

Doctor of Letters

Author and surgeon Atul Gawande gives medical writing a shot in the arm.

Photograph by JESSE BURKE

At Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, it typically takes 45 minutes to turn over an operating room between surgeries. While the room is being cleaned and prepped, a surgeon might grab a bite, return calls or otherwise decompress before plunging into the next appendectomy or cholecystectomy. If the surgeon is Atul Gawande, however, the downtime might involve hammering out a paragraph of his latest 10,000-word essay for *The New Yorker*. "I can get a lot done in 45 minutes," says the physician and author, sitting in his tidy office on the hospital's third floor. "I store everything I write on the hospital's network drive, so I can sit right in the operating room and pull up what I've been working on."

As anyone who's watched an episode of *Scrubs* knows, surgeons have a reputation as the frat boys of the medical establishment—the swaggering jocks who have sharper skills with scalpels than with people. But the tall, bespectacled Gawande, whose 2002 collection of essays, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, has a direct gaze and a quiet, curious manner. In his position at one of the top hospitals in the country, he excises endocrine tumors, repairs hernias, stitches up colons and teaches residents to do the same. In addition, Gawande, 41, who won a "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation last year, regularly contributes essays to *The New England Journal of Medicine* and holds a staff writer position at *The New Yorker*.

"I'm not just trying to explain what's in the textbooks," says Gawande. "People want to know 'Why is this happening, and why are doctors doing it this way?'" His new book, *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* (Metropolitan Books), to be published in April, explores doctors' best intentions and the sometimes triumphant, sometimes disappointing results. In one chapter, Gawande debates the ethics of assisting lethal injections during capital punishment; in another, he explains how obstetrics has changed from a craft, relying on artisanal skills, to a business, relying on C-sections. He ends *Better* with suggestions for how doctors can improve performance and avoid being "another white-coated cog in the machine."

The exhortative tone may surprise his fans, but Gawande has always been interested in the larger picture. The son of two doctors from India, he grew up in Athens, Ohio, and majored in biology and political science at Stanford University. "As the Asian kid of two doctors, medicine was the default for me," he says with a laugh. "But I was always interested in policy and politics." He studied politics and philosophy at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar and worked for Tennessee congressman Jim Cooper before heading off to Harvard Medical School. During his second year, he took time off to join Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign. He worked in the White House for a year as one of the president's senior advisers on health care before returning to finish his degree.



Atul Gawande at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital

During the second year of his surgical residency, he began writing a medical column for *Slate*. "I got a C in writing at Stanford," Gawande says. "But writing was the lone way I could stay connected with public affairs." The following year he published his first *New Yorker* piece, which discussed a diagnostic mistake he had made—taboo territory for a physician—that led to unnecessary surgery. "I was stunned that we were going to be talking about this in public," says Michael Zinner, the chief of surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital. But he soon gave it his blessing. "Here was this young man telling his personal stories in a way that no one had done before."

"Atul is almost frighteningly talented," adds *New Yorker* editor David Remnick. "And I don't measure his writing on the curve, as if he gets extra points for writing well *and* saving lives."

Gawande, who is married and has three children, ages 11, 10 and eight, plans to use the MacArthur grant to take a few months away from clinical work to write. That said, he has hardly disappeared into an ivory tower. He recently devised an innovative system of evaluating surgical success, which rates patients' post-op condition on a scale of one to 10, and he is the head of a major new World Health Organization initiative to make surgery safer around the globe. Gawande's work has even made a contribution to prime-time TV. *Grey's Anatomy* was partly inspired by *Complications* (which was the show's original title). "Ellen Pompeo told *Good Morning America* that the book was required reading for all the actors," he says, clearly tickled. "I was mostly flattered, though part of me thought, Hey, shouldn't we have cut a deal?" —CATHERINE HONG

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