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## Consider This, Señora by Harriet Doerr

Reviewed by Arthur D Hayward, MD

**H**arriet Doerr attended Smith College in her youth, but it wasn't until she reached the age of 67 that she earned an undergraduate degree in history from Stanford University. Then, at an age to retire, she entered the creative writing program at Stanford and began her own career as a fiction writer. She won awards for *Stones for Ibarra* in 1984; and nine years later, at age 83, she published this gem, *Consider This, Señora*.

For the increasing numbers of Americans concluding first careers and contemplating the prospect of living another 25 or 30 years thanks to increasing longevity, Ms Doerr's late-life emergence as a fiction writer may inspire special admiration and raise a question. Could others of us, both physicians and our patients, have hidden creative talent? Who will support the exploration of that possibility? In any case, she shares with readers the sensibility of a highly competent author whose age and maturity seem to have brought her wisdom, understanding, and a kind of bemused indulgence.

In *Consider This, Señora*, Ms Doerr places four US expatriates in a small town in the Mexican countryside. All are starting a new phase of their lives: One has returned as an old woman to reconnect with the land of her birth. Two women have been disappointed in love. A failed businessman is in arrears in paying US taxes. Their stories illustrate how people, displaced in time, place, and culture, gain new perspectives and grow wiser about life's major dilemmas: love, suffering, death. The ability of memory: "... the brilliant patchwork of a never-ending past"<sup>1p144</sup> to console and heal and to connect characters is one of several recurrent themes.

Though *Consider This, Señora* addresses profound issues, it is neither weighty nor ponderous. The book engages readers in short sections that bring to life serial moments and episodes in the lives of the four expatriates and their Mexican neighbors and friends. Making frequent use of quotations, Ms Doerr lets characters define themselves and tell their own stories. She also takes us inside the minds of her characters to show how misunderstandings and bafflement can proceed from conflicting cultural habits and preconceptions.

The book is primarily the story of Sue, a young artist who has divorced her mountain-climbing husband and harbors, but initially stifles, bitter memories. In two important chapters Ms Doerr narrates how the aging widow Ursula behaves with dignity and demonstrates both purposefulness and acceptance at the end of life.

The language of *Consider This, Señora* is uncomplicated; the narrative moves smoothly; the book reads easily. The many pleasures of reading this book include depictions of the landscape and scenes of everyday life in a remote Mexican village. The authenticity of detail and the author's gentle handling of her characters and their discoveries about life and about themselves suggest how the author's own life has given her the wisdom and understanding she eventually grants to her characters. Physicians seeing aging patients will find this an often-useful book to recommend in order to help patients see new possibilities in their lives—if not in the lives of the doctors themselves. ♦

### Reference

1. Doerr H. Consider this, Señora. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co; 1993.

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## The Best Effect

The best effect of any book is that it excites the reader to self activity.

— Thomas Carlyle, 1795–1881, Scottish essayist, satirist, and historian