

book review

Playing God, by Glenn Colquhoun

2002, Steele and Roberts, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

ISBN: 1-877228-75-3, 94 pages

Reviewed by Neil Price

I have discovered poetry and I want to share my discovery. *Playing God* by Glenn Colquhoun is the first book of poetry I've ever bought, or even read from cover to cover for that matter. I bought it because as a collection of poems about medicine by a New Zealand GP it promises to be an important feature on the medical humanities landscape in this country for years to come. I read this book while I was sitting my college primary, during what was the most disheartening and difficult experience of my life to date. It reminded me why it is that I was doing it, why I want to be a doctor.

Colquhoun describes himself as an 'ambivalent doctor', who has stayed with the 'old hag' medicine 'for the beauty I have seen in my patients and for the time it has taken me to write these poems' (p.8). These poems grouped together as 'Patients I have known', 'Diseases I have known', 'Spells', 'A portrait of the doctor as a young man' and 'Playing God' are a deeply introspective examination of what it is to be a doctor. We take a lot from our interactions with our patients and these poems explore the tension between a love of being involved in medicine and patients and a natural humility that borders on self-deprecation. The key is to realize that finding rewards in medicine is not exploiting our patients' suffering. It is important to escape depressive musings that we offer nothing

and are usually fraudulent in our attempts to claim credit for cures. In the introduction and a published interview (Welch, 2003) Colquhoun refers to these doubts, but after reading the whole book I felt only a new sense of enthusiasm for clinical practice.

This book has something to offer everyone with an involvement in medicine and humanities. For doctors it takes every day occurrences and represents them in a manner that can only encourage reflection. Some of these poems demand that we rediscover the human aspect of our patients and their diseases. For students study of this book should provide a template for a healthy way to explore their feelings about their chosen career. For others this collection of beautiful poems should provide a touching and thought provoking insight into the thoughts and feelings of a doctor who although he doesn't officially speak for us all has identified some themes that I am sure we all recognise from our own reflections on our vocation.

(*Playing God* has won two Montana New Zealand Book Awards: the Poetry and the Reader's Choice Awards.)

Reference

Welch, D. (2003). Country GP. *Listener*, 15 February, pp.58-59.