

Holy Water

Robert Schwab

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It takes nothing short of a miracle to make a urology conference sound inviting and to make the French Quarter in New Orleans appear hopelessly unattractive. But Robert Schwab, physician and first-time novelist, accomplishes both feats in the opening chapters of *Holy Water*.

Schwab's hero, Doctor Landon Ratliff, is an unusual young man: an aspiring urologist and surgeon who enjoys running, literature (especially Mark Twain), zydeco music, and playing the accordion. While attending a urology conference in New Orleans, Ratliff reflects on his relationship with his alcoholic father and drastically changes his medical career path. Meanwhile, he falls in love (maybe it's lust) with a singer in a zydeco band and learns to appreciate the colorful squalor of the French Quarter.

During his journey of personal and professional rebirth, Landon takes time to comment on some of the moral issues facing medical practitioners. He admonishes older doctors, reminding them that the Hippocratic oath requires them to provide medical treatment to all people, including the poor. At the same time, he sees nothing wrong with accepting gifts from pharmaceutical representatives. In fact, he dismisses the conflict of interest by saying, "I personally do not see how I could possibly be influenced by a drug company representative. For the most part, they are not very smart, and as long as I am aware that they are selling rather than educating, I don't see the harm."

In addition to describing the trials and tribulations of young Doctor Ratliff, Schwab has included enough backstory about life and love among hospital staff to fill another novel. Enrique Flaco is Doctor Ratliff's best friend and roommate, as well as a budding urologist. Unlike Landon, Enrique is not troubled by his pending entrance into the upper levels of the medical establishment. He is, however, vexed with sorting out his relationship with his fiancée, Amy, and her relationship with his very Catholic mother and father. It is a bit of a distraction that this serious urologist, Enrique, is at times called "Kiki" by Amy and others. It may have been intended as an affectionate nickname but instead feels dismissive.

Landon Ratliff's musings regarding his hard drinking and abusive father, Eddie, are also uneven. Eddie appears in the novel only briefly, and only at the other end of a telephone line.

Overall, though, *Holy Water* is an artfully constructed first novel. Schwab is a capable and engaging storyteller.

JOHN MICHAEL SINGER (March 15, 2012)

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