

A wonderfully intense study of fear

EILEEN BATTERSBY

Sat, Jul 24, 2010

FICTION : *The Sickness* , by Alberto Barrera Tyszka, translated by Margaret Jull Costa, MacLehose Press, 151pp, £14.99

ANDRÉ MIRANDA is a doctor, well used to dealing with the ill and the dying. But when test results belonging to his father confirm there is no hope, the doctor becomes a son incapable of dealing with the inevitable. Instead of breaking the news, he decides to lie even though it is obvious his father already suspects the worst. Dr Miranda's personal crisis reduces another problem; an obsessive patient is now no more than a mere irrelevance. This insistent, eloquent novel from Venezuelan writer Alberto Barrera Tyszka is a prose sonata that gracefully peels away every layer of human vulnerability.

The patient, Miranda's widower father Javier, has dealt with his life's grief, the shocking death of his wife in a very public aircraft disaster. It left him alone with the then 10-year-old Andreas. Even at that age, the future doctor was already given to pragmatic curiosity and had discovered an interest in how the body works – and doesn't. The father and son have had a close relationship but when the father expects to be told the truth about his illness, his son, although so experienced in such matters, can not discuss the facts.

It is movingly described and all too believable. Tyszka's remarkable novel is poised and human; through his direct, exact prose, meticulously rendered into English by Margaret Jull Costa, one of the finest international literary translators currently at work, he succeeds in making father and son sympathetic as both grapple with death.

In a vague hope of finding the strength and, with it, the right moment to tell his father how deadily serious his condition is, the son arranges for them to visit an island, the place to which his father had brought his younger self years before during that earlier family crisis. The days pass, the dying man begins to relax, his son becomes even more upset: "He finds it very hard to get to sleep at night, and when he does finally manage it, he sleeps badly, fitfully. He never feels rested when he wakes up: he gets out of bed like someone coming home from a dark and arduous task, as if returning to the light after a fierce battle."

This is a study of fear; fear of death, of loss, of losing the freedom to act and most of all losing the right to be listened to. The older man is frightened of dying and the son is terrified of the reality of his father's final leave-taking. He watches for the physical signs of impending death and notes their arrival, the way the bones force through the thinning flesh. Miranda's wife, the daughter-in-law, waits patiently. After extensive evasion, the doctor simply blurts out the truth.

Dr Miranda has long known he is more suited to research or teaching than he is to dealing with patients. All of this is obvious to the reader from the opening pages and his frailty is, ironically, among the many strengths of the narrative.

But even more interesting is the behaviour of Karin, Dr Miranda's secretary, whom he has entrusted with the task of dealing with Ernesto, the patient who is convinced he is desperately ill and for whom the doctor has no further professional time to give. The doctor orders his secretary to block his phone calls. Eventually Ernesto takes to sending impassioned and detailed e-mails. He reveals he is stalking the doctor. "Let me just make it clear that I haven't begun following you because I want to, but out of sheer desperation."

The turmoil shared by father and son is dramatically juxtaposed with the ongoing panic attacks

experienced by Ernesto. So vivid are his descriptions of his illness, imagined or otherwise, that Karin is soon drawn into Ernesto's despair. Tyszka convincingly follows each of his characters through their respective situations. Most authentic of all is the chaotic response of Dr Miranda: here is the professional forgetting everything he has ever practised when confronted by his father's fate.

On the fringes of the doctor's family, is Merny, the woman who has cleaned Javier's apartment but no longer wishes to continue the arrangement as he is ill. She has her own problems and lives with a man who is not the father of her two children and he is reluctant to become involved in her older son's emerging wildness. She makes her own deal with the dying man. The son then tracks down a woman whom he feels was, and perhaps may still be, his father's lover. All the while Karin the secretary has become so intrigued by the nuisance former patient, she begins to reply to the e-mails, pretending to be the doctor.

The narrative is worked out like a game of chess; the timing is perfect, as is the mixed tone of helplessness and despair, as well as the various levels of anger. A son grieves for his father but the most powerful note struck in the novel is the communal panic described so brilliantly by Ernesto in his obsessive communications. At the mercy of her multiple doubts, Karin, a living, breathing character if ever there was one, begins to live through these crazy e-mails, they mirror her loneliness.

She suddenly realises she has been impersonating her employer. Yet aside from this realisation are her own panic attacks, the new terrors she experiences while on a metro; the gagging that threatens to choke her as she waits in a queue in a video rental shop.

After all the games, the lies, the small diversions and the memories, Dr Miranda is the son at his father's hospital bedside, weeping as he grants his father's final request. "Talk to me about us," begs the dying man. "Don't let me die in silence."

Tyszka is a perceptive, original writer. He has brought an unusually sophisticated understanding to a wonderfully intense, little novel. No sentimentality, no polemic, just emotion at its most resonant.

Eileen Battersby is Literary Correspondent of *The Irish Times* and author of *Second Readings: From Black Beauty to Beckett*, published by Liberties Press

© 2010 The Irish Times