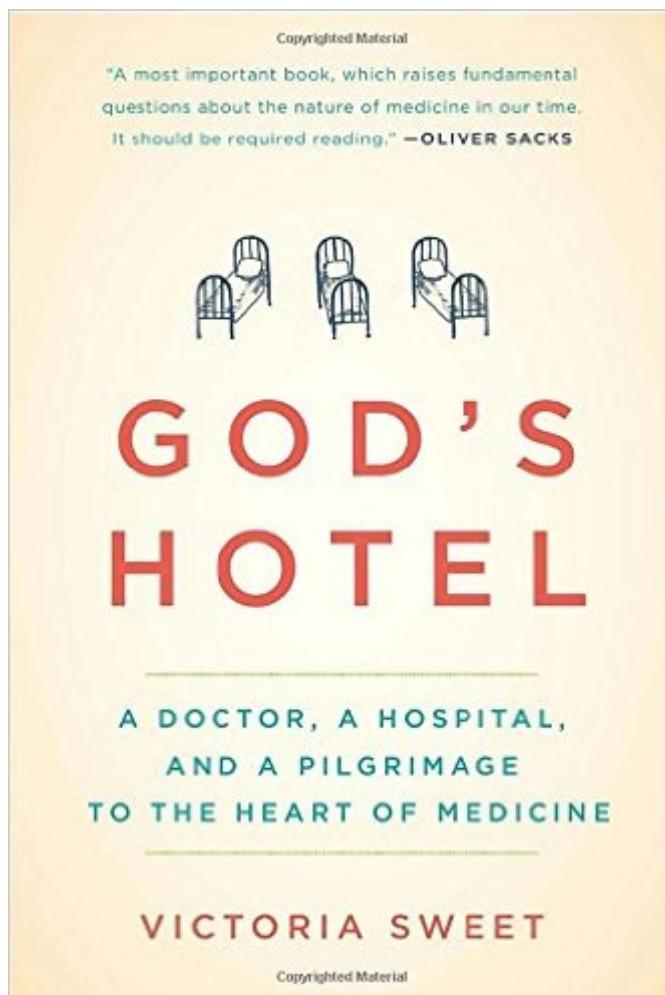


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God's Hotel: A Doctor, A Hospital, And A Pilgrimage To The Heart Of Medicine



Synopsis

For readers of Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*, a medical page-turner that traces one doctor's remarkable journey to the essence of medicine (The San Francisco Chronicle). San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital is the last almshouse in the country, a descendant of the Hôtel-Dieu (God's hotel) that cared for the sick in the Middle Ages. Ballet dancers and rock musicians, professors and thieves "anyone who had fallen, or, often, leapt, onto hard times" and needed extended medical care "ended up here. So did Victoria Sweet, who came for two months and stayed for twenty years." Laguna Honda, relatively low-tech but human-paced, gave Sweet the opportunity to practice a kind of attentive medicine that has almost vanished. Gradually, the place transformed the way she understood her work. Alongside the modern view of the body as a machine to be fixed, her extraordinary patients evoked an older idea, of the body as a garden to be tended. God's Hotel tells their story and the story of the hospital itself, which, as efficiency experts, politicians, and architects descended, determined to turn it into a modern health care facility, revealed its own surprising truths about the essence, cost, and value of caring for the body and the soul.

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Customer Reviews

It almost always annoys me when someone who isn't a professional writer produces a great book, but Victoria Sweet has written the best non-fiction book I've read this year and all I wanted to do when I finished reading it was to meet her and congratulate her and ask her a lot of questions. So I

did. Something happened at the start of that conversation that made me realize why her book dazzled me --- the qualities that make her a great doctor are the same qualities that make her book so powerful, original and relevant. She heard me. She paid attention. She made me her patient. Before I asked my first question, I mentioned a health issue. When she returned to San Francisco, she wrote me: "Now that you've let me know you haven't been feeling well, you need to make sure to let me know that/when you are feeling better and the meds are kicking in. Otherwise, I worry." You want a doctor who has infinite time for you? Who cares --- as a person --- how you fare? Who uses not just the tools of current medicine but learns Latin so she can scour texts a thousand years old to learn the wisdom of pre-modern medicine? For 20 years, to get that kind of doctor, you went to Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco. To an almshouse --- a facility that provides medical and spiritual care to the poorest of the poor. For free. "God's Hotel" --- the term comes from the Hôpital-Dieu, the French charity hospitals of the Middle Ages --- is four books in one.

Dr. Sweet's memoir, like her diagnoses of some of her patients, has multiple independent but interacting parts. In part it is about her work in San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital, a public facility which is a direct intellectual descendent of the medieval almshouse. The second part is her study of the medical writings of Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century German nun (and abbess) better known for her mystical religious writings. The third strain, which appears towards the end of the book, is about how her experiences walking the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage in Spain, changed her thinking. As the descendent of an almshouse, Laguna Honda is now a very rare institution in the United States. Basically it has served (this may change) as a free, public hospital for those with chronic conditions. The emphasis on caring for people who aren't likely to get better distinguishes Laguna Honda from the public county hospital in San Francisco, which is supposed to treat acute conditions, after which if need be the patients will be transferred to Laguna Honda. Although Laguna Honda does have many patients with drug abuse problems and mental illnesses, it is not set up (no locked wards, etc.) to deal with violent or severely mentally ill people. The characterization of Lunga Honda as a hospital for the chronically ill may not hold true in the future. In conjunction with the completion of a new building in the last couple of years, Laguna Honda may become a facility focusing on the mentally ill and homeless, though the new building was not designed with those patients in mind.

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