

## Physician Writers: Anton Chekhov

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Pursuing medicine means to a large extent pursuing medical science. A medical career also includes a substantial amount of writing, particularly for those who enter academia. Apart from science, during their professional lifetimes medical people are exposed to thousands of life stories, into which they, by necessity, intrude. Dealing with individual illnesses, and thus patients' bodies, brings doctors uniquely close to other people—even closer than other "listeners" such as lawyers or priests. Naturally, this entire sphere is confidential, but it still makes physicians more informed of the human condition than other groups in society.

There is a particular group of physicians who became literary writers, some of them making a lasting mark, from François Rabelais (1483–1563) to John Keats (1795–1821), Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), Archibald J. Cronin (1896–1981), and Stanislaw Lem (1929–2006), to the contemporary writer Abraham Verghese (1). Some books, such as William Nolen's (1928–1986) *The Making of a Surgeon*, describe the writers' own "medical" journeys, and become an inspiration for younger generations to take up medicine (2, 3).

One of the extraordinary physician writers was Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), who is regarded as a master playwright and a genius of the short story (4).

Chekhov was born in Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia, and studied medicine in Moscow. He practiced medicine mostly in provincial or rural settings. He also produced an extensive report on the living conditions of prisoners on the island of Sakhalin in Siberia after his travel to the area in 1890. Yet, it is clear from his brother Michail's account that writing was his lifetime passion; he started to write short magazine pieces even before he went to university. By the end of his short life he attained widespread fame in Russia.

In his childhood, home stories were an important part of family life, and as an adult most of his time was

spent in the company of writers and artists. One of his brothers, Nikolay, was a painter, and another brother, Mikhail, was also a writer and a journalist. The striking thing about Chekhov, quite evident from his brother's memoirs, was how many real life encounters found their way into his stories (5). He travelled to France, Italy, and Germany, but only for short visits; his life was spent in Russia, and yet his writings have a universal meaning. For example, in the second act of the play *The Seagull*, in which his character talks about those who "must write," the 2 or 3 pages of script contain a wonderful summary of what creative drive is. It would easily apply to those whose passion is research (6).

Chekhov had a dry sense of humor and an unerring eye for spotting the ridiculous. His short stories are extraordinary snapshots of human nature. Incidentally, a short story might be a natural literary form for a doctor; after all, physicians spend their professional life making condensed notes.

Chekhov's portrait shown in Fig. 1 was created by Isaac Levitan (1860–1900), a member of the Moscow artistic circle. Levitan, born in Lithuania, studied at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. He met Chekhov through his brother Nikolay and became Anton's close friend.

Around the middle of the 19th century, the Russian painters started to depart from the previous academic style, and toward the end of the century realism became dominant. The artists, including Ilya Repin (1844–1930), Vasily Polenov (1844–1927), and later Valentin Serov (1865–1911) and Levitan, focused on representation of the wide society, including folk and peasant themes. In 1870, the Society of Travelling Exhibitions was established; its members, who took their art to the country and organized exhibitions around Russia, became known as The Wanderers. They took interest in the French painting of the period, and were influenced first by the Barbizon painters and later by the Impressionists. However, there is a particularly Russian, poetic approach superimposed on *plein air* and impressionistic techniques in their landscapes, which also echoes Romanticism and makes the Russian painting of the period unique (9). Levitan created what was called landscape of mood, and his best known works include *Autumn Day at Sokolniki* (1879) and *Eternal Rest* (1894). His palette is brighter than that of

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**Fig. 1. Isaac Levitan.**

Portrait of writer Anton Chekhov, 1886. Oil on paper, 41.8 × 31 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Image courtesy of [www.wikipaintings.org](http://www.wikipaintings.org).

the Barbizon painters, and later impressionistic elements appear. This is evident in the portrait shown here. One sees an interesting combination of high level of detail, vivid palette, and impressionistic touches, so characteristic of his landscapes.

Chekhov highly appreciated Levitan's paintings. He thought his landscapes were superior to the ones he saw in Paris. "Levitan is a king compared to the landscape painters I saw yesterday," he wrote in a letter to his family in 1891 (9).

The lasting legacy of the Russian Realists is that, analogously to the French Impressionists who col-

lectively created our mental image of Paris, they constructed a lasting poetic image of the Russian countryside.

Returning to physician writers, it would be an exaggeration to say that being a doctor adds to every person's writing potential. However, for those who have an inclination to write, such a background might be valuable. Moreover, links between medicine and literature are now explored within the field of medical humanities. This can provide opportunities for the literary oriented.

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