



# Q&A Atul Gawande



Endocrine surgeon Atul Gawande well knows the publishing world, having written numerous articles for *The New Yorker* that resulted in the National Book Award finalist *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* (2002). His latest book, *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* (see review, *LJ* 3/1/07), also takes an essay format but delves into the dicey issues of success and excellence in modern medicine.

## What advice would you give to youngsters contemplating a medical career? How much should humanities be a part of their studies?

Medicine has become so various in its reach and possibilities that there is almost no one for whom it would not provide a good career. There's room for lab types, computer geeks, public health researchers, corporate leaders, people who want to look at x-rays or through microscopes all day, and people who want to be with people all day. Must humanities studies be part of the training for all of them? Yes and no. I've always been doubtful that coursework could make anyone more humane.

But a key part of being a good doctor is stepping outside yourself and seeing things through their eyes. Writing and reading can help students do that.

## What impact have technological changes in libraries had on you?

Our digital library has changed everything about the way we do our work. A colleague was in the operating room [recently] with a patient who had a drug reaction that no one had ever seen with the particular anesthetic used: his jaw clenched in spasm and would not open. The anesthetic stopped his breathing, and yet his mouth could not be opened for a breathing tube to be put in.

While the senior staff scrambled for the best way to manage the situation, the junior surgical resident did a digital library search on the OR computer and pulled up a full-text article with the three known cases of this happening—and the solution.

In a way, the changes in libraries have been sad. There was a time when I lived in the library and knew every one of the librarians by name. Now, with the resources they've put up for us in my hospital, I never see them anymore. But we use what they provide for us constantly, and it saves lives.

## I've had the pleasure of reviewing physician narratives by the likes of Katrina Firlirk and Danielle Ofri that recall your writing. Which writers have impressed you?

You've named some of the best. Others today include Jerome Groopman, Frank Huyler, Sherwin Nuland, and the great

Oliver Sacks. But Lewis Thomas has long been my favorite, especially with his *Lives of a Cell* and *The Youngest Science*. This is a man who sold his blood and wrote poetry to help pay for medical school—and anyone good enough to make money writing poetry has got to be worth reading.

## Has American managed care become "big business"?

Medicine is now too complex not to be "big." Half a century ago, what could we really do? We had a handful of effective medicines and a few simple operations. Today, we have thousands upon thousands of effective treatments with meaningful benefits for almost any illness a human being may develop. No single person knows how to provide more than a fraction of what's available.

As a result, we all have to depend more on the "system" than any one doctor in it. Medicine today is more effective than ever in history but also more impersonal, and that's the loss. We blame American managed care for this, but the concern about the humaneness of medicine is universal. *Better* is therefore about both matters: the struggle of saving lives and of preserving humanity.

## Which area(s) of medical research do you favor to receive more funding?

We have an imbalance in American research. In an effort to save lives, we spend more than \$30 billion a year seeking new scientific discoveries. But we spend almost nothing examining how to use the discoveries we already have more effectively. There is a yawning gap between what we've learned to do for people and what we actually do.

This is a problem of global health impact. And I am convinced that we could save more lives in the next decade through research to improve performance in medicine than through research on stem-cell therapies, cancer vaccines, etc. I tell a lot of stories in this new book—funny stories, scary stories, surprising stories. But the story of why I believe we've gotten our priorities wrong is the important one.—

**James Swanton, Harlem Hosp. Lib., New York**

diagnosed with special needs in this country, a statistic that has created a vast audience for this type of book. The children profiled have diagnoses ranging from autism to selective mutism, from cerebral palsy to schizophrenia; their parents describe the roller-coaster ride of daily living, discuss whether or not to medicate and the issue of public embarrassment, and share both wonderful and horrific school experiences. Their accounts are heartbreakingly sad, unexpectedly funny, and always honest. Parents of special-needs kids often feel isolated and criticized; in these pages, they will find a wise and understanding community. As Brodey writes, these parents know that "[i]f you don't take advantage of life, it may take advantage of you." An original and helpful addition to the parenting shelf; strongly recommended for public libraries.—**Elizabeth Safford, Nevins Memorial Lib., Methuen, MA**

## ★Deen, Paula with Sherry Suib Cohen. *Paula Deen: It Ain't All About the Cookin'.*

S. & S. Apr. 2007. c.288p. photogs. index. ISBN 0-7432-9285-5 [ISBN 978-0-7432-9285-6]. \$25. COOKERY

In this richly emotional culinary memoir, Deen, the author of three best-selling cookbooks, star of a popular Food Network television show, and the owner of the celebrated Lady and Sons restaurant in Savannah, GA, shares her life story. Writing in a warm, comfortable, and occasionally salty style, Deen talks about everything from her decades-long battle with agoraphobia and her troubled first marriage to the hard work that went into building her first business, The Bag Lady, and the professional and personal successes that followed. A few of Deen's recipes (almost all new) are sprinkled among her stories, which offer a sample of the distinctively Southern cooking that is the foundation of Deen's life and career. This wonderfully nourishing book will have readers laughing, crying, and hungry for more. Highly recommended for all public libraries, especially those where other culinary memoirs such as Pat Conroy's *The Pat Conroy Cookbook* and Ruth Reichl's *Tender at the Bone* are popular. [See Prepub Alert, *LJ* 12/06.]—**John Charles, Scottsdale P.L., AZ**

## ★Heim, Susan. *It's Twins!: Parent-to-Parent Advice from Infancy Through Adolescence.*

Hampton Roads. Mar. 2007. c.320p. photogs. ISBN 1-57174-531-9 [ISBN 978-1-57174-531-6]. pap. \$17.95. CHILD REARING

Writing in a humorous, take-no-prisoners style, mother-of-twins Heim (coauthor, *Oh, Baby!: 7 Ways a Baby Will Change Your Life the First Year*) arranges her book into four sections: "Babies, Toddlers and Pre-

