London Landscape

Lionel Shriver at the Tate: a conversation

John Spicer
GP, Croydon, UK

On 10 June this year (2014) the London Arts in Health Forum,¹ as part of its Health and Wellbeing Week, brought together the acclaimed author Lionel Shriver and Deborah Bowman, Professor of Medical Law and Ethics at St George's, for a sparkling public conversation of erudition and reason at Tate Modern. Readers of Shriver's books may know of her interest in medical matters, but most will have encountered her startling breakthrough novel, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in print or on a film adaptation.

Bowman and Shriver concentrated on the clinical, and particularly issues of distributive justice, organisational morality and personal responsibility. Shriver has examined all of this, and more, in her two most recent novels. *So Much For That* deals with the treatment and demise of a young patient with a mesothelioma,² and her interactions with a mainly malign US healthcare system. *Big Brother* is an account of a very obese man and his travails.³

The two conversationalists unpicked *So Much For That* first and Shriver shared with the audience that some of the thematic material arose from her own father's experience in the treatment of a lymphoma. She was struck by the complicated way that decisions are made, and limited, at the point of curative treatment shading into palliative; and she illustrated this with a reading from the book. It was a powerful sequence in which a physician and husband fenced around each other in discussion of the patient nearing the end of her life.

Both Bowman and Shriver realised the similar cost constraints in the UK and US systems and although the UK system could be said to 'muddle along elegantly', the US system was paralysed by notions of entitlement backed by law. As a US citizen living in the UK, Shriver saw the need for the NHS to be more explicit about rationing – perhaps excluding fertility treatment – but was delighted not to pay health insurance by virtue of her country of residence.

They moved on to *Big Brother*. Bowman asked of Shriver whether she felt there were duties to family

members, given that the plot was partially inspired by an obese family member. And in a revealing take on personal autonomy, Shriver declared that we should all have permission to abandon our relatives and thus could choose, or not, to keep involved. She doubted that family could 'solve' the problems of one who misused drugs. Essentially, Shriver held that what was ethical was what worked, a consequentialist stance that Bowman gently challenged. She again read a section; describing a sister being overwhelmed by her accommodation to an obese, and awkward, brother. The audience, and this clinician, were as moved by this reading as the last. In discussion, Shriver summarised the status of her [anti] hero in the following: '... the more you weigh, the less you're seen'

So what did I learn? I learnt the value of literature in understanding the perspective of a patient and family, and how it would be good educational practice to develop knowledge of both narrative and medical ethics in a stimulating way from good writing such as Shriver's. I also enjoyed the challenge to conventional ethical thinking represented by a creative non-clinician, from which lessons can always be learnt. And I learnt how critical appraisal, in the arts as in science, should be at the core of every thing we do.

Three good lessons for an otherwise humdrum Tuesday evening, and two fine books to re-read.

REFERENCES

- 1 London Arts in Health Forum. <http://www.lahf.org.uk/>
- 2 Shriver L (2010) *So Much For That*. Harper Collins: London.
- 3 Shriver L (2013) *Big Brother*. Harper Collins: London.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

John Spicer
Email: John.spicer@southlondon.hee.nhs.uk