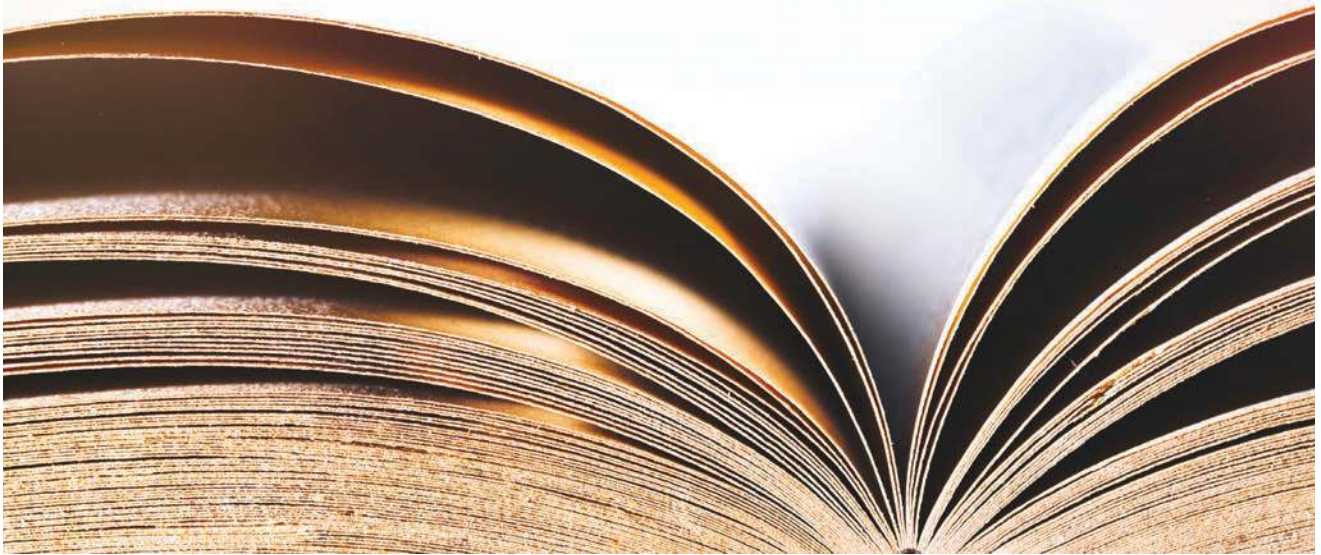


# A summer reading list for new medical students during a pandemic



## Edward C. Halperin, MD, MA

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**D**uring this COVID-19 pandemic I, like many others, was working from home in my virtual office trying to solve the very non-virtual problems facing a medical college's chancellor: the massive disruptions wrought by COVID-19 upon medical, dental, nursing, physical therapy, speech language pathology, public health, and graduate education, the closure of research laboratories, and the stresses on the college's finances.

I was delighted to receive an e-mail from a second-year medical student who posed a sincere question instead of a problem. A college chancellor "is ultimately the person to whom the problems come," said Donald Kennedy the former president of Stanford University, "What you need then is...to meet a student who wants to come in and

talk...I find those occasions very uplifting because they're not automatically negative. They're not the kind of problems that are programmed for the president's desk because they haven't been solved by anybody else. Instead, they're the kinds of things that...make this a terrific place."<sup>1</sup>

The medical student wrote to say that he had been asked for advice by incoming students about what to read over the summer before the start of medical school. The student wrote that his book club, "decided that we wanted to compile a list of works which we think would be good for students to read prior to starting medical school [and] also offer suggestions of shorter works for those students who might not be willing to commit to a full-length book." He asked, "What books should be on the list?"

After 40 years of interviewing medical school applicants I am convinced that the literary interests of pre-medical students come and go in fashionable waves. In the 1980s, people told me how they had been inspired to apply to medical school by the collection of essays by the

physician, immunologist, and medical school dean Lewis Thomas' (AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1936) book *Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*.

Also, in the early 1980s the students would tell me that they were inspired by Tracy Kidder's book *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, about Farmer's work in Haiti, Peru, and Russia. This was followed by *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot about the interface of racism and the HeLa cell line that came from Lack's cervical cancer cell.

By the late 1990s Thomas had been supplanted by applicants telling me that they had been inspired by Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*, about the inability of American doctors to connect with the cultural issues important to a Hmong refugee family when a child develops a severe form of epilepsy.

I have yet to encounter an applicant who was fascinated by the portrayal of the young doctor in the 19th century novel by George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, the book I wrote about in my medical school application essay a half-century ago.

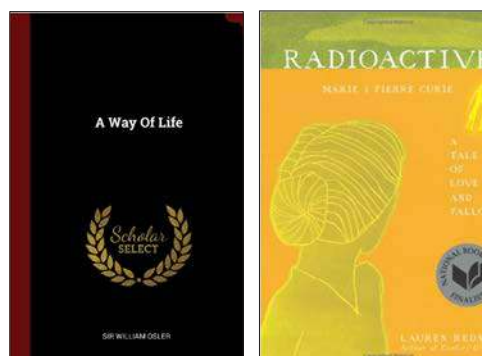
In response to the student's E-mail, I prepared a list and asked for input from my friends and family, virtually of course. I organized the books into six categories: novels; medical heroes; specialties; infectious diseases and diagnostics; race and medicine; and mortality or the nature of medical practice.



## Novels

Albert Camus published *The Plague* in 1947 about a plague sweeping through an Algerian city and the reactions of the town's citizens and doctors. The 1926 Pulitzer Prize winner *Martin Arrowsmith*, by Sinclair Lewis, recounts a doctor's battles with the culture of science and bubonic plague on a Caribbean island. These were my first two suggestions.

One friend said I was being "simply too serious" and that everyone needed a few laughs in the midst of a pandemic. He recommended the satirical 1978 novel *The House of God*, by Samuel Shem, a pseudonym for the psychiatrist Stephen Bergman (AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1973). The book describes the tribulations of hospital residents and was considered quite scandalous when it came out.



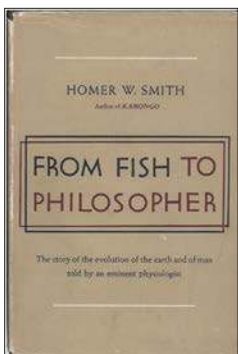
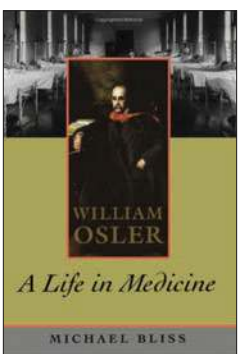
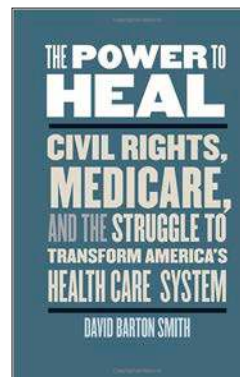
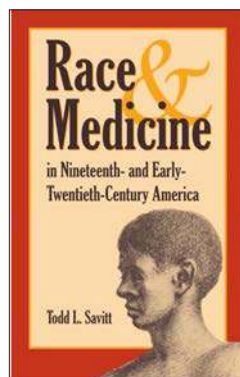
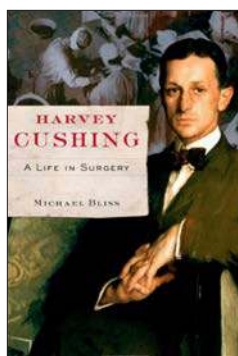
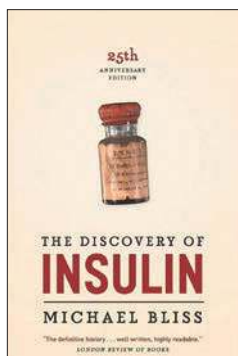
## Medical heroes

The most obvious medical hero book is *A Way of Life*, by Sir William Osler. It was, for generations, given to medical students by a pharmaceutical company. Osler was the master of the "secular sermon," a sermon-like speech that never invoked a Deity. In this classic speech to students on the "way of life" he advocated for an organized life as an ethical physician.

The charming book *Radioactive: Marie & Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout*, by Lauren Redniss, is beyond simple biography. The author delves into the risk of a nuclear catastrophe, the intersection of science and sexism, and the origins of nuclear medicine and radiation oncology.

## Specialties

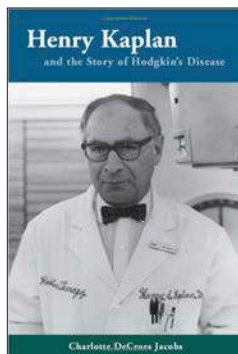
Canadian medical historian, the late Michael Bliss, is recommended by the endocrinologists for *The Discovery of Insulin*. The internists and medical educators recommend *William Osler: A Life in Medicine*, and surgeons suggest *Harvey Cushing: A Life in Surgery*.



### Race and medicine

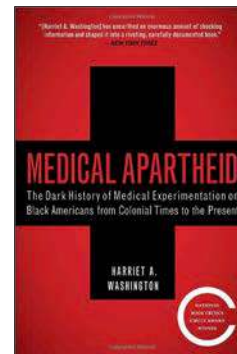
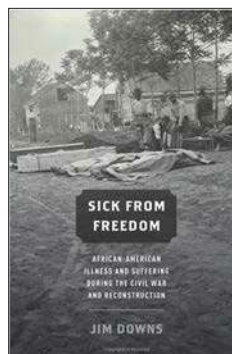
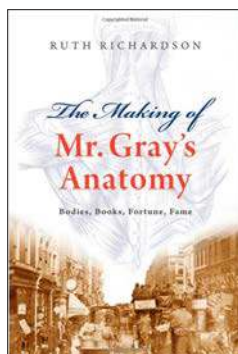
The first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia aboard *The White Lion*, a ship owned by the second Earl of Warwick in August 1619. They were destined to work at the Jamestown colony. Americans and American medicine have been grappling with institutional racism ever since. The previously cited book about Henrietta Lacks concerns itself with this topic. The dean of American medical historians writing about the Black experience in this country is Todd L. Savitt, and a good place to be introduced to his work is his book *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America*. *The Power to Heal: Civil Rights, Medicare, and the Struggle to Transform America's Health System*, by David Barton Smith, is an outstanding piece of scholarship on the desegregation of America's hospitals.

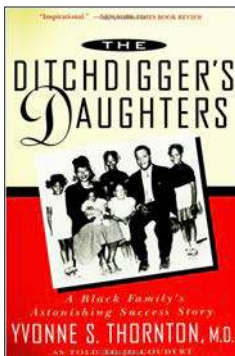
Two valuable, and very troubling, books are *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*, by Jim Downs, and *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, by Harriet Washington.



Nephrologists insist on Homer Smith's (AQA, New York University School of Medicine, 1932) *From Fish to Philosopher*, and radiation oncologists suggest *Henry Kaplan and the Story of Hodgkin's Disease*, by Charlotte D. Jacobs (AQA, Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, 1971).

For a nice excursion into the 19th century, the short book *The Making of Mr. Gray's Anatomy: Bodies, Books, Fortune, Fame*, by Ruth Richardson is a good choice.





For an uplifting story of resilience, both Oprah Winfrey and I recommend the autobiography of the first black woman to be board-certified in maternal-fetal medicine in the United States, *The Ditchdigger's Daughters*, by Yvonne S. Thornton.

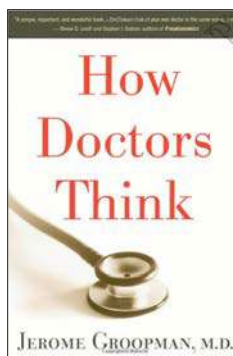
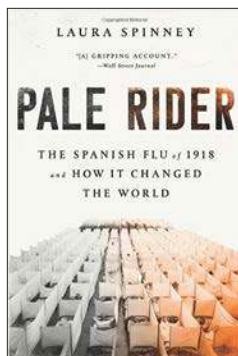
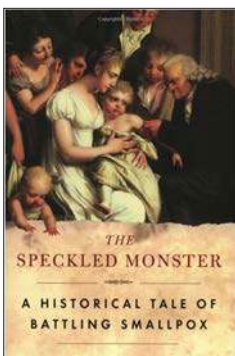
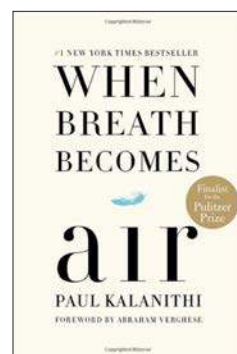
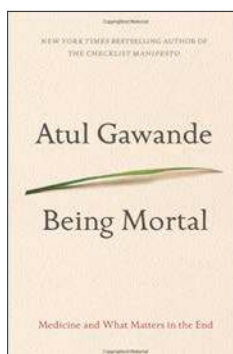
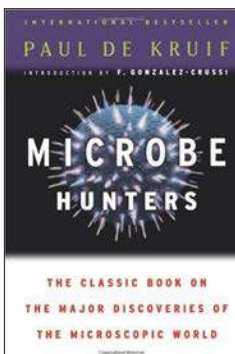
### Infectious diseases and diagnostics

Paul de Kruif's 1926 *Microbe Hunters* is a must read. Lewis relied on de Kruif for advice regarding *Arrowsmith*.

A wonderful collection of short stories from *The New Yorker* gathered together as *Eleven blue Men, and Other Narratives of Medical Detection*, by Berton Roueche is a wonderful compilation.

Jennifer Lee Carrell's *The Speckled Monster: A Historical Tale of Battling Smallpox*, Laura Spinney's *Pale Rider—The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed The World*, and John Barry's *The Great Influenza* are all timely reads during this pandemic.

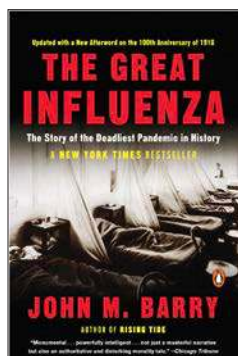
### Mortality or the nature of medical practice



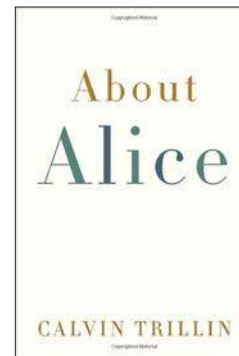
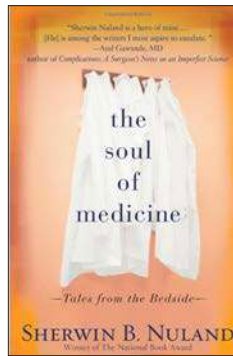
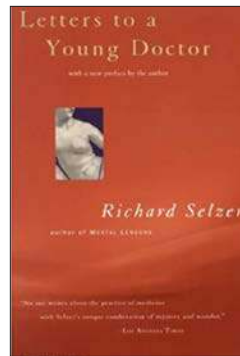
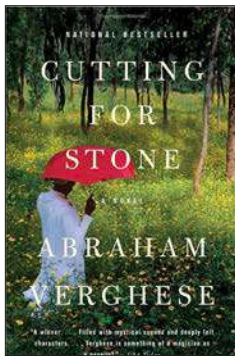
There are lots of fine choices for books about mortality or the nature of medical practice as distilled by experienced practitioners. *Being Mortal*, by Atul Gawande; *When Breath Becomes Air*, by Paul Kalanithi (AQA, Yale University School of Medicine, 2007); *How Doctors Think*, by Jerome Groopman (AQA, Columbia

University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1976); *Cutting for Stone*, by Abraham Verghese (AQA, East Tennessee State University Quillen College of Medicine, 1989, Faculty); *Letters to a Young Doctor*, by Richard Selzer (AQA, Albany Medical College, 1953); Sherwin Nuland's (AQA, Yale University School of Medicine, 2000, Alumni) *The Soul of Medicine: Tales from the Bedside*, Man's Search for Meaning, by the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl; and *About Alice*, by Calvin Trillin are all great choices.

The opening chapters of Lewis' *Martin Arrowsmith* provide a short list of what the doctor-to-be should read.



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In the book, the intoxicated Doc Vickerson comes home to find young Martin Arrowsmith sitting in his office reading *Gray's Anatomy*:

What you doing here, young fella? What you doing? I knew the cat would drag something in if I left the door unlocked....Reading old Gray? That's right. Physician's library just three books: *Gray's Anatomy* and the Bible and Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup>

There is much wisdom in this advice.

It is refreshing that there are incoming medical students who, in the midst of a pandemic, care about their summer reading. This confirms the wisdom of the late Edmund Pellegrino, "Medicine is the most scientific of the humanities and the most humane of sciences. It bridges the physical state of the human being with her psychological state, and I daresay with her spiritual state....That is not just a person's religion, but those transcendent aspects of what she is—and values—beyond the merely material domains of being."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Roberts S. Donald Kennedy, who led Stanford in 1980s, dies at 88. NY Times, April 23, 2020.
2. Lewis S. Martin Arrowsmith, London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd. 1925.
3. Giordano J. Foni phronimos - An interview with Edmund D. Pellegrino. Philosophy, Ethics, and the Humanities in Medicine. 2010; 5; 16, 2010.

### Acknowledgments

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