

Lost in America: A Journey With My Father

By Sherwin B Nuland, MD

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD



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Sherwin Nuland, MD, is an accomplished surgeon; he started as Chief Surgical Resident at Yale University School of Medicine; later, he won the National Book Award (in 1994) for *How We Die*.¹ His recent, short autobiography, *Lost in America*, differs from any autobiography I have ever read.

This book is about the shame felt by a poor immigrant's son for his family. In particular, it is about the revulsion felt by a loyal son for his father—and the damage sustained by his family as they changed cultures from Russia to New York City to seek *The American Dream*. The book is also about the intense effort of a bright young man to escape from the often embarrassing, occasionally warm world of his Jewish immigrant family in the Bronx to the “goyish” world of the Ivy League.

Nuland's autobiography is the story of the author's long day's journey into night. Professional success was followed by personal failure and divorce; ultimately, Dr Nuland became intractably depressed and suicidal to the point of accepting electroshock therapy, which was the alternative to frontal lobotomy, another treatment option offered to him during his serious, year-long hospitalization. *Lost in America* is a book written with such unsparring openness and honesty about the author's own feelings and motives that most readers will probably relate to it in several ways.

The following passage from the Introduction conveys a sense of the book and illustrates the author's skillful way of describing his close-yet-distant, isolating relationship with his father: “My father's power and

the weakness that nurtured it have accompanied me all the days of my life. I have struggled to be the un- him—to be the opposite of what he was—and in the struggling I have faltered and fallen many times. His lingering power over me has been the source of much of my weakness; I have responded to the threat of his weakness by seeking to find ways to resist it—to be so powerful against it that I am unassailable by that great portion of himself that he has left within me. And in the process, I have instead become rather more like him than less.”²

Dr Nuland's life is the story of a man's lifelong response to his father's rages and to the shame of his father's progressively unsteady gait, a condition associated with occasional bouts of pain that struck like lightning. The basis for these symptoms provides a medically interesting sidelight that is almost a relief from the intensity of the author's life story. This story is of a life spent trying to understand itself. The book's memorable opening quote, attributed to Philo of Alexandria, is also a fitting close: “Be kind, for every- one you meet is fighting a great battle.”

For physicians, *Lost In America* is meaningful because it is so easy for us to make ourselves unassail- able with what we know. ♦

References

1. Nuland SB. How we die: reflections on life's final chapter. New York: Knopf; 1994.
2. Nuland SB. Lost in America: a journey with my father. New York: Knopf; 2003.

Vincent J Felitti, MD, has been with the Southern California Permanente Medical Group since its opening in San Diego in the late 1960s.

The Optical Instrument

Every reader finds himself. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument that makes it possible for the reader to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself.

Marcel Proust, 1981-1922, French novelist