Dissection: Photographs of a rite of passage in American medicine 1880-1930

"The distinguished historians John Harley Warner and James Edmonson have gifted us with a truly unique and important book. The text and photographs are not only fascinating to contemplate, but they document a period in medical education in a way that is matched by no other existing contribution."

-Sherwin Nuland, MD, author of How We Die

John Harley Warner, Ph.D., is Avalon Professor and Chair of History of Medicine at the Yale University School of Medicine, and is also Professor of History and of American Studies at Yale. His books include The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America and Against the Spirit of System: The French Impulse in Nineteenth-Century American Medicine.

James M. Edmonson, Ph.D., is Chief Curator of the Dittrick Medical History Center and Museum of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, which houses a collection of rare medical books, photographs, archives, and medical instruments and objects. He is the author of American Surgical Instruments: An Illustrated History of Their Manufacture and a Directory of Makers.

In the 19th and early 20th century, a culture of secrecy surrounded human dissection in medical education. Students could be expelled for divulging the source or the identities of "subjects," while anatomy professors, demonstrators, and janitors were to guard the dissection room's secrets—which makes it all the more striking how often medical students documented and commemorated this rite of passage. At the same time that student dissectors were admonished to shield the secrets of the dissecting room, they frequently invited in the eye of the camera to pose with "their" cadavers. For nearly the next half century, through the 1920s, the dissection photo would become one of the most archetypal and ubiquitous forms of medical student portraiture before 1930, yet it vanished almost completely after 1950.

These photographs were made in a surprising variety of forms: class portraits, cartes de visite and postcards, and staged dark humor scenes. Complete with illuminating essays by two experts on the subject, Dissection features 138 extraordinary, rare historic photographs of the unseen world of the rite of passage into the mysteries of medicine.

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John Harley Warner and James M Edmonson, Dissection: photographs of a rite of passage in American medicine: 1880–1930, New York, Blast Books, 2009, pp. 208, illus., $50.00 (hardback 978-0-922-33342). Generously proportioned, sumptuously produced, replete with crisp photographic reproductions—at rst glance, Dissection could. He sees them not as an isolated clinical curiosity but as part of a long-established historical genre, one that drew inspiration from Renaissance anatomical atlases and Rembrandt’s The anatomy lesson of Dr Tulp (1632). He also highlights the ways in which photography was taken up in this period as a clinical tool, a seemingly objective way of capturing what is eating, what might escape. The collection of photographs gathered here by Warner are truly spectacular. For an aspiring doctor, this book shows insight into the world of human body dissection, the true rite of passage for any doctor. The sections included in the book are both intriguing and surprising. I particularly enjoyed the “Dark Humor” section of the book, which includes humorous pictures of the cadavers “doing things”, which is also a thought-creator in regards to the evolution of Medical Ethics and the respect The collection of photographs gathered here by Warner are truly spectacular. For an The anatomical diaspora: evidence of early American anatomical traditions in North Dakota. Cadaver Dissection and the Ritual Transformation of Medical Students. Ryan Allen Laudermilk. Medicine. 2011. Morbid Curiosities: Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain. Samuel J.M.M. Alberti. History.