Gentle Men
Alan Blum, MD
Kershaw, SC, Firebrand Press, 2011, 32 pp., $95, hardcover (letterpress printed, hand-bound, limited edition)

Ladies in Waiting
Alan Blum, MD
Gordo, AL, Paper Souvenir, 2009, 16 pp., $95, hardcover (letterpress, hand-bound, limited edition)

Note: Both books are available from Vamp & Tramp (www.vampandtramp.com).

Nearly 2 decades ago I heard Alan Blum, MD, give the keynote address at the Annual Spring Conference of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine. At that time Dr Blum was known as the “controversial” anti-smoking activist who had challenged the AMA, medical schools, and other health organizations to put their money where their mouth was and to divest of tobacco stocks. That’s what most of us expected him to talk about.

But in this presentation, “Seeing Patients: The Sketchiest Details,” Dr Blum introduced us to a completely different concern and one for which he showed equal passion and expertise. A family physician, Blum riveted the audience by recreating dramatic moments of his encounters with patients. In that pre-PowerPoint era he projected larger-than-life images of patients onto a white screen while telling their stories. Those images were selected from thousands of sketches he had drawn over the years. We had never seen anything like this. Simultaneously: a sympathetic portrayal of patients at their most vulnerable moments, an in-depth analysis of the clinical encounter, side-splitting stand-up comedy, and a sad lament of the lost art of stopping, looking at, and listening to the patient. We laughed, we cried, and we got a crash course on doctor-patient communication.

Now Dr Blum has recreated many of these vignettes in two lovely books that meld the worlds of art and medicine. Ladies in Waiting tells the stories of 15 female patients. In similar fashion, Gentle Men presents the words and images of 30 male patients as they emotionally undress in the presence of their physician. I found some of the saddest, most poignant vignettes were not those where patients struggled with disease and death but with their shortcomings and disappointments as parents and children, husbands and wives. One describes his failures as a father: “When she was eight years old, she asked to have a drink with me, and I stopped drinking.” Another describes being abandoned by his father: “Elroyce. My father name’ me after Elroy Hirsch of the L.A. Rams. Never seen my father since I was two, and he ain’t never tried to contact me. Only thing he gave me was my name.” (sic) An innocent question about a patient’s husband triggers an avalanche of anger and regret: “Oh, I hate that S.O.B. . . . Day we got married, he went home to his mama’s, and I didn’t hear from him for three days. Is that physical or mental? It’s mental, to me. . . . It’s been that way from the ‘I do’s’ on.” As every family physician will recognize, this type of information is worth volumes in understanding why one patient struggles with depression and addiction or why another doesn’t take his medications and where we have to journey with them if we want to help them heal.

The most instructive vignettes are those where patients candidly critique the medical profession, mostly for communicating poorly and taking too little time to know their patients. “That doctor didn’t do anything for me. . . . Nowadays you feel more like furniture coming to be repaired.” An elderly woman about the shortcomings of a young physician: “That doctor I saw didn’t know anything about polio. Said it just weren’t her generation to know anything about it. I can’t remember that doctor’s name,
as many bills as I got from her.” Another elderly woman on the same topic: “Younger doctors seem to be in such a hurry. I had one doctor, used to have to chase him, grab onto his white coat. Flittin’ up and down the hall.”

Some of the books’ most entertaining moments are those showing how patients use humor to cope with illness, suffering, and death. The doctor asks a frail, elderly man how he’s doing, and he replies: “Doctor told me I needed an autopsy.” Another patient, not quite so frail: “I took a stress test. They said the motor was running full time, but the tail pipe was beginning to drag.” A middle-aged woman has trouble losing weight, but now she reports an epiphany: “I figured it out: I’m 329 pounds, and at my weight I should be 8 feet 7 inches tall. So I’m not fat, I’m short.”

I’ve just described the words of these books: pithy comments that capture a pivotal moment in the doctor-patient encounter. But that’s not even half the story. The real prizes are Dr Blum’s sketches, where he captures the essence of his patients’ presentations. Flat affects. Angry dispositions. “Worration.” Some appear skeptical about the benefits of allopathic medicine, others demoralized by their own bad choices. Others are just plain tired. But for all the pain in their words and experiences, many sketches show virtues that transcend sad experiences and declining physical health: gentleness, tranquility, patience, love, modesty, and humor.

These books are, quite literally, works of art. Thus they are letter-pressed, hand-bound, and available in limited editions. And thus they are expensive. But for those who still believe—in truly “examining” patients, in listening to their stories, and that medicine is an art as well as a science—these books are a joy and an inspiration.

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Black Bag Moon: Doctors’ Tales From Dusk to Dawn
Susan Woldenberg Butler
London, Radcliffe Publishing Ltd., 2012, 161 pp., $33 Softcover at Amazon.com

Black Bag Moon: Doctors’ Tales from Dusk to Dawn is a companion volume to Secrets From the Black Bag by Susan Woldenberg Butler. The peripatetic author was born in Louisiana but lived in Southern California. She traveled to India on one of her many globe-trotting adventures where she met her physician husband. Susan Butler spent most of her adult life living in Tasmania and Australia and began compiling the patients’ stories she heard from her husband and his colleagues. As a writer of medical fiction and local Tasmanian history, she decided to compile the stories into a book, but after interviewing family physicians from around the world she had enough stories for two books. Secrets from the Black Bag was her first book, and Black Bag Moon is her second, in a narrative form. The writing style is more British than American and reminiscent of James Herriot’s stories of his animal patients and their owners in Yorkshire.

There are 29 tales and a short bibliography. Ms Butler interviewed family doctors who practice on cruise ships, naval vessels, mining camps, and remote Scottish islands, the Australian Outback, Tasmania, New Zealand, and other faraway places. Each tale has an irressistible character central in the story. The English characters have colorful names and reminded me of characters in the Harry Potter books. The doctors use a hands-on, no-tech approach to care for patients. Many of the patients in remote areas walk for days to see a doctor and are grateful for minimal care.

Family doctors care for patients from the womb to the tomb. Doctors in these stories handle a multitude of problems: family violence, dementia, paranoid schizophrenia, birth crises, mining accidents, food poisoning, alcohol abuse, psychoses, marital violence, and tragic accidents of all kinds, along with the usual aches, pains, infections, chronic illness, and end of life concerns. The stories are refreshing because the doctor heals and doesn’t have to
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