character in his own diary, Selzer remained spindly and wistful, contending courageously with the travails of aging while enjoying a sense of the absurd. In a 2010 entry, he is joined by another opera-lover in an impromptu performance of a beloved aria from *La Traviata* as both men, described as scrawny octogenarians, stand naked in the locker room of a gym at Yale.

POSTSCRIPT

Richard Selzer died on June 15, 2016, nine days before his eighty-eighth birthday. On July 24, Janet Selzer hosted a celebration of his life for about 120 friends at the Lawn Club in New Haven. Among the highlights were tributes by Richard's three children. Older son Jon honored his father's love of opera by playing several selections on oboe, beginning with "Musetta's Waltz" from *La Bohème*. Larry (nicknamed "Doon") described some of the ways that Richard charmed his children and grandchildren. Gretchen paid homage to her father by reading his own humorous homage to Charles Dickens: "*A Tale of Two Cities* Revisited."

Brief reminiscences were shared by two other doctor-writers: Bernie Siegel, who once shared a surgical practice with Richard; and Lorence Gutterman, a collaborator on writing workshops for medical professionals. Peter Josyph, who edited two Selzer books and provided invaluable assistance on several other projects, read from one of his published conversations with Richard. I also spoke, and told the following story:

Richard Selzer's visit to the University of Delaware in spring 1990 began with a buffet lunch attended by two dozen faculty and students. As Richard was finishing a sandwich, a handsome young man walked over and introduced himself. "I'm majoring in Communication," he said, "and I want to get into television broadcasting. My professor says that I need to practice my interviewing skills, and I wonder if I could do a brief interview with you—maybe for just five minutes."

Richard politely agreed, and the student pulled out a notebook. “OK,” the young man said, “my first question is: Who are you?”

I walked away in exasperation. “Who are you?” confirmed a stereotype of TV reporters (or would-be reporters) who seem to think that knowing anything is less important than being photogenic and looking as if they *might* know something. And in this case the question sounded almost insulting. *Who is he?* He’s a doctor who turned medical writing into art. He’s an innovator who helped to establish medical humanities as a vital field of study. He’s a stylist who specializes in brief forms but packs them with language so highly charged that they almost burst at the seams.

When I calmed down, I walked back to find that Richard was interviewing the student! He had encouraged the young man to talk about his various interests, which included eerie movies. Richard was delighted, and proceeded to recommend one of his favorite tales by Poe, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” describing it as eerier than any film. The student’s eyes widened as he heard about the story’s premise: a dying man being instructed by a hypnotist to remain alive.

It struck me then that the strongest link between Richard’s two careers, doctor and writer, was his ability to *listen*, to attend fully not just to what’s said, but to *how* it’s said, and to focus intently and amiably on the whole person behind the words.

That evening Richard gave a public reading. The story he chose was one he had recently completed, “Whither Thou Goest.” I thought then, and still think, that it stands as one of his finest works. The audience loved it too, especially in Richard’s expressive presentation. We laughed at the comic twists of the letters within the story, and teared up at the lyrical beauty of the final paragraphs.

When I left the auditorium, I crossed paths with the young man who had tried to interview Richard earlier that day. As he looked at me, I saw that his eyes were wet.

“Man,” he said, “I *love* him!” And I said: “Me too.”

We all did. And we still do.

Kevin Kerrane
Newark, Delaware

NOTES

1. Richard Selzer, *Diary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 35–36.
2. Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Touchstone edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 35–36.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. James Cameron, quoted in *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*, ed. Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda (New York: Scribner, 1997), 422.

5. Richard Selzer, *Down from Troy: A Doctor Comes of Age* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 131.

Acknowledgments

As I edited this collection, my most helpful reading was Richard Selzer's own brilliant work, including many worthy essays and stories that could not be included here because of space limits. Several scholarly studies also proved valuable—particularly Charles Anderson's *Richard Selzer and the Rhetoric of Surgery* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), as well as essays by Robert Leigh Davis, David B. Morris, Enid Rhodes Peschel, Charles I. Schuster, M. Teresa Tavormina, and Gayle Whittier.

Two other Selzer experts, Mahala Yates Stripling and Peter Josyph, deserve special thanks. Both have been generous in sharing ideas and materials, and their love for Richard Selzer and his writing is infectious. Mahala, who has published thoughtful articles about Selzer and an illuminating interview with him, has now completed a biography with the working title *Doctor of Arts: The Life of Richard Selzer, The Man Who Transformed the Literature of Medicine*. Peter collaborated with Selzer on two books: *What One Man Said to Another* transcribes a series of their lively conversations, including an interview included here in the unit entitled "Being a Writer"; *Letters to a Best Friend* is a record of their steady correspondence over a period of five years, 1988 through 1992. I am also grateful to Peter for suggesting the lecture "The Ivory Crucifixion" as a last-minute addition to this book—and to Kathleen Mylen-Coulombe of the Yale University Art Gallery for helping us to include a photo of that remarkable carving.

Marie Borroff, Sterling Professor of English Emeritus at Yale, has been one of Richard Selzer's dear friends as well as a close reader of his work. This renowned scholar is both genial and incisive, and her introductory essay is a model of appreciative commentary.

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Greatest thanks, of course, go to Richard and Janet Selzer for their grace, generosity, and hospitality. This work is dedicated to both of them with deep admiration and affection.

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- “Four Appointments with the Discus Thrower” from *Confessions of a Knife* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979)
- “Remembrance of Things” from *Connecticut Artists* 2 (1979)
- “Liver,” “Bone,” “The Corpse,” and “Longfellow, Virgil, and Me” from *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980)
- “Mercy” and “Imelda” from *Letters to a Young Doctor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982)
- “To a Would-Be Doctor-Writer” from *Literature and Medicine* 1 (1982)
- “Leonardo’s Drawings” from *Harper’s Bazaar* (June 1984)
- “Jonah and the Whale” from *Medical Heritage* 1, no. 1 (January/February 1985)
- “Fetishes” and “Taking the World in for Repairs” from *Taking the World in for Repairs* (New York: William Morrow, 1986)
- “The Pen and the Scalpel” from *New York Times* (August 21, 1988)
- “A Mother’s Fury” from *New York Times* (October 23, 1988)
- “How Proudly It Heals” from *Lear’s* (June 1989)
- “Whither Thou Goest” from *Imagine a Woman and Other Tales* (New York: Random House, 1990)
- “A Hero in a Rowboat” and “At St. Mary’s” from Chapters 2 and 4 of *Down from Troy: A Doctor Comes of Age* (New York: William Morrow, 1992)

“Risen” (Part Two from *Raising the Dead: A Doctor’s Encounter with His Own Mortality*) (Knoxville, TN: Whittle Communications, 1993)

“Flesh Holds the Truth, Mortality,” Introduction to Max Aguilera-Hellweg, *The Sacred Heart: An Atlas of the Body Seen through Invasive Surgery* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 1997)

“Five-Finger Exercises” from *The Writer* 112 (September 1999)

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