

# Book Review

## **The Mailbox**

*By Audrey Shafer, M.D.*

Audrey Shafer, M.D., is Associate Professor of Anesthesia, Stanford University School of Medicine, and staff anesthesiologist at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System. She directs the Arts, Humanities and Medicine Program based at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics and co-directs the Biomedical Ethics and Medical Humanities Scholarly Concentration. She teaches creative writing for medical students and is the author of *Sleep Talker: Poems by a Doctor/Mother* (2001). Her children's novel, *The Mailbox*, about post-traumatic stress disorder and Vietnam veterans was published recently by Random House.

## **From the Editor**

I encourage you to read Dr. Shafer's first novel. Although proposed as a teen novel, *The Mailbox* is a book for *all* ages as it cleverly evokes powerful emotions of connectedness and caring so essential to the survival of the human race. The author intricately and colorfully interweaves a mysterious story of an orphan, unsuccessfully seeking to know more of his own traumatic past, who is adopted by an eccentric uncle with a purposely secretive past. Concomitantly, she inserts a subliminal spectrum of social, psychological, political and ethical commentary worthy of our deliberation. The troubled lives into which we are suspensefully enveloped occur within a milieu of sensitivity and caring that leaves one with a powerful feeling of how even the most challenging of lives can be fulfilled through a faith in the good that emanates from human ties and associations.

## **What Prompted Dr. Shafer to Write *The Mailbox***

I work at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System as an attending anesthesiologist. In late 2002 and early 2003, during the build-up to the Iraq War, I felt I became a witness for my patients. The veterans were anxious, as was the country at large, about the impending war. In the short period of time that I have to meet and talk with patients prior to entry into the operating rooms, I found that my patients not only wanted, but needed to speak about their own war experiences and to express their empathy for the soon-to-be-deployed soldiers. Just before induction of anesthesia may not be the best time to talk about a buddy dying on the field in a war decades ago, but that is what patients did. I was profoundly moved by this experience. I was honored to be entrusted with listening to my patients' stories and concerns, and I came to understand on a deeper level that the trauma of war experiences affects people in various ways for the rest of their lives.

## Book Review (cont'd)

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This was the impetus for writing *The Mailbox*. I knew a main character would be a Vietnam veteran, one who struggled with memories of his war experiences. I wrote the story for myself, as a way to process my experience. I would read the manuscript each night that I wrote something to my daughter, Rebecca, who was in sixth grade at the time. The protagonist, Gabe, is a sixth grader, and Rebecca was my resident expert on how kids talk and think. She was also excellent at editing, and I told her that if the story was ever published, I would dedicate it to her. She is now in tenth grade, and I am thrilled that I could indeed fulfill this wish. I begin the “Acknowledgments” with “I would like to thank the veterans whose sacrifices, empathy and trust inspired this book.” Although I did not use any specific episodes that my patients related, I hope that their spirit and grace live in the book.

### Inside Book Jacket

Vernon Culligan had been dead to the town of Draydon, Virginia, so long that when the crusty Vietnam vet finally died, only one person noticed. Twelve-year-old Gabe grew up in the foster care system until a social worker located his Uncle Vernon two years before. When he comes home to discover that his uncle has died of a heart attack, he's terrified of going back into the system—so he tells no one. The next day, he discovers a strange note in his mailbox: I HAVE A SECRET. DO NOT BE AFRAID. And his uncle's body is gone.

Thus begins a unique correspondence destined to save the two people that depended on Vernon for everything. Through flashbacks, we learn about Gabe and Vernon's relationship, and how finding each other saved them both from lives of suffering. But eventually, Vernon's death will be discovered, and how will Gabe and the mystery note writer learn to move forward? *The Mailbox* is not a story about death—though it begins with a death. It's also not a story about Vietnam vets, although the author works with Vietnam veterans and wrote this novel, in part, to illuminate their sacrifices and suffering. *The Mailbox* is a story about connections—about how two people in need can save each other.

—*Delacorte Press Random House*