

THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

A new novel by Samuel Shem, author of *THE HOUSE OF GOD*

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www.samuelshem.com

ADVANCE PRAISE:

“A deeply moving and profoundly intelligent exploration of the complexities and rewards of family, profession, and place. The story of a young physician returning to his small town becomes a tale with universal meaning. This book continues to resonate in the mind and heart long after it is read”—**Jerome Groopman, M.D.**, Author of “How Doctors Think.”

“This new novel from Samuel Shem, raucous and insightful physician of the soul, captures a town, a man, a time of life with all the verve and nerve that marked *THE HOUSE OF GOD*. Hooray!”—**Bill McKibben**, author of “The Bill McKibben Reader.”

“*THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE* is written with a large heart, a healing touch, wry and wise insight into the human condition. Worthy of the Best of Samuel Shem, which is worthy indeed.”—**James Carroll**, author of “House of War.”

“In this lovely novel Samuel Shem brilliantly describes scenery from the Italian Lakes to the Hudson River Valley with vivid enchanting detail. But his real subject is the landscape of the human heart with its dangers and delights, its vertiginous cliffs and mossy woods, its comforts and contradictions. This is a wonderful book about the surprises of human connection and the infinite power of love.”—**Susan Cheever**, Author of “American Bloomsbury.”

“Samuel Shem captured the humor, the angst and pathos of medical training in that unforgettable book, *THE HOUSE OF GOD*. His new book is an incredible and heartfelt

story of a physician whose life has taken the most unexpected twists and turns. THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE entertains, satisfies, and affirms; it is beautifully conceived and brilliantly executed. Shem has done it again!”—**Abraham Verghese**, author of “My Own Country” and “The Tennis Partner.”

“As in THE HOUSE OF GOD and MOUNT MISERY, I was riveted by this story of a world-weary young doctor called to heal the body and spirit of his ailing hometown—and of himself. THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE is special—a grand, wonderfully insightful story of love and death, mothers and sons, doctors and patients—filled with larger than life characters and told with outrageous Shem-humor and authentic humanity.”—

Michael Palmer, (12-time) New York Times Best Selling author of “The First Patient.”

Samuel Shem’s novel about medical internship, THE HOUSE OF GOD, is a classic, noted in *The Lancet* as one of the two most significant American medical novels of the 20th century, praised by **John Updike** (“glows with the celebratory essence of a real novel, defined by Henry James as ‘an impression of life.’ Sentences leap out with a supercharged vitality...The tale of (Roy’s) venture into the valley of death and the truth of the flesh.”) It has sold millions of copies and is required reading in medical schools throughout the world. It, MOUNT MISERY, and FINE are celebrated for their authentic description of medical training and practice, for their dazzling, Rabelaisian comedy, and for their humanism and vision. THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE is Shem’s most ambitious work yet. It goes beyond a focus on young doctors-in-training to that of a world-traveled doctor called home in the early ‘80s to become the doctor to the small town he ran away

from, to face his own history and that of the place. It is a novel of love and death, mothers and sons, ghosts and bullies, doctors and patients, illness and healing.

After a divorce and a year of wandering the world with “Doctors Without Borders,” Orville Rose has settled into a new love with an Italian Buddhist teacher, Celestina Polo. A telegram informs him that his mother has died. He returns to Columbia, “a Hudson River town plagued by breakage”, and is startled by his mother’s will: she has left him an enormous sum of money and her historic home. But there’s a catch: he must live in her house on the Courthouse Square continuously for a year and thirteen days. But Orville desperately wants to return to Europe and Celestina.

As he struggles with his decision, he re-connects with the man who had been his mentor and surrogate father, Bill Starbuck—the kind of small town doctor now extinct. Bill’s dusty office features a prominent ‘YES SMOKING’ sign and a cache of his home remedy “Starbusol.” Bill treats the working poor, people that the medical and insurance industry have shut out. Now in his seventies, Bill needs a break, and talks Orville into helping out. He takes over Bill’s practice and plunges into the grim realities of American life—as perhaps only doctors are subjected to with such grinding regularity: “Alcohol and violence. Murder as grisly as Angola. Malnutrition as bad as the Third World. A cornucopia of drugs. Epidemic smoking and obesity.”

“History” is one of the central themes of the novel, elaborated in a romance between Orville and a remarkable young mother, Miranda Braak, who aspires to be the Columbian historian. Her deep knowledge of the past challenges Orville to get perspective on his present crisis; her love and integrity challenge him to grow. In a story told with the ineffable “Shem-humor”, pointed insight and drama, Orville faces his

patients, his past friends and demons, and the floating presence of his dead mother, learning to be a ‘healer’ and a part of ‘the spirit of the place.’

SPIRIT is Shem at his finest—compassionate, capacious, funny, full of big ideas and memorable personalities. It offers an authentic, unvarnished portrait of the medical profession and underscores the crucial link between the health of individuals and the health of communities at a pivotal period of American history.

Samuel Shem (pen-name of **Stephen Bergman, M.D., Ph.D.**) is a novelist, playwright, and for three decades a doctor on the Harvard Medical School faculty. His novels include: THE HOUSE OF GOD, which has sold over two million copies in thirty languages, FINE, and MOUNT MISERY, called “another medical classic.” With his wife Janet Surrey he is the author of the hit Off Broadway play BILL W. AND DR. BOB, the story of the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (winner of the 2007 Performing Arts Award of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence), the nonfiction book WE HAVE TO TALK, HEALING DIALOGUES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN (winner of the Paradigm Shift Award of the Boston Interfaith Counseling Service), and the curriculum MAKING CONNECTIONS: BUILDING GENDER DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOL. A 30th anniversary symposium—“Return to the House of God: Medical Education Revisited 1978-2008”—will be held at the Cleveland Clinic in October 2008, also published by Kent State University Press. Shem has been honored as one of Boston Public Library’s “Literary Lights,” as one of “Boston’s Best Authors,” and as a speaker at the Hemingway Centennial Celebration at the JFK Library. He has received the Vanderbilt University Medal of Merit, has given

commencement addresses at over fifty medical schools, spoken all over the world on
“How to Stay Human in Medicine,” and published a noted essay, “Fiction as Resistance.”

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