

Frank Huyler. *Right of Thirst*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.

In an interview supplementing the edition of his novel *Right of Thirst*, Frank Huyler, an emergency room physician, notes that although medicine has been “among the most repressed of all professions,” the profession is changing and “more doctors [are] writing now than ever before.” He divides these doctor-authors into two categories – those who write “elegant, well-crafted” essays about medical subjects and those who are writers as much as they are doctors. Huyler himself belongs to the second category. He is an essayist, a poet, and a very talented novelist.

In *Right of Thirst*, his first-person protagonist, Charles Anderson, happens to be a doctor, a cardiologist who teaches in a Michigan medical school. While medicine does have a role in the novel, his profession comes to matter little in Anderson’s dilemma as a man facing a life crisis in late middle age; it could have been any high status career that no longer satisfies his soul.

Far from home in the frigid mountains of an unnamed country much like Pakistan, finds himself performing life-saving surgery to amputate the pus-filled foot of a child, a girl named Homa from a local village. Huyler describes this tense procedure very effectively, “the rasp of [a saw] in my hands, the silver bar of the blade up and down, bloody and glistening from the bone ends.” A novelist, however, does not need a medical degree to write such a scene. Consider Gustav Flaubert’s description of Charles Bovary’s grotesquely botched operation on a club foot. Anderson’s surgery, in fortunate contrast, is successful. But other than a lesson in drawing blood, that is the only time his profession matters in the novel.

The story setup of *Right of Thirst* is familiar: a man burnt out after “decades of blind relentless work” seeks “something clear and redeeming.” The novel opens with a scene of Anderson assisting his wife’s death to free her from terminal suffering. Stunned by what has happened, estranged from his teaching duties, Anderson attends a lecture by a young man named Scott Coles, who seeks financial and human assistance for camps his new organization is creating to help earthquake victims. A doctor would be crucial, and Anderson signs on: “I suppose another world was what I wanted most.” Once there, he hopes to finally make a difference for the first time in his life.

The familiar fictional pattern, of course, would be to have Anderson overcome some initial dislocation but soon minister to the sick and wounded, popping in and out of refugee tents to share his medical skills, and emerge a renewed and fulfilled man. Huyler is much more original. Nothing like that happens. The refugees never arrive. Anderson’s medical skills – beyond saving Homa – are never called upon. Although he faces severe physical, emotional, and moral tests, he must confront them at the most basic human level. His title, doctor, means nothing in the world he must endure.

Huyler’s greatest strength is his crystalline prose, the evocation of places, people, and events in sentences that are, at the same time, precise and lyrical. The writing immerses the reader in the vividness of Anderson’s world – the amputation, the shivering cold, the sickening food, the visit to a nearby village for blood samples, the inspection visit by a smug general, the aerial view of an idyllic lake, the days of arduous walking through icy mountain passes along a river route, an accidental drowning, the retrieval of the body. More than just incidents, these happenings develop the complexities of

Anderson's relationships with the two other main characters – Captain Rai of the national army and Elise, the young German geneticist seduced into the project by Scott Coles and promised an opportunity to collect blood samples.

The novel's final section takes place in a crowded city totally unlike the empty mountains. Despite the many physical dangers of the journey that brought him here, it is in this city that Anderson's strength as a man is most tested. The journey has revealed to him his mistaken belief that his adventure was unique, his own, when it "was just the human story again." Yet in the city he makes decisive choices because "This trip has to mean something. Otherwise I can't go home." Once he is back in the U.S, seeing his son waiting for him at the airport, he feels himself "go calm for the first time." His commitment to a cause turned out to be nothing like his expectation. Yet, although Anderson has not changed the world he entered, he has made a great difference for a few people and, as a result, for himself. That difference has nothing to do with his medical degree, but everything to do with his humanity.

*Right of Thirst* demonstrates Huyler's many gifts as a novelist – his ability to describe unusual settings with precise lucidity, to create complex characters, and to tell a compelling story. His richest gift, however, is the emotional power to make his readers care about the characters in this novel and be moved.

Walter Cummins

[847 words]