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Ordinary Tales from Endoscopic Odysseys *Fiction, ethics, and the gastroenterological journey*



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A B S T R A C T

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Fiction (i.e. novels, short stories, and movies) provides an opportunity for imaginative moral reflection and can serve as a basis for moral argument. Narratives play a role in moral reasoning because they are exemplars as well as tests. Those who care for sick people, should be interested in patient's and literary stories. Exploring the representation of gastroenterological ailments in fiction gives insight in the experience of undergoing colonoscopy, farting, pain, the borders of intimacy, hygiene and the lack of it, taboos and the doctor-patient-relationship. Included authors are, among others: Michel Faber, Alan Bennett, Charles Bukowski, Charlotte Roche and James Joyce. Several movies are discussed as well. Though in general gastroenterological problems don't seem often at foreground in fiction, in some cases they are represented in a more symbolic way, and touch upon some fundamental aspects of the human condition.

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'Thought depends absolutely on the stomach, but in spite of that, those who have the best stomachs are not the best thinkers.'

Voltaire

Introduction

Isserley is undeniably a beautiful woman: 'Her face (...) was small and heart-shaped, like an elf in a kiddie's book, with a perfect little nose and a fantastic big-lipped curvy mouth like a supermodel.' Yet her breasts are her best assets, especially when she straightens her back, sticking out her chest. She only ever wears low-cut tops. No underwear or bra. 'Fantastic tits on this one, there wasn't much of her otherwise', a hitch-hiker contemplates, sitting next to her in the car. Isserley enjoys that, picking up hitch-hikers. In fact, it's her job.

'A male in prime condition', that's all Isserley cares about. She gets a kick out of picking up men, 'savouring the thought of how superb he'd be once naked. (...) The bulge in his jeans was promising'. The Scottish, Dutch born, author is called Michel Faber (1960). For a long time the reader expects Under the Skin [1] to unfold as an erotic novel or even pure porn. He couldn't be further from the truth. Isserley is an alien, a creature which has been transformed into a type of 'human' by means of surgery. With needles in the passenger seat of the car she sedates the shapely male hitch-hikers. She delivers them to an abandoned farm. There, her colleagues first cut off the tongues of the hitch-hikers, then they are shaved, castrated and fattened up until they are ready for slaughter. Employees don't call them humans but 'vodseles', 'vegetables on legs'. When a 'shaved, castrated, fattened, intestinally modified, chemically purified vodsel', that escaped, writes the word 'mercy', Isserley is puzzled. 'The word was untranslatable into her own tongue; it was a concept that just didn't exist.' The vodsel is captured and transported back to the farm to be processed into meat. Human meat, processed into animal feed.

Under the Skin is a macabre nightmare with a touch of science fiction (made into a film in 2013, starring Scarlett Johansson). Obviously the book doubles as a condemnation of the bio-industry. Isserley has caught herself wondering how animals, humans and vodseles are different from each other. Hardly, is the answer, because 'we're all the same under the skin'. The dehumanisation to a vodsel is quick. Through a funnel all food is dumped immediately in the digestive tract, which is working overtime. And during the slaughter the oesophagus, stomach and intestines are removed first. The novel is of course an analogy to the way humans slaughter animals. But one can read the novel in addition to this clear interpretation in another way. The story then depicts the digestive tract as organ that more or less symbolizes the identity of an individual.

Which brings us to the themes of this article: the relation between fiction (novels and films) and ethics plus the representation of gastroenterological themes in fiction. Not so much focussing on the ethical issues *sec* but rather on representation as a basis for ethical reflection. We will limit ourselves to the digestive tract and we will not analyse novels and films about food and eating habits. A high dose of self constraint was necessary as there are many interesting novels and films on eating matters.

Fiction and ethics

How relevant is fiction for medical ethics? [2,3] This depends, in part, on the definition of ethics one holds on to. Let us, in the tradition of Greek philosophy, not to be too strict: ethics is about how we should live (Socrates' question) and what sort of persons we should be. It deals therefore, in the words of the philosopher Anthony Cunningham, with ways of life and forms of character. We paraphrase him here, with full agreement [4]. Ethics includes: ideals, aspiration and imagination with respect to 'what is good and best'. It also includes so called 'rich' concepts as shame, jealousy, respect, pride, compassion, cruelty, dignity, etc., not only the concepts good and evil, right and wrong.

Life and character are complex phenomena. We have to find out what 'really matters' and motivates us. Our daily experiences should be in the forefront and can be of great help. As we all know, for instance, intimate attachments provide shape and meaning to our lives.

The importance of daily experience thus is clear but we do take a moral position on many issues, even regarding issues we have not experienced ourselves: like war, incest, murder, child-

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