

BOOK REVIEW

Growing Into Medicine: The Life and Loves of a Psychosexual Doctor

Ruth Skrine. Hove, UK: Book Guild Publishing, 2014. ISBN-13: 978-1-909-71677-3. Price: £10.99. Pages: 304 (paperback)

Ruth Skrine, a retired specialist in family planning and psychosexual medicine, is well known to many people working in the sexual and reproductive health field. Her work with the Institute of Psychosexual Medicine (IPM), her publications and training have influenced and improved how health professionals understand sexual wellbeing and dysfunction, enabling them to work *with* patients, not *for* patients.

This book is a memoir of her life; an enormously honest account of how her personal and professional life intertwine. Early beginnings, life dilemmas, her personal struggle for independence of thought and an adequate philosophy, and her continual questioning of her personal worth, thoughts and actions, thread through the book, shaping her as a person and as a doctor.

Ruth was born at the end of the 1920s. Her father, a general practitioner, was kind and gentle and came from solid Quaker stock. Her mother, quick-tempered and a strident atheist, became an eye specialist due to her “dislike of messiness that is an integral part of

looking after bodies”. Her mother’s strong and unwavering beliefs influenced Ruth throughout her life, but having some time in psychoanalysis enabled her to “appreciate, understand and feel nothing but love for my difficult mother”. Although born into a medical family, Ruth did not feel her capabilities were good enough to be a doctor; instead she wanted to be a nurse, and “make people comfortable, provide sympathy and not run the risk of misdiagnosing a life-threatening emergency”. Her mother had other ideas, however, and Ruth became a doctor – a decision she never regretted – working first in general practice and then specialising in family planning and psychosexual medicine.

Ruth’s memoir takes the reader through her early life, her medical training, her work in medical practice, and to her marriage to Ralph and the long-awaited birth of her daughter, Helen. A book she chanced upon in a London bookshop written by Dr Michael Balint opened up the view that medicine should be caring for the body *and* the mind, and that the role of the doctor can negatively or positively influence a consultation. This seed of thought was to greatly influence the rest of Ruth’s career. Her family planning work with women wanting to use contraception involved talking with women, and listening to their views and experiences. It was during these consultations that patients often revealed sexual difficulties – a subject that was never discussed during her medical training – and

Ruth recognised the need to understand more. She was actively involved in training and with the early beginnings of the National Association of Family Planning Doctors (now the Faculty of Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare) and she became Joint Editor of the newsletter that became *The British Journal of Family Planning* (now this Journal). Perhaps what we know most about Ruth Skrine is her work in psychosexual medicine, which is fully discussed in the chapter on ‘Body/Mind Doctoring’. Her early learning with Michael Balint and later with Tom Main, the IPM’s founder, coincided with the new discipline of sexual therapy based on the work of Masters and Johnson in the USA in the 1970s. Ruth was Chair of the IPM for 3 years and her work and publications are still used today.

The book concludes with a description of Ruth’s life after retirement, when her own psychoanalysis provided her with powerful insights into her life and self-worth, and about living, loving and growing older. This is a book that is well worth a read.

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