



Mary Roberts Rinehart used her nursing knowledge in the writing of nearly 70 best-sellers.

The Image of Nurses in Novels

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An analysis of how the image of the nurse in the media has fared over the decades facilitates an awareness of the importance of the nurse's role in our evolving health care system. It also reveals a great deal about the nurse's changing status. Looking at how the nurse is portrayed in novels reveals values about the profession that operate in society at a subliminal level.

The popular image of nursing is the result of a cluster of nurse stereotypes the public has and uses to construct a symbolic reality for themselves. These stereo-

types are based on things people "know" regardless of the ultimate validity or inaccuracy of their "knowledge." This knowledge is taken for granted until—or unless—it is confronted directly by new information.

In this aspect of our study of the image of the nurse, 207 novels were analyzed. As was true of the nurses on television and in motion pictures, nurses in novels were almost always female (99 percent), single (71 percent), childless (92 percent), under 35 years of age (69 percent), and white (97 percent).*

Nurses have almost always been depicted in novels as women, and this has led to an emphasis on the traditional female biological roles in relation to nursing: wife, mistress, mother. As a result, nurse stereotypes usually fall into three general categories: the nurse as man's

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*This study of the image of the nurse in novels is a part of an overall study of the image of the nurse in all forms of mass media. The novels were analyzed for content by trained coders. For the strand of the study, intrarater reliability was 87.1 percent and interrater reliability was 88.3 percent.

companion, the nurse as man's destroyer, and the nurse as man's mother or the mother of his children. Very frequently the "man" in these novels is a physician. Over and over again the characteristic image of the nurse in novels has been one of a young woman looking for romance and adventure who is carrying out the often unpleasant but essential job of supporting the magnificent work of physicians.

When nurses in novels were compared with physicians in terms of personality attributes, it was found that nurses scored higher only on obedience and kindness. Physicians were more confident, sophisticated, ambitious, intelligent, aggressive, and rational. Nurses and physicians were equally altruistic, sincere, warm, sympathetic, and nurturant. Physicians were also portrayed to value achievement, power, science, intellect, and scholarship more than nurses. Thus, physicians have maintained a stronghold on the traditionally masculine traits while also exhibiting the nurturant and caring qualities that typify the nursing role.

The Nineteenth Century Image

Until the mid- to late-nineteenth century, a large proportion of the American and British nursing force was made up of untrained lower class, often alcoholic women. Little concern was given to the abysmal conditions in nursing until Charles Dickens's novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), with nurse characters Sairy Gamp and Betsy Prig. Both women were sadly representative of the standard of nursing that was then available. Ms. Gamp was a private duty nurse who could usually be recognized by the smell of spirits that she gave off.

Once Florence Nightingale brought respectability to the nursing profession, a new portrayal of the nurse began to appear. Breeding and social class, rather than education, were attributed to these heroines' success in nursing. Often their tenure in the profession, however, was only temporary. An example is *Marcella* (1894) by Ms. Humphrey Ward, which relates the story of a well-bred young woman with vague dreams of working for social justice. For Marcella, nursing is a form of sackcloth and ashes that will help her "grow a soul" and prepare her for future good works as a rich benefactor to the poor.

A majority of late nineteenth century authors contrasted the newer "trained nurse" with the discredited and older familiar "Sairy Gamp" type of nurse. For example, in *St. Bernard's: the Romance of a Medical Student* (1887) by Edward Bersoe, the refined and sensitive nurse heroine, Agnes, differs markedly from Ms. Podger, the other nurse in the novel. Ms. Podger, thoroughly ignorant and weak-willed, does whatever is necessary to safeguard her position at the hospital. The heroine, Agnes, is one of those "gentlewomen who have adopted the noble profession of nursing from the love of God and their neighbor" (1).

In *Hors de Combat or Three Weeks in a Hospital* (1891) by Gertrude and Ethel Southam, Sister Agnes is a marvelously compassionate and efficient nurse. It is the nurses who represent and explain the charity hospital to hero and reader. This novel is particularly important as it stresses the difference between the "born nurse" and

the "trained nurse" who emerged in the post-Nightingale period. One of the novel's physicians explains this distinction:

... it is quite an old-fashioned idea that a nurse, like the poet, must be 'born and not made.' In these enlightened days, one of these born nurses ... would be quite useless in our infirmaries, unless she had undergone a thorough training. (2)

The new professionalism of nursing is clearly evident as the nurses live in comfortable nurses' homes, wear the Nightingale uniform, are treated with respect by the physicians, and make a definite contribution to the physical and mental well-being of their patients.

The sixth best-selling book of 1897, *The Christian* by Hall Caine, introduced a highly controversial character who attempted nurses' training but could not measure up to the profession's high standards. The failure of Glory Quayle as a nurse offered a sharp contrast between the nursing standards of Charles Dickens's day and those at the end of the century.

Increasing Respectability: 1900 to 1919

By the turn of the century, the nurse began to appear as a substantial member of the literary world and worthy of treatment by leading authors. Nurse heroines were presented as involved in searching for success and meaning in nursing as well as searching for happiness and fulfillment through love and marriage. The result was often a mixed image as conflict resulted because outstanding work as a nurse calls for competence, intel-



Marcella, a well-bred young woman, chose nursing to help her "grow a soul."

ligence, and determination while love and marriage demanded the traditional "womanly traits"—passivity, dependency, and submissiveness.

Such role conflict is a major theme in Ralph Connor's *The Doctor* (1907). Margaret Robertson becomes a nurse after her widowed father remarries and she is no longer needed to look after her brothers and sisters. From the outset, Margaret is characterized as being a self-sacrificing, chaste, serene, compassionate, and beautiful young woman. When she becomes a nurse, it seems only natural because her personal qualities are closely equated with the role of a good nurse. Margaret ultimately comes to believe, however, that a woman's true place is in the home.

Another example of the nursing versus marriage conflict was dealt with in Israel Zangwill's 1908 novel, *Nurse Marjorie*. The plot revolves around Lady Marjorie, the only daughter of an English duke and duchess, who shocks her parents by entering a school of nursing and showing true dedication to her work. When one of her patients, John Danbury, proposes to Marjorie, she tests the depth of his affection by pretending to be the daughter of a fish peddler. Danbury, a member of the House of Commons, sticks to his determination to marry Marjorie in spite of her alleged social class. Eventually the secret of Marjorie's background unfolds and marriage again triumphs over a nursing career.

A more dedicated nurse whose prestige was enhanced by association with the upper social class is found in the highly acclaimed 1907 novel, *The Fruit of the Tree*, by Edith Wharton. In this novel, an attractive 24-year-old private duty nurse, Justine Brent, comes from a well-to-do New York family. Economic difficulties force her to leave an exclusive convent school and become a nurse. While nursing is hard work for Justine, she does not let it get her down, noting that "it was always the imaginative side of my work that helped me over the ugly details—the pity and beauty that disinfected the physical horror..." (3).

A remarkably early questioning of nursing as merely constituting the lower half of the medical profession was posed by Eleanor H. Abbot in her 1913 novel, *The White Linen Nurse*. The major theme is nursing—why young women decide to become nurses, what effect nurse training has on them, and what it means to be a nurse.

The image of the nurse in novels was given a major boost after 1914 by the emergence of nurse-author Mary Roberts Rinehart, an 1896 graduate from Shadyside Hospital School of Nursing in Pittsburgh, Pa. Her first story appeared in 1903, while her first novel, *The Circular Staircase*, which became an all-time best-seller, was not published until 1908. Thereafter she wrote steadily, averaging more than a book a year, for a total of nearly 70 books by 1958, the year of her death. Some of Rinehart's early short stories were about nurse-detective Hilda Ames whose major characteristics were her courage, intelligence, and ingenuity.

Rinehart's extremely popular *K* (1915) concerns two different nurses—one nurse a scheming, dishonest, and basically unprofessional woman, and the other a conscientious, devoted, and intelligent nurse.

With the outbreak of World War I, nursing's image

in novels further improved. Although skilled nursing activities and knowledge as a basis for practice were downplayed, the projected image of the nurse as an autonomous and intelligent health care provider during this period is one of the best depictions of the profession to appear in fiction. In the book, *In a French Hospital* (1915) by M. Eydoux-Demains, the nurse who receives the major focus of attention is an ethereal figure whose power rests in her ability to create a comforting and supportive environment for soldiers and who is most contributory to the patients' recovery. She is seen as being responsible and autonomous.

A fighting nurse heroine was presented in *The Nurse's Story* (1916) by Adele Bleneau. This World War I novel tells of an heroic American nurse's exciting adventures at the front lines in France.

World War I juvenile novels were directed toward filling America's youth with national pride, heady courage, and a sense of duty to the Allied cause. For example, in *Belinda of the Red Cross* (1916), by Robert W. Hamilton, the heroine believes that her duty lies with the French army, so she enlists in the Red Cross and travels to the front lines. Again, nursing rather than medicine takes most of the credit for patient recovery.

Two Steps Backward: The 1920s and 1930s

In novels written immediately after World War I, nurses declined in importance and were depicted at best as a cure for the emotional scars left by the fighting. In three novels, *Leerie* (1920) by Ruth Sawyer, *Invisible Wounds* (1925) by Frederick Palmer, and *Jenny: The Romance of a Nurse* (1929) by Norma Patterson, the nurse heroines are described as instilling hope and dealing with the wounded soldiers' psyches.

A marked decline in the image of the nurse is characterized by the 1923 novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, by Ernest Hemingway. Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver in love with an English nurse's aide, regards the professional nurses as smug, self-righteous, critical, antisexual, and sadistic.

While *Arrowsmith* (1925) won Sinclair Lewis the Nobel Prize for literature, it failed to make a positive contribution to the image of nursing. Nursing's subservience to physicians is noted when Dr. Arrowsmith chides a student nurse for not standing when he asks her a question.

Mystery stories were popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Mignon G. Eberhart wrote about nurse-detective Sarah Keate, an older and more grouchy nurse than Hilda Ames, the nurse-detective in Rinehart's novels. Not only is Sarah a snoop, she is somewhat less intelligent than Hilda and rarely solves mysteries on her own.

Two of the best-selling Eberhart mysteries, *The Patient in Room 18* (1929) and *From This Dark Stairway* (1931), take place in the hospital where Sarah is the superintendent of a ward. Although Sarah makes decisions about the needs of her patients, she does an equal amount of menial work. In several other novels, Nurse Keate moves out of the hospital and is more autonomous, as in *The Mystery of Hunting's End* (1930).

Representative of the treatment of the nurse in the inspirational novels of the 1930s is the number one best-

seller of 1935, *The Green Light* by Lloyd C. Douglas. Its theme is the conflict between self-interest and the duty owed to the medical profession and patients.

The surgical nurse wishes to clear a surgeon wrongly accused of killing a patient, but on someone's advice, she keeps silent. The surgeon eventually falls in love with and marries the dead patient's daughter, while the long-suffering nurse goes to work in a remotely located experimental laboratory.

Reaching the Pinnacle: The 1940s and 1950s

During World War II, at all levels of society, the American nurse received unreserved backing and favorable regard. Dramatizations of war exploits of nurses, either real or imagined, were a perennial staple. For example, *They Were Expendable* (1942), by W. L. White, was the inspiring saga of a handful of American naval heroes and a group of nurses who waged a hopeless fight during Japan's attack on the Philippines. Because of their bravery in performing their duties in a tunnel in the army hospital under the besieged island fortress of Corregidor, the nurses were thought of as the epitome of female heroism.

After the war, a nurse character was used as an instrument of social reform in one of the first novels to attack the long-neglected issue of racial prejudice. *Quality* (1946) by Cid Ricketts Sumer, describes a young nurse's fight against segregation in rural Mississippi. The heroine, Pinkey, or Patricia Johnson, who passes for white, went to a school of nursing in Boston. Upon returning home, Pinkey refuses to be humbled by the narrow-minded white people and stands up for her rights. Pinkey derives much of her self-respect and authority from her identity as a nurse.

The character of nurse Kitty Fremont in *Exodus* (1958) by Leon Uris is the last highly positive nurse portrayal in a best-selling novel in our study.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the nation's younger generation was being introduced to nursing by the *Sue Barton*, *Penny Marsh*, and *Cherry Ames* series that were particularly noteworthy for their accurate and attractive portrayals of the profession. The *Sue Barton* books were written from 1936 to 1952 by Helen Dore Boylston, who had been a head nurse, instructor of nursing, and a private duty nurse. Over the years, Boylston's heroine, Sue, became a student nurse, a staff nurse, a visiting nurse, a superintendent of nurses, and a public health nurse. Specifics of actual nursing care were included and the novels emphasized such personality traits as self-sacrifice and humanitarianism, which were deemed important for success as a nurse. Although Sue is clearly an adept and responsible nurse, she almost always works under a physician's orders.

The *Penny Marsh* series was written between the late 1930s and early 1960s by Dorothy Deming, who was executive director of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing. During the series, Penny Marsh advances from student nurse to director of nursing. Unlike Boylston, Deming was concerned with the professionalization of nursing. Her nurse heroines take appropriate science courses in high school, choose nationally approved schools of nursing where they can



Sue Barton, Little, Brown and Co.; *Arrowsmith*, Seal Lambert; *A Farewell to Arms*, cover design by Paul Bacon, reprinted with the permission of Charles Scribner's Sons; *Cherry Ames*, Grosset and Dunlap; *Exodus*, Sanford Kossin; *The World According to Garp*, Pocket Books.

Juvenile fiction of the post-World War II era idealized nurses for self-sacrifice and humanitarianism. Recent adult novels, however, portray nurses as cold and controlling.

study for their baccalaureates, and enroll in postgraduate studies.

The *Cherry Ames* series was begun by Helen Wells in 1943 with *Cherry Ames, Student Nurse*. Written initially to inspire young women to take up nursing as a patriotic duty in World War II, the popularity of the series resulted in installments that ran until 1962. The first nine books were written by Helen Wells; then Julie Tatham assumed authorship for seven more. Helen Wells completed the series with nine additional books.

Most of these novels projected a positive image of nursing as an attractive, demanding, and rewarding profession. They have probably been particularly popular, however, because each includes a gripping and often spine-chilling mystery to keep the young reader captivated. *Cherry Ames*, the heroine of all 25 novels, is a young, attractive woman in her early twenties. She is a sympathetic and compassionate nurse, although she can be stern with patients and other nurses if a patient's health is in jeopardy.

Falling Back to the Bottom: The 1960s and 1970s

The association of nursing with sexual promiscuity is recent. Before the 1960s, nurses routinely appeared as chaste young women, involved in mutually satisfying romantic relationships, but not in casual affairs. *The Interns*, a 1960 novel by Richard Frede, deals with the first year of internship of a group of aspiring doctors. Nurses appear on nearly every other page of the novel, usually referred to by their first names. The general impression resulting from the novel is that nurses serve as the physicians' helpers as well as providing a ready form of relief for the interns' sexual tensions.

In similar fashion, *The Bramble Bush* (1958) by Charles Mergendahl, presents a wayward nurse in a small New England town, where old traditions and religious ethics abound. Readers are told that she is essentially a kind, compassionate woman, and this helps her to be an especially good nurse. Her passionate sexual life, however, results in numerous difficulties.

Joseph Heller's 1961 novel, *Catch 22*, which has sold over 6 million copies, describes a group of US fliers stationed on a fictional Italian island toward the end of World War II. A negative image of nursing is contributed by the three nurses who turn up from time to time. Two of the nurses are described by their sexual relationships to characters in the book. The nurses are never involved in any demanding nursing work. They take a goodly number of temperatures, order patients to bed, and on one occasion, a nurse accompanies a physician on his hospital rounds. The nurses' most noticeable activity is to clean the body cast and care for the tubes and catheters of a patient swathed in bandages whom no one can see.

The "nurse as the physician's sexual plaything" tradition continued in novels that appeared throughout the 1970s. For example, Samuel Shem (the pseudonym for a Boston psychiatrist), who wrote *The House of God* (1978), claims that the interns' numerous sexual encounters with the nurses in his novel are based on fact. "A nurse gets off at 11 PM, you're there, and there's a bed. What else do you need?" he asks (4).

On the opposite end of the spectrum of nurses in novels is the aging authoritarian spinster who has become a perennial nurse character of the past two decades. Frequently found as a nursing service administrator, this older, powerful, unmarried, and often emotionally warped nurse recurs in all types of settings. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Ken Kesey draws Nurse Ratched as an obsessive-compulsive creature, intent on order, cleanliness, and power, who treats men as objects.

The 1970s brought nurse Jenny Fields in *The World According to Garp*, a 1978 best-seller by John Irving. Both as a nurse and as a woman, Jenny has little interest in men. When a soldier makes a pass at Jenny in a dark movie theater, she slits his arm from shoulder to wrist with a scalpel, a punishment that she believes "appropriate" for a man with lust in his heart. After all, the narrator argues, she had no intention of killing the man, for as any nurse knows, it is a horizontal, not a vertical, slice that would cause him to bleed to death.

Jenny does love children, however, and uses a dying soldier to impregnate herself. Throughout the novel, Jenny does not bend or compromise, a quality that is not always flattering and, in fact, earns her the label of "drillmaster" from her loving son.

Scores of romantic novels about nurses were churned out during the 1960s and 1970s, as if from an assembly line and following a basic formula for plot, characterization, and theme. Romance novel nurses are portrayed as ultimately submissive women, never, or rarely, daring to question the authority of physicians, even when the physician is wrong. Nursing is generally identified as a technical occupation rather than as a profession, and education and research are deemphasized.

All these nurse stereotypes in novels, as well as on television and in motion pictures, have maintained a basic element of continuity despite far-reaching changes occurring in real-life nursing education, practice, and research. Novelists, especially during the past two decades, have sadly neglected and maligned their nurse characters. Most obvious is the fact that the same rigor, intensity of effort, and originality afforded heroic physician roles has not been given to the development of admirable nurse characters. Contemporary novelists have ignored the nurses' professional motivations and health care perspectives. It is not surprising that the image of the nurse in novels is at an all-time low within social and cultural contexts. If nurses are to receive the same quality of literary portrayal as that of physicians and other professionals, they must become more active as authors and as collaborators with established authors. Such individual and joint literary efforts can do much to improve the fictional portrayal of the world of nurses and nursing.

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