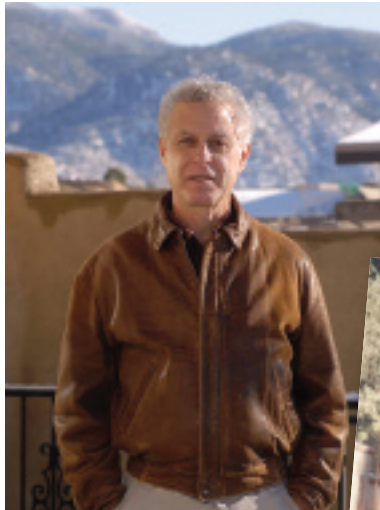


LA CLÍNICA: A DOCTOR'S JOURNEY ACROSS BORDERS

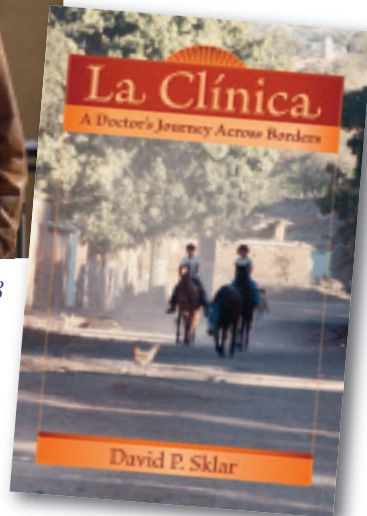
A review by Elizabeth Stevens

How often is it that an experience from our youth shapes who we are, or at least, who we think we are? “The village and the clinic had been my engine all these years, powering me forward with a vision of why my life made sense and a certainty of its basic goodness.” So says Dr. David Sklar '68 in his first book, *La Clínica: A Doctor's Journey Across Borders*.



In his memoir, David Sklar '68 reveals the profound influence a remote Mexican village had on him during two distinctly different periods of his life.

Sklar is referring to the time he spent at a clinic in the Mexican countryside before attending Stanford



Medical School. As a senior in college, he had read an article about a small medical clinic run by an American in a remote Mexican village. He sent a donation and an offer to volunteer. When he received a letter back asking for his help, the 22-year-old Sklar jumped at the opportunity. With virtually no medical training or experience, he set off on a life-altering journey that laid the groundwork for the type of doctor he would become.

In the book's opening chapter, Sklar is at the pinnacle of his career in emergency medicine, but he finds himself “adrift, exhausted, and full of doubt.” He has spent the better part of his adult life working tirelessly to save the lives of a never-ending stream of nameless faces in a hospital in Albuquerque, NM. The violence of society permeates his life every day, and an inadequate system of medicine adds to his frustration. His dedication to work has also jeopardized his most important relationship—his wife has just moved out.

Sklar's distress leads him to analyze what brought him to his current place in life. He reflects about his

time in Mexico and does a wonderful job moving back and forth seamlessly between his world in Albuquerque and the world he remembers. He recounts numerous captivating stories about his time there, including the horror of facing a patient's death and feeling responsible. He also speaks of the satisfaction gleaned from helping others and knowing so well those he treats.

He tells of one experience when, after only one week in Mexico, he is called to a house to help deliver a baby. He has only another young American visitor as an assistant. The birth happens without incident, but Sklar describes his fraudulent feelings. Had he been required to do anything, he could have potentially caused more harm than good.

Particularly intriguing was the unfolding story of the clinic's founder, who was Sklar's mentor. Revered by the villagers and ultimately the medical community for his selfless dedication to the impoverished, the founder's unorthodox ways and sexual interest in young boys cast a dark shadow on his character.

Sklar's book is a beautifully written memoir that does a lovely job of looking at the “grays” in our world, the fine lines between right and wrong. For example, Sklar learns to pull teeth from a teenage worker at the clinic. His newfound skill ends pain and suffering for numerous villagers, yet such unorthodox practices would not be permitted in the United States.

As a means of coping with his professional burnout and personal crisis in Albuquerque, Sklar returns to the Mexican village, and the journey reveals how life changes. He sees the village as a metaphor for his own life. He remembers the river that winds through the village and, “how it resembled a question mark as it meandered between the mountains, and how sometimes a river can change its course.” His realization that change brings new possibilities gives him a new perspective on life.

Sklar's insight, excellent writing, and fascinating stories make for time well spent reading his book. Trained to be a doctor and not a writer, Sklar's first book is evidence, perhaps, of the new promise of change. I highly recommend picking up a copy. ●

Elizabeth Stevens is a member of the Exeter Science Department.

In July 2006, she and her family went to Honduras and spent a year living and working at an orphanage. During last spring's March break, she went back to the orphanage to lead a dozen Exeter students on a community service trip. She plans to take another group to Honduras this March.

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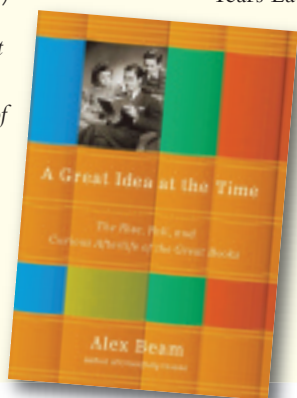
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