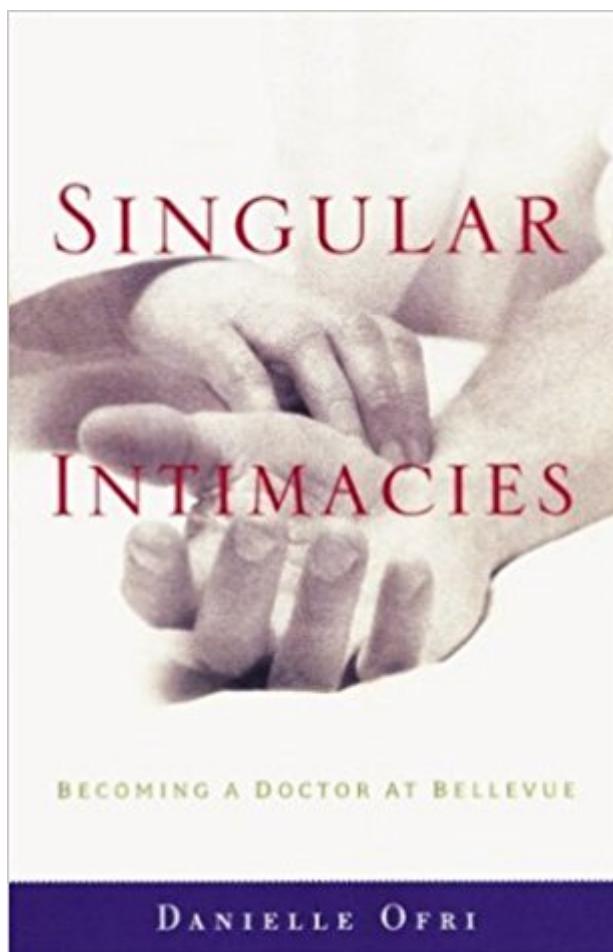


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Singular Intimacies: Becoming A Doctor At Bellevue



Synopsis

In the tradition of Abraham Verghese and Atul Gawande, a gripping memoir of learning medicine in the trenches Singular Intimacies is the story of becoming a doctor by immersion at Bellevue Hospital, the oldest public hospital in the country; and perhaps the most legendary. It is both the classic inner-city hospital and a unique amalgam of history, insanity, beauty, and intellect. When Danielle Ofri enters these 250-year-old doors as a tentative medical student, she is immediately plunged into the teeming world of urban medicine: mysterious illnesses, life-and-death decisions, patients speaking any one of a dozen languages, overworked interns devising creative strategies to cope with the feverish intensity of a big-city hospital. Yet the emphasis of Singular Intimacies is not so much on the arduous hours in medical training (which certainly exist here), but on the evolution of an instinct for healing. In a hospital without the luxury of private physicians, where patients lack resources both financial and societal, where poverty and social strife are as much a part of the pathology as any microbe, it is the medical students and interns who are thrust into the searing intimacy that is the doctor-patient relationship. In each memorable chapter, Ofri's progress toward becoming an experienced healer introduces not just a patient in medical crisis, but a human being with an intricate and compelling history. Ofri learns to navigate the tangled vulnerabilities of doctor and patient, not simply battle the disease. Dr. Danielle Ofri is an attending physician in the medical clinic at Bellevue, with an academic appointment at NYU. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the Bellevue Literary Review, and her essays have been published in over a dozen literary and medical journals; one chapter of this book was selected by Stephen Jay Gould for The Best American Essays of 2002 and received the Missouri Review Editor's Prize for Nonfiction. She is also associate chief editor of the award-winning textbook The Bellevue Guide to Outpatient Medicine.

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Customer Reviews

These essays, some previously published, about the author's 10 years as a medical student, intern and resident at the oldest public hospital in the U.S. resonate with insight, intelligence, humor and an extraordinary sensitivity to both the patients she treated in this inner-city facility and the staff she worked with. The cofounder and editor-in-chief of a literary magazine, the *Bellevue Review*, Ofri is now an attending physician at *Bellevue* and brings to this memoir a combination of medical information and some very expressive writing. The author acknowledges that when she arrived to work on the wards, she had no idea what her responsibilities were or how to perform typical student tasks like drawing blood. Along with the technical skills she absorbed working overtime in a stressful atmosphere, Ofri also learned to truly care for her cases. In "Finding the Person," she describes, for example, why she continued to speak to and maintain a bedside manner with a comatose woman in front of the dying woman's family. "Intensive Care" recounts the story of Dr. Sitkin, a difficult supervisor who both alienated and won the respect of his medical team, and eventually took his own life. The tragic loss of her close friend Josh, a 27-year-old, who died from a congenital heart condition ("The Burden of Knowledge"), caused her to doubt the foundation of medical training, that knowledge is power. The pieces in this powerful collection are tied together by the struggle of a clearly gifted physician to master the complexities of healing. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Bellevue Hospital, probably the oldest hospital in America, began to serve George II's New York subjects in 1736 as a Public Workhouse and House of Correction with six beds for the sick. Included in the cost of construction were 50 gallons of rum. Forced by an epidemic of yellow fever to escape the filth of central Manhattan in 1794, the almshouse-prison-hospital complex found a haven at *Belle Vue*, an estate overlooking the East River. *Bellevue* became a teaching hospital, first by shedding its poorhouse and penitentiary and then, in 1847, by opening its doors to medical students. The horse-drawn wagons of the world's first hospital-based ambulance service began to clatter out of *Bellevue* in 1869, and four years later the hospital opened America's first nursing school. Over the ensuing years, *Bellevue* evolved into a behemoth built of bricks the color of dried

blood, one side facing the East River, the other looming over First Avenue and 27th Street (Figure). In the 1950s, New York University medical students, of which I was one, thought it was the greatest hospital in the world's greatest city. The Old Bellevue is now a worn-out hulk occupied mainly by administrators. Its clinical services were transferred to the New Bellevue in 1973, and a part of the former poorhouse is undergoing conversion into a center for biomedical research. Now, 30 years after the Old Bellevue closed its doors to the sick, Danielle Ofri recounts in *Singular Intimacies* how it was to be a medical student and resident at the New Bellevue and how it is to serve the grande dame of New York medicine as an attending physician. Ofri is a gifted writer. Her vignettes ring with truth, and for any physician or patient who knows the dramas of a big-city hospital they will evoke tears, laughter, and memories. Indeed, any reader, physician or not, will find in *Singular Intimacies* the essence of becoming and being a doctor. Ofri's prologue tells the story of a 62-year-old French woman with lung cancer who, gasping for breath, gives the intensive care unit (ICU) team her final orders through an oxygen mask. "Air France," she says. "No other airline. My body must fly to Paris via Air France. . . . No ceremony before the interment . . . just a burial at Rue de la Colonnade." Ofri writes, "We file out of the room . . . our hands dangling awkward and useless, our tears threatening to give way." Ofri's epilogue reveals that after a week in the ICU, her French patient's pulmonary infiltrates and hypoxia gave way to antibiotics. "There was no sweeter music than that silvery Parisian accent floating into my ears. . . . The arc of her words shimmered in the air and her history settled softly into mine." Little wonder that Danielle Ofri is editor-in-chief of the *Bellevue Literary Revue*. Then there is "The Professor of Denial," a psychiatrist who is clearly in the terminal stages of an intraabdominal cancer but does not have a tissue diagnosis. The psychiatrist insists to the end that he has viral hepatitis. Despite obvious signs of his patient's impending death, Dr. Gursky, the attending physician, demands one invasive diagnostic procedure after another, including a laparotomy, to get the answer. All to no avail. Ofri's anguish at having to carry out Gursky's orders is the only point of clarity in this story. One wonders who was in denial -- the patient or Dr. Gursky. Ofri writes about Mrs. Whitney from South Carolina, whose brain lost its cortical function after she collapsed from cardiac arrest while visiting her daughter in New York. All the frustrations of caring for a patient in a vegetative state in the cardiac care unit of Bellevue Hospital and dealing with her family are examined. "It's just a coincidence that her eyes sometimes move toward you when you speak. But her cortex can't process anything they're seeing. I . . . I'm sorry." The arresting aspect of the story is Ofri's respect for the unseeing, unfeeling Mrs. Whitney and her hope that the staff that will continue Mrs. Whitney's care will "find the person within the patient." In these and 13 other stories, Ofri distills the terrors, frustrations, and joys of her life as a student and physician at

Bellevue. Above all, Ofri has the precious gift of humility. It is this quality that graces her prose, transforming it from mere storytelling into memorable parables. Robert S. Schwartz, M.D. Copyright © 2003 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS.

I am a nurse who lives to read any medical memoirs. There are few written so eloquently portraying what it is like emotionally in a hospital. Even though there is still a class distinction off Dr vs nurses, I enjoy the perspective from a MDs view who actually shows emotion and care for their patients. Very well written. Very enjoyable!!

Probably one of my favorite medical memoirs. Dr. Ofri is amazing. There is a vulnerability that she isn't afraid to show in her books, which is needed because sometimes we do tend to forget that doctors are just as afraid as their patients, whether they show it or not. She talks about the struggles of dealing with personal tragedy and just keeping relationships with all the patients under her care. It's definitely one of the books you could read twice because it reads more like a story than a memoir.

Interesting and fascinating read. Shows the inside of a doctor-to-be. Being a nurse for over 30years, one wonders about the inner workings of a doctor. How can they tolerate the everyday existence of dealing with the lives of the people they come in contact with on a daily basis. This book let us know that they are human too. Totally enjoyable.

Dr. Ofri describes her journey from medical student to 1st and 2nd year resident in Bellevue hospital, New York city with a rare combination of medical skills together with emotions and feelings both as a healing provider and with insight into those of her patients. Over a 10 year period, Dr. Ofri completed a Ph.D in Pharmacology as well as an MD in addition to becoming a remarkable writer. The reader stands over her shoulder as Dr. Ofri writes down the final directions given by a charming french woman with lung cancer, recounts her first night on call attending to prisoners from Rikers Island, in Ob/Gyn, being involved in the birthing of a newborn, the ordeal of talking to the wife of a psychiatrist dying from pancreatic cancer about what terminal treatment her husband would want. Certainly, *Singular Intimacies-Becoming a Doctor at Bellevue* should be read by anyone aspiring to be in or involved in the healthcare field. Moreover, with the current emphasis on shared physician-patient medical decision making, it will enhance participation of those seeking medical

care. Lastly, this work has the impact of a vivid and engrossing novel.

Awesome book-- I didn't want it to end! I love the stories and the insight into what life is like for an up and coming doctor. I will read ALL of her books!

Excellent book about learning medicine. Really inspiring and insightful views to help young medical professionals learn to practice!!

Good book

With spellbinding pace, Ofri gives an inside view of what it's like to go through your residency as a young doctor at Bellevue: the challenge of coming up with a diagnosis, the often irascible patients, the insecurities, the iffiness of medicine, the ego of the big doctors, which can be big yet precarious. To those of us who are mainly patients, it provides a unique insight into what might be going in the hearts and minds of those people in white coats who are, after all, only human.

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