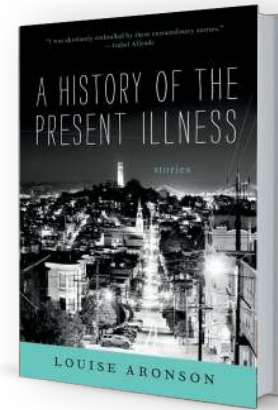# A History of the Present Illness: Stories

By Louise Aronson

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about A History of the Present Illness, a collection of original linked stories based on the author's personal experience in medicine. Narratives of doctors at various stages of their careers are interwoven with stories of patients of diverse ages and backgrounds to create a portrait of health and illness in America today.

About This Book

A History of the Present Illness explores the truths of medical care in the U.S. today through an examination of what it means to be a doctor and a patient, as well as the relationship between the two. Aronson lends her personal experience to these expressive short stories, correcting any prettied-up or embellished views of doctors and illness by offering a realistic, often moving, and sometimes saddening sense of how the world of medicine operates.

This book provides a glimpse into the complicated lives of doctors: why they have chosen to become doctors—and why for all of those who love the profession, there exist others who question the decision for varied reasons and at different stages of their careers; the personal turmoil a doctor's career path can wreak on both the individual and their loved ones; how a hierarchy of specialties exists; what it feels like to burn out from caring too much; how easy it is to make mistakes, especially fatal ones; how a seemingly-simple moment can become a profound turning point; and how doctors themselves inevitably become patients.

Aronson also presents a powerful and genuine portrait of what it means to be on the other side of the stethoscope, as a patient or caregiver. She captures the spectrum of emotions patients and families feel, sometimes in rapid succession and other times gradually and cumulatively over the course of treatment: from Bopha's embarrassment and shame, to Rodney's sense of despair laced with brief bouts of hope, to Maurice's determined cheerfulness. In a number of the stories, the doctors themselves become the patients, yet are unable to acknowledge this fundamental reality.

The collection's title, culled from the medical term "History of the Present Illness" or HPI is, as Aronson writes in the Acknowledgments, "the critical first portion of the medical note that describes the onset, duration, character, context, and severity of the illness. Basically, it's the story, and without it, you can't understand what's going on with your patient." These short stories serve as the HPI for the current state of health and illness in America today, and they imbue the world of medicine with the truths of humanity.

For Discussion

1   In "Snapshots From An Institution," what purpose do Charles' antics (the story-within-the-story) serve?

2   In "An American Problem," why does the Khmer assistant use this phrase to describe Bopha's bedwetting?

3   Do you get the sense that Robert really enjoyed being a doctor in "Giving Good Death"? What about the narrator in "Becoming a Doctor"? Or Ray in "Lucky You"?

4   Why does Aronson choose to set Marta's difficulties with her daughter Sophie against the backdrop of Marta's father's last days and death?

5   What do you think the narrator's mother-in-law means by "Form is not always content's container" in the story "Twenty-Five Things I Know About My Husband's Mother"?

6   What effect does the structure of short stanzas in multiple alternating points of view have in "Fires and Flat Lines"?

7   What tips you off to the irony of "Blurred Boundary Disorder"? Why would Aronson include this seemingly ludicrous story in the collection?

8   Why is "Vital Signs Stable" told in everyone but Edith's point of view?

9   Is Ruth's behavior at the end of "Days of Awe" selfish? Justified?

10 In "Lucky You," why doesn't Perla help the boy who falls?

11 Why does the narrator (or the author) continue to emphasize the themes of objectivity and truth in "A Medical Story"?

12 Many of the doctors in A History of the Present Illness face ethical dilemmas with their patients, including Chitra in "Soup or Sex?" and the narrator in "The Promise." There are strict guidelines and laws governing doctors' behavior; do you think it's ok for a doctor to interpret the rules somewhat flexibly, even just a little bit, if s/he believes it will bring comfort to a patient?

13 The phrase "good death" appears in a number of the collection's stories. What does this phrase mean? Why the repetition?

14 What is the role of the narrative of medicine in the medical world? Why is it important?

Suggested Additional Reading

Richard Selzer, Letters to a Young Doctor and The Doctor Stories; Atul Gawande, Complications; Abraham Verghese, My Own Country: A Doctor's Story; Jerome Groopman, The Measure of Our Days; Samuel Shem, The House of God; Oliver Sacks, The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat; Ellen Rothman, White Coat; Emily Transue, On Call; Michael Collins, Hot Lights, Cold Steel; Pauline Chen, Final Exam; Rita Charon, Narrative Medicine.

Louise Aronson has an MFA from the Warren Wilson College and an MD from Harvard. She has won the Sonora Review prize, the New Millennium short fiction award, three Pushcart nominations, and has been awarded UCross, Ragdale and Hedgebrook Foundation residencies. Her fiction has appeared in the Bellevue Literary Review, the Sonora Review, Northwest Review, and the Literary Review, among other publications. She is an associate professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, where she cares for diverse, older patients and directs the UCSF Pathways to Discovery Program, the Northern California Geriatrics Education Center, and UCSF Medical Humanities. She lives in San Francisco.

Please visit www.louisearonson.com for more information about A History of the Present Illness. Book clubs and reading groups interested in having Louise Aronson joint your discussions, please email louise@louisearonson.com with "Book Club" in the subject line. Conferences, medical centers, and universities please use "HPI" in the subject line.