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MOUNT MISERY

By Samuel Shem

Fawcett Columbine. 448 pp. \$24.

In his ardently appreciative 1995 introduction to the 33rd printing of Samuel Shem's 1978 bestselling novel *The House of God*, John Updike says the book "could probably not be written now."

It probably could, but not by Shem. *The House of God* is a young man's book, brimming with fresh disillusionment potently spiked with Shem's wry and ginger wit. As Updike notes, it does for medical training what *Catch-22* did for military life.

Mount Misery, the long-awaited sequel covering Dr. Roy Basch's year of psychiatric residency, shows a far more ripened talent, less frenetically satiric but deeply compassionate and wise, a view through mature eyes that have seen the caring practice of medicine do wonders and its self-interested practice bring catastrophe.

Shem's sequel does provide surface similarities. Once again, Basch is the ingenuous novice learning his profession. He's still loved by the wise and persevering Berry. His father still writes him letters filled with disparate clauses strung together with "and"s, like Hemingway with a life-threatening fever. And he's still taught by smug incompetents certain of their divinity, from whom he is saved by an eccentric iconoclast mentor.

Shem (pen name of Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Stephen Bergman, also writer-in-residence for the Boston Shakespeare Company) shows a Shakespearean disregard for time. Ostensibly set two years after Basch's 1973-74 internship, this novel contains AIDS, the Internet, Ross Perot and thong bikinis. It is about psychiatry today, and it is not a pretty sight.

Mount Misery, the psychiatric hospital affiliated with BMS (the world's Best Medical School), was founded in 1812 in a remote location when the guiding principle was, "Out of mind, out of sight." In each of his successive rotations there, Basch will train under, and be beguiled by, a psychiatrist more pernicious than the last.

First, he studies Depression & Borderlines with Blair Heiler, a Nobel aspirant so devoid of warmth that his therapeutic technique consists solely of attacking patients until they quake with anger, which to him means they are being authentic; if patients seem better, he insists, they are actually worse. Basch tries Heiler's hostility on his young patient Zoe Bicker. Zoe clearly seems worse, so Basch believes she must be getting better.

Basch moves on to Admissions, where he's taught to get patients examined, diagnosed and admitted in 14 minutes, and to determine exactly how long a stay their insurance will cover.

His most seductive rotation takes him to the Freudian unit with the eminent and beautiful A.K. Lowell who puts Basch into analysis. Before long, behavior looks healthy only when reduced to infantile regression and sexual dysfunction, until Basch finally learns that "it's rough when you shine the high beams of analysis on reality. Everything looks different, and a lot worse than it really is."

Worse still is the psychosis unit under drug pusher Errol Cabot who believes, "There are no psychological or social factors in mental illness.... If it's mental illness, by definition it's biological." That means drugs, and drugs earn Cabot \$420 an hour and an office full of plush furniture provided by pharmaceutical companies. Soon, Basch is not only dispensing but taking Ritalin, Prozac and Valium to get through his day.

Most depraved of all is Dr. Schlomo Dove, analyst to the analysts, who speaks of himself always in third person, a peccadillo that disarmingly masks his dissociation from his own superego.

But just as *The House of God* had the Fat Man to expose the absurdities of its medical looking glass world, this sinister psychiatric snake pit provides third-year resident Leonard Malik to reveal the Macbethian ironies of Mount Misery, where fair is foul and nothing is but what is not.

At Mount Misery, the chief of staff "had that dazzling sincerity that meant you couldn't trust a word he said," residents are taught "If [the patient] talks feeling, you talk thought. If he talks thought, you talk feeling," patients say of analysis sessions "[I] felt incredibly worse when I left them. Things were going extremely well," and Cabot's drugged victims are "twitching horribly from Tardive dyskinesia, the incurable disease caused by the drugs each had been given to cure them of their curable diseases."

The deepest irony may be that even as Shem skewers Freud he lets Basch acquire what Freud declared the keys to a happy life: the abilities to love and to work.

Malik shows Basch his teachers "mistake having no feelings for being smart," so they cover the gaps in their humanity with clinical theories. Effective therapy, he insists, is not a science but an art. His comments have the force of koans and teach Basch that "human beings are so complex, any theory fits" but the crucial requisite in counseling is connectedness with people, being genuinely *there* with patients, making them feel seen and heard.

Still, Basch has no easy road, and answers come only with excruciating prices: patients committing suicide when insurance denies treatment, parents dying, lovers lost, children orphaned, terminal diseases, virulent misogyny, doctors shielding each others' criminality, patients abused by the only one they trust.

There's appalling villainy here, all the more ominous for being cloaked in white collars and lab coats. Amoral drug and insurance companies destroy people for profit, and "shrinks have fallen prey to what they were supposed to heal: the isolation of one human being from another." They sneer at touchy-feely abstractions like "love," disparaging the most basic force for health in the world, what Rene Spitz proved newborns wither and die without, what John's epistle even declares God is.

Shem writes it all with consummate skill, evoking the perfect image ("for a moment we were still, like birds caught, still, in a pocket of wind") and the deft characterizing touch ("he settled back in his chair, placing his hands flat on his thighs the way farmers will do when there's no internal combustion engine present and they don't feel really alive").

Yet, more than deftly written, this book is sage and important. Reportedly, colleagues criticized Shem for writing *The House of God*, not because its disclosures were untrue but because they shouldn't have been revealed. He will hear that again, which is exactly why this book is so necessary. He will be refuted, told that drugs and shock and lobotomy indeed do heal.

Maybe that's true. But it will seem a small truth next to Malik (echoing Montaigne) proclaiming that our purpose here is ultimately to learn how to die well, that life and joy arise from being profoundly alive in the connections we make. For this book by a healer and a Shakespearean is really about that most familiar yet enigmatic question of all: to be, or not to be. It urges us to be.