

Media and Book Reviews

REACHING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEYS INTO THE HUMAN BRAIN

edited by Allan Ropper and B.D. Burrell, 272 pp., Atlantic Books, 2015, \$25.99

Allan Ropper's *Reaching Down the Rabbit Hole: Extraordinary Journeys into the Human Brain*, cowritten with Brian Burrell, is a first-person narrative about hospital neurology. Popular science is a staple of nonfiction publishing and the mysteriousness of neurologic disease is the hook of the subtitle "Extraordinary journeys into the human brain." For nonprofessional readers, the idea of Allan H. Ropper as a real-life version of Dr. Gregory House, the unconventional Sherlock Holmes-like medical character on TV, is a seductive one.

While Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the source of the title, the theme of implausible reality in neurologic practice comes from the White Queen of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Neurology is queen of the medical specialties, says Ropper. Like Wells, a queen among Gothic cathedrals, she is neither the biggest nor necessarily the best but few exceed her for finesse and elegance.

Popular culture neurologists are an unrepresentatively extroverted sample. Oliver Sacks is the best known, although Ropper's book has more affinity with those of the Chicago neurologist-writer Harold Klawans by its references to baseball lore and supporting cast of hospital doctors. Among them is Elliott, the neurologist with whom Ropper shares his term of ward duty, who is his temperamental opposite. With his dispassionate thoughtfulness and distancing strategies, Elliott has the aloofness that is common among neurologists. Has it developed out of our professional work or did we have it before neurology?

Reaching Down the Rabbit Hole does not particularly try to be funny, yet its commentary on how

events happen to arrange themselves has a comic sensibility. Ropper's mirthless exchange of one-liner jokes with a hospital visitor who turns out to be a former comedy writer establishes a fellowship between the men and helps us understand the origins of this show business take on clinical neurology.

Ropper solves case after case, but criticism that *Reaching Down the Rabbit Hole* is short on professional humility is not entirely fair. His initial diagnosis of a patient with acute quadriplegia is wrong, and events then unfold too rapidly to avert catastrophe. Ropper is reminded of fallibilities that will trip up even an expert. He is in thrall to the buzz of the Sherlock Holmes moment of grasping the diagnosis from the barest of facts, deaf to Watson's cautionary voice in his head, and he fails to mitigate the fatal flaw of hubris.

Elliott quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* ("So we beat on, boats against the current...") to introduce a meditation about progress and generational change. Jay Gatsby and the White Queen share the conviction that you can project your memories into your future. As Nick Carraway tries to tell Gatsby, "You can't repeat the past." Now near the end of his own career, Ropper reflects on his mentors and the passing of time. He foreshadows a neurology that has followed some of the kings of the medical specialties into a new world of technology and process, stripped of her traditional craft skills. The main message of this book of neurologic anecdotes is about stories themselves, and an intellectual curiosity in their content and significance.

Reviewed by Peter A. Kempster

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