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Summoning Your Inner Verghese

I'm learning to listen to books. Like most ophthalmologists, though, I'm a visual learner and prefer to read them.

But there's a compelling beauty to oral language. While listening to Abraham Verghese's new novel, *The Covenant of Water*, I've been engrossed in his storytelling. An internist, he weaves medical stories into the narrative of this book and his central characters are surgeons, similar to his previous novel *Cutting for Stone*.

Physicians are good storytellers. This is partly because we listen to stories all day as we interact with patients. Hearing about the lives of my patients is a meaningful part of my job. Recently, I was evaluating a patient who was losing vision in his only sighted eye. He had also lost his wife of 62 years a few months before. When I asked him how he'd met his wife (on a double date except that she was the date of the other boy), he finally smiled.

We tell stories, too. Explaining why a patient needs an anti-VEGF injection requires narrative skill. Effective storytelling, whether it takes place in a novel or the exam room, requires the creation of emotional connections between people.

It's no surprise that there are many ophthalmologist writers. The creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—who has been credited with pioneering the entire genre of crime fiction—studied and practiced ophthalmology, though not for long because his writing took precedence. Trained as an ophthalmologist, Robin Cook has also devoted his career to writing. The author of more than three dozen books, Robin popularized the genre of medical thrillers with his novel *Coma* in 1977. He also wrote *Outbreak*, *Contagion*, and *Pandemic*—three prescient thrillers about fictional pandemics. In a *Boston Magazine* interview, he explained why he started writing: "I thought entertainment and fiction could play a bigger role in getting out medical information."

William Coles, another ophthalmologist-turned-writer, has published five novels and many short stories and essays. In *Scope*, the Academy's publication for senior ophthalmologists, William says that the primary theme of his fiction is "what it means to be human."

Some ophthalmologists juggle productive medicine and writing careers simultaneously. Andrew Lam, a retina special-

ist in Springfield, Massachusetts, just published *The Masters of Medicine*, a nonfiction book about the history of medical innovation. Andrew tells the compelling stories of several medical breakthroughs, including heart transplantation, the polio vaccine, and the discoveries of insulin and penicillin. In the chapter about cancer developments, he shares the story of Judah Folkman, who in the 1960s and '70s, developed a theory of angiogenesis, the idea that tumors elute a growth factor that stimulates vessel growth. He was mocked by his peers. But his work led to the FDA approval of Avastin (bevacizumab) in 2004 and all the anti-VEGF treatments we use to treat AMD, diabetic retinopathy, and ROP. In describing why he writes, Andrew explains, "The process of writing has shown me the importance of pursuing the things that inspire us."

A copy of Ivan Schwab's *Evolution's Witness: How Eyes Evolved* sits in a prominent place in my dining room display cabinet. Ivan, a cornea specialist at UC Davis, compiles scientific discovery, stunning photography, and a fascinating narrative that describes ocular evolution across time and species. For example, *Deinopis subrufa*, a net-casting spider, lives in the dark and has the lowest f-number of terrestrial animals because of its highly curved lens and very short focal length. Ivan describes the viscous tears of *Dermochelys coriacea*, the leatherback turtle, and its ability to eliminate salt. It's fascinating.

I recently gave a talk about what I've learned from writing this column every month and concluded by encouraging ophthalmologists to write their stories. Several of you emailed, texted, or tracked me down in person to describe a current writing project. Ophthalmologists have stories to tell—human stories that incorporate fear, loss, hope, innovation, compassion, and healing.



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