

BOOK REVIEW

Mary S. Edwards, M.A., M.S.Ed.
Appleton, WI

Raising the Dead: A Doctor's Encounter With His Own Mortality, by Richard Selzer. New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1994, 118 pp, \$17.50.

There is a certain euphoria that comes over me when I happen upon a great piece of literature, especially when its subject is one of my favorites. Richard Selzer is now retired as Professor of Surgery at Yale. He is the author of numerous books of essays and short stories, and is the recipient of many honorary degrees, a National Magazine Award, a Pushcart Prize for fiction, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Anyone who has read his masterful and eloquent books awaits with pleasure what he will write next. It was frighteningly unexpected, however, to have him chronicle his own recent near-death experience, in this, his new book.

Raising the Dead is divided into four parts. The first reviews an historical account of a woman novelist named Fanny d'Arblay, who in 1810 had the deadly experience of having to undergo major surgery without anesthesia for what appeared to be breast cancer. This account also includes the surgical memoirs of Baron Larray. Selzer imparts at the outset that he does not wish to romanticize his own account, as d'Arblay had done. Instead he confesses great envy for

Baron Larray's masterpiece of medical history rendered in prose, so meticulous and sharp as to suggest having been written with something other than a pen. A scalpel, perhaps? (p. 21)

It is with this careful, meditative approach that Selzer begins his story.

Mary S. Edwards, M.A., M.S.Ed., is a psychotherapist in private practice. Reprint requests should be addressed to her at 54 Park Place, Appleton, WI 54915.

Part two details his sudden collapse, being taken to the hospital, the diagnosis of Legionnaires' disease, and his lapse into a coma, in which he remained for over three weeks. Written like a journal, much in third person, he explains:

the pronoun *he* gives a blessed bit of distance between myself and a too fresh ordeal in which the use of *I* would be rather like picking off a scab only to find that the wound has not completely healed. Still, *I*, the author, will be present throughout, looking on, translating for *him*, the patient. (p. 29)

However, Selzer goes on to describe where this I is located, initially in the emergency room:

In addition to the doctors, nurses and technicians, I, the author, am also there standing, or rather, hovering bodiless above and to the side, out of the way yet able to see, to hear, now and then to reach down if I wish and touch him, the one lying there on the stretcher who seems to me a small bird perched on an arrow that has been shot from the bow and is flying somewhere. If ever the man wakes up and can speak for himself, I shall have changed pronouns. (p. 32)

With careful yet Spartan detail he then quickly moves through those days of coma, until the twenty-third day, in which he died and could not be resuscitated. And then:

It is true! After ten minutes of certified death, this man has . . . risen. Risen! Such a word does not belong in an intensive care unit. (p. 46)

Resurrection, and the title he chose for his book, *Raising the Dead*, are arresting words for a self-professed atheist. Selzer himself, though, admits also "to the love of being in the vicinity of piety."

Part three chronicles the rest of his hospitalization.

He, however, is to be psychotic for a time . . . the insanity, they say, is the aftermath of all the drugs and their withdrawal, the long coma, deprivation of sleep, and toxicity. Like most forms of situational madness, it is aggravated by the coming of night; "sundowning" it is called in the argot of clinical medicine. Later on, the hallucinations and delusions of this time are what will survive in his memory. (p. 54)

And

In the course of a single night he travels to a medieval monastery in 13th-century Ireland, where he undergoes a hard novitiate against his will. Minutes later he is in the delta of the River Nile, wading among the fat, yellowish serpents that are native to that

region. From there he's on to Molokai on a tall sailing ship. Father Damien himself comes out to greet him, the face of the holy man already bearing the leonine marks of his leprosy. It is no wonder that by morning he is exhausted. (p. 56)

As his recovery progresses, Selzer deftly takes us with him, often half in and half out of these other realities, through his grueling process of coming back:

It is not death that he hates; it is this borderland between, where terror and discomfort prevail. To return to life is to embark upon yearning again. (p. 64)

The humbling experience of returning to the body is expressed with great wit. The hallucinations become exquisite metaphors for the process. I was left nearly drunk myself moving along with Selzer through such a journey.

In the last part of the book the writer and patient are now home, journaling together in first person. There is a hint that this is not the same "first person." Selzer states that he remembers nothing of the other side and remains often incredulous that the event actually happened. But I still can't help reflecting on the "I," the writer, describing "the patient" during those ten minutes of death:

Already the man has taken on that look of dignity that the newly dead have because of their possession of secrets. (p. 44)

Perhaps with time Selzer will, indeed, tell us more.