

Cooked: An Inner City Nursing Memoir

Carol Karels

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Chicago Illinois 1971. Imagine the largest charity hospital in the United States. There is no air conditioning with the exception of the intensive care units and the burn units. Beds are lined up in huge wards with curtains separating them. More astounding is that nurses swat at flies in the operating room yet nursing students still take Friday teas in a tradition Florence Nightingale started.

Now imagine being a young naive student nurse on the first day on the job in this place.

Welcome to Cook County Hospital.

Such is the world of *Cooked: An Inner City Nursing Memoir* where author Carol Karels took her training. Her memoir brilliantly paints life in this legendary hospital. From drug addicts to burn victims criminals to rock stars hiding from their fans the hospital cared for a wide variety of patients turning absolutely no one away from its doors regardless of race or ability to pay. The reader has a sense of the fierce devotion the nurses had for their patients overcoming amazingly difficult challenges with intelligence good humor and wisdom that the doctors deferred to. In one case Karels has an unforgettable experience with an old man dying of most brutal and hideous kind of cancer nature. He won't respond to the doctors who virtually killed him but treats the young nurse with respect.

Karels skillfully draws a portrait of her life there from the archaic standards the hospital clung to (there were no call buttons to summon a nurse; patients had to yell for one wooden wheelchairs one bathroom for up to sixty patients) to the intricate web of political intrigue that surrounded the hospital to the ever-present threat of having the hospital shut down altogether.

Those who read *Cooked* get a very clear idea of what being a nurse in such a hospital might be like. There are harrowing accounts of the maternity ward where mothers delivering newborns scream in the summer heat to an entire family in the burn ward. The author's description of the treatment process is not for the squeamish: "...tubs were filled with tepid water to soften the eschar the tough leathery substance that formed over third degree burns. Once the eschar had softened the nurse would scrub the eschar with a steel brush similar to those used to scrub barbeque grills."

Scenes like that are balanced by stories of grace and tenderness as a group of volunteer senior citizens come in and look after a group of abandoned and sick babies a look of common contentment on their faces or the description of how the patients as soon as they felt better were expected to and often did look after those sicker than themselves.

This book which won an American Journal of Nursing 2005 Book of the Year award belongs on anyone's bookshelf who is interested in either the history or future of nursing. It also has a wider appeal as a coming of age story and illustrates the strength of the human spirit when faced with adversity. Karels reminds us that the nursing profession is critically short of young people and *Cooked* is an inspiring wonderful introduction to one of the most necessary callings.

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