

The Dash of Dr. Todd

Howard E. Adkins

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Sometimes a bright future can get derailed by a rocky present. Daniel Todd, fresh out of college with his medical degree in 1849, dreams of leaving Boston far behind and heading for San Francisco to start his medical practice among the thriving gold fields. But Fate has some lessons of its own to teach him.

Todd books passage on a schooner, but his seafaring adventure quickly turns into a nightmare when the ship encounters a devastating storm that tears it to pieces and leaves Dr. Todd, the lone survivor, adrift in the water. Eventually he is rescued by the crew of a whaling vessel, the Ellie Mae, and he must learn a whole new set of skills as an oarsman while acclimating himself to the rough life of a seaman. It proves to be a real-life education that will be helpful when he finally reaches the West Coast.

He tries to establish his practice in California, but without any experience, the unstructured and free-wheeling lifestyle of the miners presents obstacles that stretch the limits of Dr. Todd's medical and personal skills. Through these wide-ranging circumstances, Adkins reveals the adversity faced by frontier doctors in the mid-1800s.

Adkins is at his best when showing Dr. Todd truly interacting with his patients. A scene where Dr. Todd has to calm a man threatening suicide illustrates the doctor's quick thinking and ability to build rapport with troubled people. Another side of Todd's character shines when Lottie Jo, a former prostitute who saved Todd's life years earlier, visits him in the final stages of a terminal disease.

Adkins, a retired ophthalmologist who has authored three other books, gives credible medical analysis of Todd's various cases and demonstrates extensive research on other subjects, such as the whaling industry. Often, however, the story gets slowed down by the overuse of medical terms, nautical lingo, and obscure vocabulary that interrupts the flow of the narrative. Adkins does a good job of developing his characters and storyline, but the overemphasis on the medical or technical descriptions of the scenes forces readers to stumble through those sections to get back into the rhythm of the story.

Readers interested in nineteenth-century American frontier life or biographical based accounts of pioneering men and women will find *The Dash of Dr. Todd* an enjoyable read. It's a reassuring reminder for any visionary that the path to the future may be rocky, but the pursuit and the final destination can be incredibly fulfilling.

JEFF FRIEND (May 18, 2010)

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