

Simple tests

ANTHONY FUREY

Alberto Barrera Tyszka

THE SICKNESS

Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

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Andrés Miranda's years as a doctor have emotionally hardened him, especially when it comes to delivering terminal test results. "He's done it so often, with so many people, even cruelly, without a scrap of pity, feeling that he was doing the right thing, that frankness should, ethically speaking, be part of the medical armoury." Yet when he sees the results for his father, who was admitted for testing after collapsing in his apartment hallway one day, and discovers he has only several weeks to live, Miranda can no longer balance the personal and professional.

After failing to tell him the news on the telephone, Miranda creates an excuse for the two to go on holiday together in the naive hope that a relaxed environment will make the task easier. These events, which draw the reader in with their raw emotion, constitute the first half of *The Sickness*. The equally compelling second half concerns the father's palliative care – "the inevitable story of bodies, the biography of deterioration" – and its impact on Miranda.

While there is nothing special about the

plot, it is in the telling of the tale that the first-time novelist Alberto Barrera Tyszka, who is best known as the co-author of the first biography of Hugo Chávez, reveals his skills. *The Sickness* is a calmly paced novel unafraid to linger in scenes long enough to realize their potential but never so long that they become tedious. His prose is simple, with no flourishes and Margaret Jull Costa's smooth translation never impedes the narrative.

Tyszka can reduce his through-lines to something resembling the first principles of a systematic philosopher. When recounting what drew him to medicine, Miranda relates the story of how "science became a sin" under the sixteenth-century founder of anat-

omy, Andreas Vesalius. Dissecting cadavers one day, Vesalius discovers one of the hearts to be faintly beating and is punished for this encounter: "he paid for his curiosity". Thus Tyszka's framework is clear: for better or worse, sickness and medicine are linked to the curiosity inherent in humans. The curiosity that drew Miranda to bodies is what also damages him.

This is underscored by the novel's subplot. A young patient, Ernesto Durán, has suffered a fit similar to Miranda's father and has been sending him pleading calls, letters and emails. But Miranda, who delegates his correspondence to his staff, has not received Durán's messages. He is too busy wringing his hands over his father to notice a man in almost identical need. It is Karina, the nurse, who becomes intrigued with Durán's case. Signing herself as Miranda, she begins a correspondence with Durán that soon consumes her. "Look at the state you're in over that guy", says her co-worker. "He's passed his sickness on to you!" Karina is imitating Vesalius: peering into the world of decay in search of knowledge – a modern-day Antigone obsessed not with burial rites but with treatment options. *The Sickness* is refreshingly clean in its storytelling yet very complex in character.