

The Healing Field: A Young Psychiatrist's Battle with His Anorexic Patient, Her Hunger Strike against God, and Their Journey Through the Dark Night of the Soul

Howard E. Richmond

CreateSpace (Sep 8, 2014)

Softcover \$16.95 (256pp)

978-1-4974-7571-7

This erudite story of one woman's struggle to find purpose in a life derailed by self-hatred is a moving psychological tale.

Howard Richmond delivers a novelization of one of the more challenging cases in his psychiatry career, wherein he assisted a patient struggling with severe anorexia fed by the burdens of a lifetime of trauma. *The Healing Field* is detailed and moving, though the narrative sometimes takes on a clinical flavor.

As the novel opens, Lori, the embattled heroine, is facing down the first grand disaster in a life already marked by periodic upsets: the suicide of her beloved sister, Linda. Their childhoods rife with religiously upheld humiliations and castigations, the siblings learned early on to conflate any disobedience or individuality with spiritual uncleanness.

The girls' upbringing has severe implications for Lori later in life, when she must contend with guilt and shame for horrors not of her own making. She's referred to Dr. Kaplan for dermatillomania and depression, conditions that balloon into life-threatening anorexia. Though his plate is already full—his marriage falling apart, his side career as a comedian slow to get going, his own medical concerns weighing on him—he assumes responsibility for the new patient, eventually growing along with her over years of concentrated treatment.

Lori's troubles are sympathetically related, though her own words are slow to percolate and are often encased in variations of self-negation. She is at her saddest and most severe in the italicized internal dialogue she practices during her sessions with Kaplan, who responds in measured, sometimes creative ways.

Lori struggles to accept Kaplan's medical expertise, particularly when it comes to extended hospital stays. The plot proceeds at a similarly straggling pace, with years passing in the span of a few pages. Lori's condition changes little, and desperate revelations keep coming.

The revelations do serve to show how much Lori is contending with, even though not much emotional baggage gets unpacked throughout the course of the novel. Kaplan's goal is to get Lori to eat despite her consuming despair, but he doesn't reveal how she learns to overcome her tragic memories in order to love herself. The sad events of Lori's past almost become background noise within the larger struggle.

Richmond's prose is sometimes weighed down by excessive emphasis on the points he wishes to convey. Descriptions like "little bare feet" and "lily-white skin" are used to highlight the innocence of Lori and Linda, whose faultlessness is already without question, while terms like "nom de plume" are carefully and needlessly defined.

Further, forays into Kaplan's own life, particularly into his explorations of comedy, sometimes confuse the novel's focus, illuminating little regarding his growth with Lori. Nevertheless, the sympathetic manner in which Kaplan stands by his ailing patient is certain to strike a chord with those familiar with psychological struggles, and Richmond proves

skilled at highlighting the dangers of inflicting religious guilt on children.

An erudite, if sometimes didactic, story of one woman's struggle to find purpose in a life derailed by self-hatred, *The Healing Field* is both moving and challenging in its scope.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (April 17, 2015)

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