

Book Review: "Healer" by Carol Cassella, M.D.

By Audrey Shafer, M.D.

Anesthesiologist-writer Carol Cassella wrote a blockbuster first novel, "Oxygen," about a single woman anesthesiologist's personal and work struggles, and the mystery behind a devastating outcome for a pediatric patient. How to follow the success of the first book? Cassella has jumped right in with a second novel two years later, equally as thoughtful and engrossing as her first.

Although the protagonist again is a female physician in the Pacific Northwest, the central character in "Healer" (Simon & Schuster, 2010), Claire, is an "internist" (who did not complete her residency due to complications of pregnancy), mother and wife. Abruptly transplanted from Seattle to a small rural town in eastern Washington state and needing to practice medicine for the first time in years, Claire finds her only opportunity in a public health clinic with limited pay and resources.

The story centers on a domestic financial crisis: Claire's husband has leveraged and lost the entire family fortune on the latest product from his pharmacologic oncology company. In order to pay off debts, the family's luxurious home in Seattle has been sold precipitously and the family uprooted to a dilapidated country house ill equipped for winter weather. Moreover, Claire's daughter Jory is in the middle of her high school freshman year, and her teen angst and self-centered attitudes are put to the test in her new environment.

Some of the strongest scenes are between mother and daughter. Claire learns the delicate balance between her duties as a rural physician and her need to be available as a mother when flashes of opportunity appear in her daughter's life.

Claire's inexperience and poor Spanish make her wonder if she can rise to the challenge of working in a general medicine clinic. However, just as Claire matures into a competent and effective clinician, Jory begins to grow up and expand her horizons; indeed, so does the family as a whole. Tellingly, the cover of the book depicts a single crocus pushing its way up from the snow, serving as both a harbinger and a symbol of growth and renewal for Claire and her family.

Before Cassella became an anesthesiologist, she studied English and worked in publishing; after medical school, she trained first in internal medicine. In a thoughtful "Mind to Mind" essay in the January 2011 issue of *Anesthesiology*, she describes how, as a young internist, she was "committed to working in public health, to being a first-line physician," and she joined the staff in a clinic that served a large number of Seattle's immigrants and uninsured.¹ Her

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burnout from the production pressures of primary care led her to a new career in anesthesiology, but Cassella's experience in public health serves her well in the new novel.

The disadvantages of the immigrant worker population, compared to those Americans such as Claire's family who have access to opportunity, expand the story from one about a comfortable family made less comfortable to one that probes the consequences of American health care inequities and the class system within our borders. Cassella avoids heavy-handed proselytizing and the result is a page-turning read with a nuanced look at family dynamics and social issues.

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¹ Cassella CW. Burnout and the relative value of dopamine. *Anesthesiology* 2011; 114:213-7.



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