Book Review

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Lying Awake, By Mark Salzman. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. 181 pp. \$16.00, ISBN 0-375-70606-2.

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Since I began reading *The Linacre Quarterly* in 2017, I have not noticed any book reviews for works of fiction. As I began reading Mark Salzman's *Lying Awake*, a selection recommended to me by one of my mentors who knew of my interest in exploring the nexus between faith and religion, I immediately knew this novel would be of interest to other readers of this publication.

In this relatively quick read (180 pages), Salzman introduces us to Sister John of the Cross, a Carmelite nun residing in a monastery just outside of San Francisco. The story focuses on three periods in Sister John's life: her young adulthood and decision to enter the Carmelite order; her feelings of isolation in the monastery leading to uncertainty and possible regret; and the onset of her symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment for epilepsy. Because this is a work of fiction, Salzman can tackle an ethically complex issue from a first-person point of view, and in a thought-provoking way. As an aside, Salzman, being a self-proclaimed agnostic, takes care to avoid using Sister John's diagnosis to discount her faith experiences. Instead, he deftly handles the interplay between human biology and spirituality and asserts that God is present amid of all our struggles, medical and otherwise. Catholics especially will enjoy the details about our faith practices that Salzman includes, almost as though to demonstrate that he stepped outside his comfort zone to learn more about the Catholic faith. Chapter titles are dates with their corresponding feast day or church holidays, and it is clear that he researched and respected Carmelite living.

Without giving away too much of the story, Sister John is faced with a difficult medical decision regarding her temporal lobe epilepsy. Her condition

allows her to have profound and life-altering experiences with God but also causes her intense and debilitating headaches. She also fears that seeking treatment for her epilepsy will force her to reenter the "dark night of the soul" that plagued her early years as a nun. Therefore, she relies on the advice of her fellow sisters, a priest, and her physicians as she contemplates removal of the tumor.

Sister John's experience, though fictional, is not entirely without historical parallels. Many religious figures have been posthumously "diagnosed" with temporal lobe epilepsy: Saint Joan of Arc, Saint Teresa of Ávila (founder of the Carmelite order), and Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, among others. Although these diagnoses are by no means fully informed, the potential link between epilepsy and religiosity has been widely suggested and studied. Jewish behavioral neurologist Norman Geschwind coined the term "Geschwind syndrome" to refer to an individual with epilepsy who becomes hyper-religious (Veronelli et al. 2017).

In *Lying Awake*, the reader is allowed a behind-the-scenes view of how patients might consult spiritual companions and authorities in their lives while discerning a course of action regarding medical decisions (fans of Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* will most certainly experience a sense of déjà vu in this respect). Salzman's story of temporal lobe epilepsy in a religious and healthcare setting is a reminder that for many, experiences of illness and faith are deeply interconnected. In one particularly powerful moment, Sister John is being examined by her physician, Dr. Shepard. As he is completing her full body examination, the physician holds Sister John's feet in his hands and she recalls Christ washing his disciples' feet. This interaction shows that healthcare providers are afforded and can experience a special opportunity to become unique agents of Christ's love and compassion. Because of her interaction with a kind physician, Sister John becomes determined to find God in her experience of suffering and in what she had perceived as a harsh and impersonal medical world. An important takeaway and a special opportunity for

reflection becomes apparent here. This book calls on us to consider the faith of our patients, and how an understanding of their faith can play a role in interaction and treatment for those with epilepsy but also for those with any serious medical condition. Given the importance of the decisions vis-à-vis the importance of faith practices (Curlin, Roach, and Gorawara-Bhat 2005), healthcare providers might consider their obligation to provide nonjudgmental accommodation to the religious or spiritual needs of each patient.

Ultimately, I highly recommend this short novel to all healthcare providers, Catholic or otherwise. This book will reward the reader with the power of the story and its characters. I also hope you will be called to reflect on your own faith, as well as how you can facilitate the inclusion of your patients' faith in your medical practice.

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