



**In the bookstores:
What malady shall I have today?**

by Karen Shashok

VanderMeer J and Roberts M, editors. The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases. San Francisco, Portland: Night Shade Books, 2003. ISBN 1 892389 54 1 (hardcover). 297 pages, about 25.00 euros (hardcover).

Any book with its own website (www.lambsheadguide.com) and about 745 Google hits more than a year after publication will clearly have attracted the attention of a lot of people. Most of those people, to judge from the many glowing reviews on the net, will have laughed themselves almost to death while reading this eccentric opus about imaginary diseases and their fictitious compiler. For readers who enjoy sophisticated science spoofs, the book is a slick example of this uncommon genre, and has been highly acclaimed in science fiction circles. For those of you who work daily with information about medical conditions, the parade of freak diseases and disorders, described and illustrated as though they were actual chapters from an early 20th century medical textbook, will either go straight to your heart or touch a nerve.

The The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases is funny on several different levels, and the skill in parodying all of them holds delights for readers with an interest in historical elements of layout, typesetting and illustration as well as pathology and medical education. The odd-ball and often gruesome texts, which often deal with bizarrely horrifying symptoms, may not quite be everyone's idea of humour. But readers ready for some ghoulish, gothic medical and literary satire spiked with a generous dose of creative West Coast mind bending will welcome the Guide as the greatest thing since disposable syringes.

The ailments collected here are surreal. Many of them involve mental as well as physical processes, and paranormal phenomena are treated in the same matter-of-fact manner as signs and symptoms that might be considered objectively observable. What contributes to the fun is that it is sometimes hard to figure out where the patient's altered state ends and where the fictitious (Dr Lambshead) author's altered state begins, and where the real authors are peeking out from behind their alias like mischievous kids playing hide-and-seek with grown-ups, revealing their whereabouts on purpose to get caught. Current English usage intrudes frequently on the mock early-twentieth-century academic writing style, leading a number of reviewers to conclude that the Guide is a quintessentially postmodern opus. The authors, however, are probably not in the least concerned which label people with a degree in literary criticism wish to attach to their work.

Several of the diseases are especially interesting for medical writers, editors, translators, and communications experts. For example, Buscard's Murrain (Wormword) involves an unlikely mechanism of pathogenesis for a disorder culminating in "a feverish seeking out of the largest audience possible, and a state of loud, hysterical glosso-lalia". The main symptoms of Download Syndrome are reportedly "constant talking with

the aid of mobile phones and email, near-zero memory retention, dead stare, and blithely confident attitude". The chapter on Logrolling Ephesus will have readers digging into their library to retrieve and savour their copy of John Lennon's A Spaniard in the Works. Menard's Disease (Biblioartifexism) will be sadly familiar to some of us, as its sufferers "present to the public...an actual copy of a well-known literary work as their own accomplishment...by excruciating protocols of self-denial and reenvisionment". (EMWA members are apt to be familiar with the academic or scientific form of the disorder, rather than the literary form.) In Printer's Evil, the addition of inks and other materials to paper during the printing process triggers "rapid zoosporangia proliferation" of the usually harmless slime mould *Papyroplasma ppora infestans*. Mayhem results as the printed words appear to rearrange themselves on the page while the skin of persons who handle the infected book comes to resemble passages of cursive script formed by dark, thread-like rhizoids. Literacy, "involving both perception and comprehension of the written word", is a pre-requisite for infection by the agent that causes The Wuhan Flu (Wangji-Cunzai or Forgetfulness-of-Being).

The section titled "Reminiscences" parodies the *festschrift*, consisting of testimonials by health care professionals whose lives were touched by Dr Lambshead. For bibliophiles, the section titled "Autopsy" is an elaborate publishing history of previous editions of the Guide. (The title page would have us believe we have acquired the 83rd edition, although the copyright page clarifies—in deceptively quaint small caps—that this is indeed the first edition.) Here we are treated to reproductions of the original typescript from 1921 and to the front cover of several earlier editions, each of which is described briefly. There is even a picture of the front cover of "the Argentine Spanish-language edition" titled *La Guía del Bolsillo a Las Enfermedades Metafísicas*, compiled by one Jorge Luis Borges. The additions and deletions to successive editions as diseases came into fashion and were later discredited are recounted in true philological fashion as though the Guide had actually existed on the desks and bookshelves of several generations of GPs the world over.

The "Autopsy" section also contains an assortment of short fiction touching on medical history, substance abuse and biography. Here you can read how the Guide affected the lives of Margaret Mead, Nikola Tesla, Lon Chaney, Jim Morrison, and many others, and how it was involved in key twentieth century phenomena such as the Space Race, the appearance of AIDS and terrorism. Many different contemporary authors contributed to the book, which ends with brief and fanciful biographical sketch of each.

From the List of Contributors to the last page, the book misses no opportunity to parody text and typographical elements of academic writing and publishing that will be familiar to anyone who has consulted medical textbooks and multi-authored compilations. Amazon was offering the US hardback edition at a fair discount at the time of writing, and there was news on the net of a possible paperback edition or a UK edition for this side of the Atlantic. So by the time you read this issue of *TWS* an edition of the Guide for the European market may well be available, which would save you overseas shipping costs for the original hardback edition published in the USA.

Karen Shashok

Translator - Editorial Consultant
Granada, Spain
kshashok@auna.com