

10-4-2000

Sherwin B. Nuland: 10-04-2000

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Stan Sanvel Rubin

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Repository Citation

Nuland, Sherwin B. and Rubin, Stan Sanvel, "Sherwin B. Nuland: 10-04-2000" (2000). *Writers Forum Videos*. Video 1.
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Nuland:

Long before physicians had so much as made a start toward any valid understanding of human anatomy, rumors abounded over just what it is that goes on beneath the layers of skin, fat, and fiber hiding the inner man from his own direct scrutiny. Sounds were heard, rumblings were felt, and it must often have seemed to our earliest forebear that autonomous lives were being lived in the capacious cavities of his body. Through the slaughter of beasts and of his enemies, he knew that inside of him dwelt structures of various shapes, colors, and consistencies. Some of them continue to wriggle or pulsate for seconds or minutes after a chest or an abdomen had been laid open with primitive weapons. To our ancient ancestors, life was movement. If an organ moved in the depths of their bodies, perhaps it had a life of its own, perhaps there were animals within. At the very least, there was mystery.

Rubin:

Welcome to the Brockport Writers Forum.
I'm Stan Rubin.

Our guest today, Dr Sherwin B Nuland, was born in the Bronx, educated at NYU and at the Yale School of Medicine where he became a clinical professor of surgery. He has had several overlapping careers as an esteemed surgeon, as a professor of surgery, as a medical historian, and as a creative non-fiction writer, a writer of great resonance and power. Among his books are the trilogy, "How We Die", which received the 1994 National Book Award, "How We Live", and "The Mysteries Within: A Surgeon Reflects on Medical Myth" published this year, 2000, by Simon & Schuster. His most recent book was just published as we speak. It is Leonardo da Vinci and the Penguin Lives Series. Dr Nuland is here as the recipient of the Art of Fact Award, the M & T Bank Writers Forum Art of Fact Award in literary non-fiction. It's a great pleasure to have you here.

Nuland:

Well, it's wonderful to be here.

Rubin:

I want to begin this discussion of your work and ideas by going to what you just read, it ended on the word mystery. It seems to me mystery drives your work, it's the title of your next to most recent book.

Nuland:

You know what I think?

I think the human mind craves mystery, needs mystery. While looking for answers, we still need to retain the notion that there are things out there we will never understand. And it gives rise to romance, it gives rise to poetry, it gives rise to literary effort. And it also gives rise to a certain optimism that we can achieve beyond what we think we really are.

Rubin:

It leads, as you described else where in that book and else where, it also leads us to error.

Nuland:

To error. Oh does it ever lead us to error. My God, yeah. We ritualize mystery. We worship and adore it. And so early man, who is completely overwhelmed by the thought of mystery, absorbed by mystery, invented explanations for what was mysterious around him to retain the mystery, actually to say these are things we can't understand because they have these qualities about them that are extra physical or metaphysical, sure.

Rubin:

You were reading from *The Mysteries Within*, and near the end of that book you say that, in fact, it is the very mythic quality of some alternative so-called cures that gives them their appeal and power, because in fact, to some extent, we don't want to have certain knowledge.

Nuland:

Well, that's right. We want to feel, to know that there is something superior to us that we can appeal to, whose workings are inscrutable to us and will remain inscrutable to us. The great unknown is also the great excitement, at the same time that it's the great fear. The real paradox in human nature is the paradox of conflict. We didn't need Sigmund Freud to tell us that. The history of mythology is filled with opposites and contrast.

Eros and Thanatos that Freud played around with existed for what, fifteen, woo, woo, woo, 1500 years before Freud at least.

Rubin:

Yes, he was aware of his predecessors in mythology and literature which is I think one of his more endearing qualities. This, of course, means we're still living in a mythic, mythologized, mythologizable universe even in this era of incredible, seemingly incredible scientific ability to control and alter nature. We're still living in that world.

Nuland:

We've created myths around our, myths. Isn't that interesting, mists? There's Dr Freud again. We have put our scientists into a mystic and mythic ambience. We see them, not directly as human beings struggling with evidence and interpretation. We see them as mythical beings who can bring to us the fountain of youth, which is the most current thing, or all of the goods that mankind has been looking for long before, I said 1500 years, it's 2500 years. It's been going on forever and will persist forever. We need to think of authority figures as having powers that are beyond us.

Rubin:

It sounds like a dangerous state of receptivity to be in. If you are too abject before the authority figures and don't value evidence or verifiability of science, you can be made to believe anything.

Nuland:

I think the human mind is basically not capable, on its own, of logical sequential thought. I think that logical sequential thought, which periodically came along let's say with the Greeks and then disappeared

again, didn't really enter consciousness as a living thing until the 17th century, the so-called scientific revolution. I keep doing this, don't I?
Rubin:

We're paying homage to Sigmund.

Nuland:

Well, isn't that interesting. The scientific revolution when inductive reasoning, the experimental method came along and that had to really be invoked on people. And I'm very fond of saying that at the drop of a hat we get into some difficulty. We want something we can't have. We invoke all kinds of irrational ideas that we can pray to or wish for because that's our natural state. Logic is not. Evidence is not. Look, seventy-five percent of Americans by survey believe we are surrounded by angels. We are surrounded by powerful mysterious forces to which we can appeal to help us because they are stronger than we are.

Rubin:

And it's maybe more encouraging or comforting to think we're surrounded only by our own limitations. But I think this conversation is going to turn, about now, to your work as a writer. But this is inescapably part of it. Perhaps I'm thinking now of the old romantic dilemma. I mean, without mystery and perhaps ignorance and error, is there any poetry?

Nuland:

Oh, of course not. You know, I used to love when I was in active practice to walk into the obstetrical suite and watch a fifty-seven year old obstetrician deliver his 5000th baby. Because every time a kid came out, almost every obstetrician gets excited. Now he knows all there is to know about reproduction and embryology and the physiology of the placenta. Doesn't make a damn bit a difference. When that kid comes out, it's a miracle.

It's the same miracle we observe when the leaves start turning, right now it's early October, or when they turn green again in the spring. We know exactly the biology and biochemistry, but it makes no difference whatsoever. What appeals to us is the gorgeous quality of mystery that's in it, something that is beyond us, something almost supernal.

Rubin:

I think this clearly brings the scientist, or certainly the surgeon and the writer together, understanding that we're living in a realm of mystery and that the search for truth matters though, whatever that truth may be. Your three books that I named, you have referred to as your biological trilogy, "How We Die", "How We Live", and "The Mysteries Within". When did you conceive of them as a trilogy, as belonging together? I had the understanding that "How We Die" was a discrete project. Would you speak, perhaps, about how you came to write "How We Die" and how you came to articulate it into a trilogy?

Nuland:

I never thought of it as a trilogy until it was over, and realized that something within me had created a trilogy. It started, as you say, with "How We Die" with a simple telephone call. I was in the middle

of office hours one afternoon, late in the afternoon. And my secretary walked into the examining room and said, there is a man on the phone who insists on talking to you. And I said, I'm doing this examination, I can't.

She said, well, he's a literary agent. Well, my little ventricles started beating a little faster. I was toward near the end of the physical exam anyway, and so I slipped out. Actually, I literally slipped out because I was just doing the rectal exam at the time. So I slipped out and went into the office and answered the call. He pointed out, introduced himself by name, which meant nothing to me, and he said, you know, I'm about thirty-five or whatever it was at the time, and I'm having a lot of difficulty dealing with my aging parents' senescence. Do you realize, he said, there is no literature on what actually happens to us when we die and I've thought someone should write a book about it. And the book, this is interesting, should be called, how we die, which I thought was a pretty hokey title for a book. And I said to him that I had no interest in doing this. He had called me because several editors in New York had recommended that, you know, this was a doctor who had done some writing. I had no interest in it, but driving home that night, I realized that this young man was giving me an opportunity to summarize my entire life and my entire career. Do you know I had never stopped to realize that every volunteer thing I had done in medicine had to do with the end of life. I was, of course, on the Board of Directors of Hospice. I was a volunteer with the American Cancer Society for years and director of its professional education unit. I volunteered at two, now we call them senior citizens, homes for the elderly in New Haven. Other things that I had done always focused on the end of life. It had never come together for me and I began thinking about my own mother's death at the age of 11, and what a motivating force, without my consciously realizing it. That must've been in my turning toward medicine as a career. And there it was, out of the clear blue. An opportunity to summarize it, to bring it together in one place, to epitomize my life's experience. So I decided I would do it. And a year later, I'd never even talked to him about what I was doing. A year later I handed him the manuscript and it was, "How We Die";.

Rubin:

Well how was it from the gestation, birth process? What happened during that year with the book? What kind of working regimen did you find yourself in that was productive and what literary models were you drawing on, if any?

Nuland:

I had no literary models. The only model that has ever influenced my writing that I'm aware of is the Old Testament, actually. Actually, the Old Testament in the King James Version because I had read it so many, many times.

Rubin:

That is the version from writers.

Nuland:

Well I would hope so. And it has to do with the rhythms and the cadences and the thoughts recurring. My regimen was very simple. I bought a dozen

number two Eberhard Faber pencils and I said to them, write a book. Because I really feel like that book wrote itself. Something was streaming through me that I never understood, and this book went on and on and believe me, the very last chapter in the epilogue, I physically could not keep up with the pencil. When the book was written and I'd gone through the galleys, what do you do, three, four, five times. Two weeks before the book came out, my editor, also a young man, late 30s, phoned me and said, you know, you really ought to read your book, which I thought was about the dumbest thing anybody had said, at least since the last domestic dispute in my household. And so I said okay, okay, I'll read it. And I read this, but it took me a week to read it, in fact, it was ten days. I couldn't read more than one or two chapters at any given sitting. Again and again, I would see a paragraph, two paragraphs, that I had no recollection of writing. As I read it, came to the end, I realized there was an entire philosophy of death here which I never knew I had. What I'm saying is that everyone of us has experiences, impressions, call them philosophies if you want a high-flown word, that we don't know we have, that are in us, that are being digested, that are being cooked, that are changing levels all the time. And if we are only willing to allow whatever is inside to reach consciousness, you're going to be able to express it verbally, you're going to be able to express it with a number two Eberhard Faber pencil, whatever it is, if you don't censor it.

Rubin:

Let me probe that a bit further. What did you do to pop the cork, as it were, every morning, presuming you were writing in the mornings? What did you do? Was it imagery? Was it a certain personal anecdotal material, or what is it that got you going that the book took the shape it took, finally, the sequencing? Particularly, I think what I'm referring to without saying it, is the extraordinary blend of, you are there, hands-on experience with death, with personal, a lot of personal material. How did that come to be, and I suppose I have, if you'll forgive me, a further question here. Was it a challenge to you or a surprise to you to find yourself sharing as much personal memoir as you did in that powerful book?

Nuland:

Well, I work purely on emotion. The most primitive thing our brain does is to have feelings, to have emotions. An emotion becomes converted to a specific thought that you're conscious of. The thought then is expressed in words. You don't know what that emotion means until you find the words to express it. To me, emotion is associated with visual images. I have the kind of memory that brings visual images very clearly to me so that, believe it or not, even certain images when I was two and a half or three years of age, what comes with the images. And I think many people will confirm that this happens to them, is an emotion, a sense of what it was like when that image was reality. And once I can feel the emotion, which is almost instantaneous, I write from the emotion and the words are secondary. My friends in comparative literature always talk about language, language, language, and I say, language has very little to do with it. The language follows from the emotion that you feel. And if you are willing to write true to what is going on and coming up to the surface, you're going to have truth right there. And you're going to have

truth as it's expressed virtually conversationally, as if you're talking it, which incidentally I do too. When I write, I talk.

Rubin:

Do you speak aloud?

Nuland:

I speak aloud, because I want it to be my voice in the literal sense as well as in the figurative sense.

Rubin:

Did you have much adjusting to do, say, when you initiated this process, at what level the voice should be pitched? Was it a conscious effort at all to shape or construct the voice in the book or as you're saying, it just came and was right?

Nuland:

It just came. I wouldn't have known how to adjust it, and I think if I tried to adjust it, it would've destroyed whatever it was that was happening.

And I never would've gone through that later phase of reading it and saying, where the hell did it come from? Where was it? How did I know this? And I've, of course, I've had that experience with these other books too. Not quite to the extent as with "How We Die", because so much of "How We Die" is personal and biographical.

Rubin:

Did you find yourself at all surprised during the process at where you were going, at where the work was leading you?

Nuland:

Stan, I've got to tell you a story. When I was writing the third chapter, which is a chapter on aging, I wrote three or four sentences about how no one ever dies of old age. And then suddenly, because I really don't plan anything, I thought, my God. I spent the first eighteen years of my life living with someone who was, during all that time, dying of old age. But how can I write about my grandmother, you know, my little now Belarusian, as they would say, baba. So I went in the kitchen, my wife wasn't working at that time, and I said, you know, I want to write about baba but I can't.

And she said, why not? I said, in the first place, I would have to disclose family secrets which I've never told to anybody and, you know, with some of those personal things are now. And in the second place, who would care about my four foot eight inch baba who never learned to speak a word of English. If I write about my baba, I'm going to end up with six readers and they're all going to be aging Jewish boys from the Bronx. So she looked at me and she said this interesting thing, three words that affected the rest of the book. She said, don't censor yourself. Said, you know, you've got an editor, he doesn't like, he won't like it. He'll tell you what to do, don't censor yourself. And that was the key to the rest of the book.

I just wrote what was coming off those images. I had done it in the first two chapters somewhat, and I knew I was doing it. But the third chapter was really a turning point in that book. You know the astonishing thing.

Of all the zillions of letters I've gotten about that book, the most common topic is my grandmother. Because everybody had a grandmother just like mine, regardless of what they called her. So there's the lesson for me, that the more intimate and personal you are, the more universal you are. And I had never consciously realized that, never. You know, I've never had a writing lesson in my life. Every real writer knows these things. I didn't know that. I got a letter. It's one of the letters that I've quoted several times, from a fellow who said he was a pig farmer in Iowa. Used to be a lawyer in Florida, but he had a midlife crisis and he gave it all up and became a pig farmer. And he wrote me this wonderful three or four page letter. At the end of it he said, and thank you for your baba. He said, I love her as you do. I have known her in a different time, in a different place, by a different name. And that put it all together. That, there she is, you've got her, everybody who's going to watch this little bit of video has her, and it makes no difference where she is or what the relationship is, there's that person.

Rubin:

Don't censor yourself are probably the three best words of advice a writer could have, I think, and your wife gave them to you.

Nuland:

That's right.

Rubin:

Was she your reader all along? Did you share the [inaudible] as it unfolded with her?

Nuland:

She would read every chapter, and she's read everything I've ever written before it ever went off, you know.

Rubin:

Now, the second and third book I would understand followed more or less naturally, in some sense, from the success of the first, there was probably a desire to have a second book. But now that we've retroactively named them the biological trilogy, what do you mean by that? When you look back, what do you learn about the shape of Sherwin Nuland's imagination when you think about the three books as a whole?

Nuland:

Every one of us is in search for understanding of the human condition, and every one of us approaches it from a different viewpoint. Without realizing it, as a result of my medical and specifically my surgical training, I approach it from the biological viewpoint. To me, biology becomes the ultimate explanation for a great deal of what we are, including our spiritual selves, as I write in "How We Live". So my first approach is to, as the kids in the street say, tell it like it is, talk about the real evidence, what we really know, what comes out of a laboratory,

and try to infuse that as we're moving along in the text with what we bring to it as individual humans. Individuals, members of a society, members of family. And again and again, what keeps resonating back is a single word, a single word that is the most important word in

understanding the human condition and that word is love. It sounds corny, it sounds hackneyed. But as I study the biology, as I study interrelationships between communities and individuals, I come back to the single greatest motivating factor in what we do as love indeed. And Freud put it into words, love and work. Those are the two things that make us what we are. And both of them are incorporated in our need to create a unity of what we are, to give meaning to our lives. I'm, you know, I believe in nothing supernatural. So, what is the meaning of life? Well, life has no intrinsic meaning. We are biological organisms, you know. We started out a single cell so long ago, and we have put meaning into our lives by love and by work. So your life becomes not just a search for what is the human condition, the meaning of the human condition, but what is the meaning of life and how can I put more meaning into my life. And it has to do with expressing love, being able to feel free enough to express it, being able to feel free enough to choose a kind of work that enables you to express your deepest talents and your deepest interests. And very few of us ever manage it somehow, but we keep striving for it.

Rubin:

And I think your work exemplifies too that memory is part of this mix, part of the way our lives are meaningful.

Nuland:

Oh Stan, you want a quote, a quote which I say constantly. We are made of memories, that's what we are.

Rubin:

Let me, I won't tax it with this question, but let me go back to your memories for a moment. When did you begin to write or want to be a writer?

I know you were a reader at an early age, weren't you?

Nuland:

No, actually I didn't learn to read till second grade like everybody else. I wasn't one of these precocious readers. But the moment I learned to read, the whole world opened up. Because as I've told you, I came from a household where the adults could not read or write English. And I recognized immediately that English was my key to the greater world.

Rubin:

[inaudible] else where you've said English was my liberator.

Nuland:

It was my liberator, it was my freedom, it was my escape. And as other people have said, escape involves transformation. It was the way I could transform myself from being the child of illiterate immigrants to a member of this greater society that understood what the greater society was all about, what its literature was all about, what its science was all about. So from the first book I ever took out of the Fordham branch, Kingsbury branch actually, of the Bronx Public Library, "Ab, The Caveman", until the last thing that I read, I am obsessed with the printed word. You know, I'm the guy who reads the label on the ketchup bottle at supper time.

Rubin:

And you did, you speak of writing a childhood piece at about, what, age eight or something?

Nuland:

Yeah, I was eight and I went to a local carnival, and I was desperate to write about the carnival. And I came rushing home and I couldn't find any paper. And so I grabbed a little book I had bought in Woolworths for a quarter or something, the seven wonders of the world, and I wrote on the inside cover, and I wrote on the back cover. And I found that book, and I have it. I keep it my library at home, yeah.

Rubin:

What I'm interested in there is, what, did you get any good feedback or sustenance from the outside world in your early little forays, even at eight, into writing? Did you share this? Did people encourage you? Was there a teacher or was it just an interior process that kept you needing and in touch with language?

Nuland:

Yeah. My teachers encouraged me. Remember, I'm of a generation of New York kids that was brought up by a generation of unmarried Irish Catholic spinsters, whose entire attitude toward the Jews and the Italians and the whatever else we had there was, look, this is our country, we're going to make it your country. And the only way we're going to make it your country is for you to learn everything you can about it. So you're going to memorize poetry, and you're going to read all these stories, and you're going to pledge allegiance. And when we're through with you in sixth grade, you're going to be real Americans, and there are going to be no compromises on this. And I think that was the salvation of hundreds of thousands of us in the New York City of the 30s. It was that legacy that they gave us and they were so proud of what we did. So they would encourage our writing.

Rubin:

So it's in many ways the story of America in this century.

Nuland:

Yeah.

Rubin:

And it poses a challenge for understanding where we are now with the technologies we got now, with the ideological divisions we've got, with globalism and all these large issues we're not going to solve or really even have time to discuss. But I can bring it down to this question for you.

Do you see your work or the work of literature in general, in our time, as having some special urgency or significance or mission beyond just the particulars of each book? Do you see that there's a role? What I'm saying, I think you know. You've been, you've written elsewhere quite powerfully about the technology impinging on our sense of the human in your own craft, in your own profession of medicine. And this is of course

just true in our lives altogether as we reshape ourselves in terms of our technologies. It seems to me that we're, at times, running almost even with nature, but not ahead in certain places. And literature itself has undergone, not least at Yale, so many re-evaluations and reassessments. When you write, when you value, as you clearly do the vocation of writer, what is it you're valuing?

Nuland:

Sigmund Freud wrote somewhere that beauty has no practical value to the human race, no evolutionary value, no practical value, but we cannot live without it. We need the spirituality of that which is beautiful, and a written sentence, at least in our language, is beautiful. A written thought is beautiful. It's the aesthetic of writing that really has always appealed to me from the very start. It's not really the intellectual content. It's not really the transmission of information. It's the sound of it and the feel of it, that people can communicate this way and understand each other's hearts as they read. That's why editors so often talk about your voice. You must find your own real voice. And your voice is not something you manufacture or learn from Hemingway. Your voice is something that comes from inside of you, that another human heart understands with its ear attuned to that voice.

Rubin:

Very good. There is a marvelous continuity in there too as you're citing the King James Bible and Shakespeare. These things do live again in every new writer who was shaped by them. So it sounds as if we're ending where we began. It's really the same human problem. Whatever our technological or societal condition, it's the same human problem of meaning that drives you. It sounds as if you made, and I imagine you did make a very easy transition in a sense, or a natural transition from the practice of medicine to the practice of writing, which I think you've been doing, am I wrong, that you've been doing this as your primary activity for about the past, much of the past decade.

Nuland:

That's right. Well, the thing that unites it is the aesthetic. I always felt that there was an aesthetic in surgery that brought me into it in the first place, and certainly the aesthetic of the literary kind of communication, you know.

Rubin:

And I think you've written in "How We Live", for example, about the aesthetic having a role in sustaining life actually.

Nuland:

Oh, without question, yeah, and our desperate need for the aesthetic, and the fact that every society that's ever been studied has poetry.

Rubin:

One, couple of last questions in closure of this all too brief conversation. One is, why Leonardo? You just published a book on Leonardo, perhaps a subject you could talk a lot about. But briefly, why him?

Nuland:

Well, I was initially hooked on Leonardo because I developed a relationship with a visiting professor who was the world's authority on Leonardo as an artist, Kenneth Keele, who was an English physician. And I shared so many interests. Actually some of them are things we've just talked about in the last fifteen or twenty minutes, that he got me interested in Leonardo as a thinker and as an anatomist. So I've been tracking this virtually inscrutable human being for close to twenty-five years now, including trying to find out where he was really born, what really happened to him under certain circumstances. So when they called me from Viking Penguin and said, would you write about someone, I chose Leonardo.

Rubin:

Came easily.

Nuland:

It came very easily.

Rubin:

Would you, and to tantalize people, I gather, I've not read the book yet and I can be forgiven perhaps, this is just out. But I gather you have some speculations about a certain famous artwork.

Nuland:

Well, I have speculations about Mona Lisa. Who is the Mona Lisa? There have been so many conjectures about the Mona Lisa. And to me, a portrait is, well, first let me say that Leonardo's notion was to capture an instant in a person's life, a biographical instant. And he has caught a biographical instant in the life of this young woman. She was about twenty-four years old at the time. And it's an article of faith with me that any biographer is writing as much about himself as he is about his biography. To me, for psychoanalytic reasons actually that I describe in the book, Leonardo was painting the idealized mother. But it was his mother, his own mother, with whom he identified which was part of the root of his homosexuality in fact. What he is painting for us and what he is showing us is his mother, his idealized mother and himself at the same time. That's what we're looking at. And that's why the Mona Lisa has been so elusive to us, that there are things in that picture that are mysterious, exactly as Leonardo is mysterious. I put words in his mouth in the book and I say, you will never understand me. I know things that you do not know and are inaccessible to you because I have studied things you can never understand. That's what we're looking at in the picture. We're looking at Leonardo essentially thinking this and saying this. Leonardo wrote somewhere, the purpose of a painting is to depict the passions of the soul. And that's what he's done in that picture.

Rubin:

Very interesting. I'd be remiss if I didn't say what many viewers will know, that you have written in many major venues about patient care and end of life care and the need for humane re-understanding that some of the culture is embarked on now of these issues. And I won't go into that now, it's not what this is about, nor is there time, but it's very much a part of your, what you're identified with. I'm just wondering this. Does

that get in the way at all of your, does that set of concerns, which in some sense is an activist's concern, get in the way of your writerly self at all?

Are you more, perhaps I'll use the word polemical, you're not a polemical writer, but sort of public issue sort of writing, at all conflict with the call of the memoir or other projects?

Nuland:

Does the practical removal of a man's intestine conflict with the aesthetic of dealing with the tissue of the human body, and I say no.

Does the practical issue of writing about death and dying or the difficulties in various ethical problems, does that conflict with the beauty of two people,

a writer and reader communicating with one another and the aesthetic of the language? Because after all, do you really write in a different language

when you're writing an op-ed piece for the times? You shouldn't. You know, you've got to keep that [inaudible] out of your mind. You've only got to think of what you are writing for that individual who, whether he or she realizes it or not, is listening to your cadences and your rhythms just as he or she is listening to your message. So, there's the message and there's the beauty of the way the message is delivered, and they go together very, very well.

Rubin:

Marvelous continuity, as we see in your life and career. Would you give us a brief hint of your next project? I gather it's a more personal memoir still.

Nuland:

Well, like, so many people, especially children of immigrants I suppose, where two generations live in such different worlds, I had a fractious relationship with my father which I have never completely understood. And I got so many letters after "How We Die";, we want to hear more about your family. That over these years, it's six years now, I thought more and more about writing a memoir of my relationship with my father and carrying through till some decade after his death when I began truly to understand it, although I still don't completely understand it. And for myself, it's a way of understanding the picture that remains a bit fuzzy. For myself, I'm in the midst of beginning a memoir about my father and me.

Rubin:

I look forward to it. A last question, I promise, because I must. You write about randomness in disease and in writing. And the way you describe your writing process, in a sense, posits a kind of randomness or at least an openness to chance. What does this mean to you, randomness?

Nuland:

Well, let me tell you what it means in disease. Forty years in medicine. I would have become psychotic by my fifth year if I really believed there was a reason this person got sick or that person died. The only way I can live with the carnage that I have been with for so long is to stay

with my absolute scientific conviction that most disease processes and most misfortunes that befall us, maybe all misfortunes, are random. They would, even with a genetic predisposition to something, it takes all kinds of other entering factors to make the genetic predisposition express itself. Virtually everything that happens to us is random. There are subconscious drives that make us go one way or another, but one of the mysteries, we're back to mysteries, and beauties and excitements of life is what we do with the randomness that is given to us. The old thing about it ain't the cards you're dealt, it's the way you play them, you know. But that's real. That's a reality. That cliché, like so many, is real. So I like randomness. I appreciate it. I find myself wondering what I will do with it. And I've had some pretty big hits in my life which I haven't enjoyed. But in the retrospective understanding this thing we call the human condition, that has made me understand it in ways I wouldn't otherwise. So I am convinced that life is, in spite of what Einstein said, a crapshoot, and if there is a God, God does play dice with the universe. And it makes us greater than we would otherwise be to have the challenge of that randomness and learn how to deal with it.

Rubin:

And thank you very much Dr Nulan. I would just comment that as so many of the most important writers, you're an explorer, an explorer in language of what it is to be human. And we look forward to your future work, and we're honored to have had you here with us.

Nuland:

Well, I'm honored to be here. Thanks very much.

Rubin:

Thank you. And for the writers forum, I'm Stan Rubin.