Fiction as Resistance

Samuel Shem's Writings

By

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Dedication

For Steve Bergman, aka Samuel Shem, without whom this book would not exist

Contents

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to Stephen Bergman, "Samuel Shem," for reading and commenting on my manuscript before I submitted it for publication. I have not had the pleasure of meeting him in person, but our many email exchanges and telephone conversations have been lively and informative. Although scores of articles have been written about Shem, mine is the first book-length study, but almost certainly, it will not be the last word about one of the most noteworthy psychiatrist-novelists of our time.

Introduction

Art is long and life is short, I remind myself, ruefully, whenever I come across an excellent writer whom I should have known but didn't. Such was my rationalization on learning of the novelist Samuel Shem, the nom de plume or, more accurately, nom de guerre, of the psychiatrist Stephen J. Bergman, born August 6, 1944.

I first learned about Shem when, while completing a book called *Clinical Fictions: Psychoanalytic Novelists and Short Story Writers*, I sent a posting in August 2023 to the listserv of the American Psychoanalytic Association, of which I'm an Honorary Member, asking for the names of novelists I might have missed. I immediately received a reply from Steven Gotlieb, who enthusiastically recommended *The House of God*, Shem's first and best known novel, published in 1978. "He's a psychiatrist but not a psychoanalyst," Dr. Gotlieb wrote. "*The House of God* captures the camaraderie and emotion of young doctors learning to cope with life-and-death decisions and their own limitations. I read it during medical school, and it captured for me in a very vivid way some of the experiences my friends and I were having ourselves at that time."

I was happy to learn about Shem's fiction, but by the time I read his early novels, I was nearly finished with my book, and I worried that I would not have the space to devote a long chapter to his work. I decided to limit my discussion to his second novel, the 1985 murder mystery *Fine*, a comical story about a clueless psychoanalyst who is pursued by a sociopathic murderer. After writing the chapter, I sent Shem an email, as I had done with most of the nearly 30 authors in my study, asking if he would read and comment on my discussion. He must have thought I was a bubble brain because I had referred to his novel as *The House of Religion*. Within a few days he emailed me: "OK, you can send the chapter," giving me his home address in Newton, Massachusetts. Strange, I thought to myself: he was the only author who wanted me to snail mail the chapter to his home. He signed the letter, "Gratitude, Shem." Only later did I discover that he signed all his emails that way as a result of "living through a long rough

spell"—this was before he and his wife, Janet Surrey, spent a "vicious six weeks fighting" COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic. "Whenever I send an e-mail, my eye catches that 'Gratitude! Shem,'" he wrote in a *Boston Globe* article published in 2020. "It makes me recall my suffering, and the release of my suffering" ("All Across the Country"). I did as he requested, and a week later I received a brief letter from him. He didn't comment on my discussion, which I also found strange; instead, he remarked that, four months earlier, he had completed *Our Hospital* (2023), adding that of the novels included in what he called the *Healing Quartet*—*The House of God*, *Mount Misery* (1997), *Man's 4th Best Hospital* (2019), and *Our Hospital*—his "best novel" was a prequel, *The Spirit of the Place* (2008). "Thanks for doing this," he wrote, this time signing the letter, "Steve."

I always feel bereft completing a book—postartum depression—and after finishing *Clinical Fictions*, I read Shem's other novels. I realized, then, that I wanted to continue writing about him. Writing this book has been a labor of love. Why else would an octogenarian—I am five months younger than Shem—wish to devote so much precious time to a writer if he did not admire his work?

A Biographical Sketch and Brief Overview of Shem's Writings

We know much about Shem's life as a result of his many interviews and nonfictional essays. He is a highly autobiographical novelist; like many writers, everything becomes grist for the mill. Born in Hudson, New York, a small town 130 miles north of Manhattan, he attended Hudson High School. He was valedictorian of his class and New York State American Legion Oratorical champion. His father, Sigmund Bergman (1914-1993), was a dentist, the son of immigrants, and his mother, Rose Fuchs Bergman (1913-2007), volunteered in the Hudson Area Library, which she helped found in 1959. As he notes in the 2010 Afterword to *The House of God*, his father was denied admission to a New York City medical school because of the "Jewish quota"; consequently, he pushed his son "to live out his dream." In high school Shem spent much time with the town's doctor, a "roly-poly Buddha who seemed able to send warmth through your body just by putting his hand on your shoulder" (373). Shem writes about him in

The Spirit of the Place, when a young doctor, Orville Rose, the novelist's alter ego, returns home to be mentored by his beloved former physician and now colleague.

Shem loved to read when he was young. "I was a writer before I was a doctor," he remarks. "From an early age, I was concerned with suffering and understanding, and I often turned to stories, for solace" (Afterword, 372). As a teenager, he worked on the graveyard shift as a toll collector on the Rip Van Winkle Bridge over the Hudson River so that he could read fiction. The same detail appears in several of his novels, one of the many similarities linking the novelist to his protagonists. Shem spent two summers reading the great Russian writers, "caught in the spell of their great themes—love and death," the same subjects that appear in his own novels.

Shem attended Harvard College, earning membership to Phi Beta Kappa and graduating magna cum laude. He struggled, however, in his freshman writing course. According to the account offered in *The Harvard Crimson*, "That whole first semester of my freshman writing class the teacher, Ms. Heller, did not put a letter grade but wrote on the bottom 'See me.' When I went to see her, she looked at me and said this paper is too terrible to mark, 'Below F,' Bergman said. "She destroyed any idea in my mind that I could fulfill my dream to become a writer" (Wilson). A revision, he admitted to Craig Lambert in a 2024 interview in *Harvard Magazine*, elicited the teacher's comment, "Terrific! D-." In "Five Laws of the Novelist" published in the *Boston Globe* in 2009, Shem disclosed that he was on the golf team with a "blond Adonis," Ray, who kept receiving a straight A from the same graduate student. "Ray was a great golfer, but he could barely talk, much less write. 'What, you an A'? 'Yeah. I've been sleeping with her all year.'" Shem used this rich material in *Man's 4th Best Hospital* when a former Marine, Nolan O'Brian, who had served in Vietnam, threatened to use his gun at a US Army recruiting booth. O'Brian's community college writing instructor, Miss Heller, had graded his story about his war experience "below F" and demanded to see him, judging his writing as melodramatic and overblown. Nolan O'Brian's grades gradually improved to "A." "I finally figured out her subtext," he tells the novel's narrator, Roy Basch; "her 'See me' meant 'See *all* of me, naked'" (223).

In college, Shem excelled at athletics, especially golf, which he continued after graduation. In a 2009 *Boston Globe* essay, "Golfing with Updike," he writes about the many times he played with the famous novelist, whom he had met in 1979 at a writer's party. "Often he would repeat something I said, and I knew I would soon see it in a book." Shem wrote his senior thesis on the biological basis of learning and memory, a subject that fascinated him. Throughout his four years in college, Shem was a member of the Harvard Glee Club, singing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at Boston's Symphony Hall and at Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, located in western Massachusetts. Music figures prominently in Shem's novels. "When I write," he confided to Jeremy S. Faust in an article published in *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, "I hear the writing. There's kind of a musical thing going on. The sense of a sentence and dialogue, the rhythm. But as you get toward a crucial part of a novel, it's about chords being struck. Especially for an ending. This chord has to come here, and this one has to come there" (15A). As described by the literary critic Dennis Donoghue, the auditory imagination involves a "feeling for syllable and rhythm, a sense of the primitive and its relation to the highly developed, an ear for the echoes behind words" (103). The auditory imagination usually describes poets, but it also applies to fiction writers, including Shem, whose prose style captures, at its best, what Robert Frost called the "sound of sense." The pseudonym "Samuel Shem" evokes an alliterative musicality that must have given him pleasure.

After college, Shem was accepted at Harvard Medical School, but he rejected the offer upon receiving a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship to study for three years at Balliol College, Oxford University, in 1966, eventually earning a D.Phil. (PhD) in physiology. (Two other famous future physician-writers who were Rhodes scholars are Atul Gawande and Siddartha Mukherjee.) His research involved, as he wryly notes in a 2003 essay published in *The Lancet*, a continuation of his college research on memory and learning, "coaxing cockroaches to lift their legs" (536)—research he later satirized in *Fine*. Yet his heart was in writing fiction, not in science. When, filled with trepidation, he told his thesis supervisor, the British cardiac physiologist Denis Noble, about his decision to give up science to become a novelist, he was greeted with the genial words, "Well then, Bergman, have a sherry" (Afterword, 373). Shem still remains in touch with

Noble, talking often through Zoom. Shem's passion for fiction, however, needed to be deferred because of the Vietnam War. He was faced with a no-brainer: Harvard Medical School or being drafted.

Each summer during medical school, Shem returned to Europe "under the pretense of finishing my PhD." One summer he traveled to Dublin to work at the National Maternity Hospital, the setting of three chapters in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. With several Irish students, he would get drunk each night at a local pub. Though he never states explicitly that he was an alcoholic, he implies this in a 2017 essay, "Conversations, Events & Book Talk." During his Rhodes Scholarship, he became depressed, largely over the breakup of his relationship with Surrey, whom he had begun dating in college (she was an undergraduate at Tufts). While drinking the night before and then again in the morning, and wearing only a bathing suit, he gunned a powerful BMW motorcycle down a hill, driving between cars going both ways, hitting the bottom of a hill at 100 miles per hour. "Insanity," he later said. Was this a disguised suicide attempt? Several of his fictional characters unexpectedly take their own lives, an event that has a shattering impact on their colleagues. The "motorcycle" incident was one of the low points in Shem's existence. "I felt desperately alone, and kept thinking that I'd really made a dumb choice to leave her. What I didn't realize was that my suffering demanded I change, and grow." He did—both. Had he not learned from his harrowing cautionary tale, he speculates, he would now be a "divorced, alcoholic neurosurgeon with tenure and a full practice at Harvard Med."

From this experience, Shem learned about Alcoholics Anonymous, realizing that he had a problem. "That was 26 years, 9 months, 17 days ago," a detail that adds authenticity to his account. (When asked by Franz Wiesbauer in a 2017 interview what advice he would give to his 30-year-old self, Shem replied, "Don't drink so much.") One of Shem's signature themes is that "psychiatrists specialize in their defects" (*Fine*, 85), suggesting that his decision to specialize in patients suffering from addictions came from his own personal struggles. More ominously, in *Man's 4th Best Hospital* Shem observes that "Doctors die of their specialty" (284).

Shem also learned about Alcoholics Anonymous from Janet Surrey, who was sending her patients to a Gloucester, Massachusetts AA meeting. Regularly attending AA meetings was life-changing for him. As Lambert reported, Shem exulted, "Everybody got better!" After attending one eye-opening AA meeting, Shem saw his consumption of alcohol in a new light: "Maybe *I'm* an alcoholic," recalling that at Oxford nearly everyone drank heavily, including himself. Inspired by visiting AA, Shem coauthored, with Janet Surrey, *Bill W. and Dr. Bob* (1990), which focuses on the creators of Alcoholics Anonymous. Shem and Surrey researched the play by reading source material and by interviewing living friends of Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, including Smith's daughter.

After receiving his undergraduate degree in social relations from Harvard College in 1966, his doctoral degree from Oxford University in 1971, and his medical degree from Harvard in 1973, Shem worked for more than three decades at Harvard Medical School while serving as attending psychiatrist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. He was also affiliated with the Stone Center at Wellesley College.

Shem was attracted to psychiatry for many reasons, as he recalls in "Psychiatry and Literature: A Relational Perspective" (1991):

> I remember when I decided to become a psychiatrist. I had already determined that I was a writer, and although I had liked all my medical-school clinical rotations, it was only in my fourth year, when I did psychiatry, that I realized I had found my field. First of all, I could use all the skills I had already developed as a writer—listening, forming stories, understanding character; second, I would hear incredible stories and meet incredible people; third, I could schedule my day to have mornings free to write. Two decades later, I can report that psychiatry has not disappointed me. (55)

Best known for his fiction, Shem is also a playwright. Two of his early plays, *Napoleon's Dinner* and *Room for One Woman*, were published in *The Best Short Plays* anthologies and then published together by Samuel French in 1981. (Shem's Oxford supervisor, Denis Noble, must have been startled when he read *Napoleon's Dinner*, which contains an Oxford professor

named Denis whose long-estranged father, Sammy, returns unexpectedly and embarrasses him.)

While writing *The House of God*, the novelist chose a pen name with a double significance. In the Jewish Bible, "Shem," which means *name* or *fame* in Hebrew, was the first-born son of Noah. But the novelist also had in mind James Joyce's final novel, *Finnegans Wake*, in which "Shem the Penman" is one of the twin sons of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, HCE. (Bergman sometimes calls himself "Shem the Penman.") Another source of the pen name, he stated in "Basch Unbound" (2019), was the seventeenth-century mystic Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name"), who transformed Judaism into a radically egalitarian practice. "His democratic impulse was one I relate to." And in *Man's 4th Best Hospital*, the novelist spells *Baruch Hashem*, Hebrew for "Blessed be God," as *Baruch Ha Shem* (92), in effect, blessing his own pseudonym. Shem chose the pen name, he told Faust, at the beginning of his psychiatric practice, when *The House of God* was being published, mainly to hide his identity as a novelist from his patients, but he soon came to believe that it was a "big mistake," partly because his patients discovered he was a novelist. Now, however, he embraces the name and usually drops "Samuel," simply calling himself "Shem."

Shem revised *The House of God* seven times for publication. He has never elaborated, specifically, on the nature of these changes apart from saying that his editor toned down some of his "far-out versions": "You are at your best writing one-step off real" ("Basch Unbound"). Others have seen a connection between *The House of God* and *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Catch-22*, but he was not consciously influenced by these iconic novels. Rather, it was the Russian writers, Tolstoy and Chekhov, who influenced him.

Shem never realized while writing *The House of God* that he needed to disguise his fictional characters, most of whom were based on the people he encountered during his internship. In "How to Stay Human in Medicine: from *The House of God* to *Man's 4th Best Hospital*," available on *YouTube*, he admits, with a smile on his face, that prior to the novel's publication, his publisher summoned him to meet in New York with a lawyer. "Are there any characters in the book who resemble real people?" Shem's heart sank. Several of his characters were easily identifiable, including the chief of

medicine, a kidney specialist who walked down the hall singing "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true." The publisher asked, "Does he have a big red birthmark on his cheek?" "Now he does," Shem replied, "a non-liable" birthmark that belongs to the "fictional" Dr. Leggo.

The British medical journal *The Lancet* hailed *The House of God* as one of the two most important American medical novels of the twentieth century (the other was Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*). *The House of God* is a raunchy and irreverent story of several interns at the most renowned teaching hospital in the country, Harvard Medical School's Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, subsequently renamed Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, where Shem trained in 1973-1974. Shem's first choice for an internship was Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), nicknamed "Man's Greatest Hospital" in his fiction, but he was unexpectedly rejected. Years later, he discovered why MGH turned him down. The internship interviews he had done with several doctors torpedoed his chances. "You said, 'I am writing plays,'" one MGH physician explained. "When you started talking about writing plays, you lit up! We thought, 'He's not going to stay here'" (Lambert).

The House of God has sold more than three million copies and been translated into thirty languages; it was the inspiration behind the 1980s television series "St. Elsewhere." *The House of God* "does for medical training what *Catch-22* did for the military life," John Updike enthused in the introduction to the 2010 edition—"displays it as farce, a melee of blunderers laboring to murky purpose under corrupt and platitudinous superiors" (xv). *The House of God* could not have been written decades later, Updike concedes: "its lavish use of freewheeling, multiethnic caricature would be inhibited by the current terms 'racist,' 'sexist,' and 'ageist'" (xvii). Celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the novel's publication, *Return to The House of God* (2008), edited by Martin Kohn and Carol Donley, explores its wide impact on medical education and the medical humanities. The volume includes essays and creative stories by many eminent physician-and-nurse writers, highlighting Shem's contributions to medical training. The volume's opening essay, Denis Noble's "The Birth of *The House of God*," contains fascinating biographical information, including how Bergman brought Noble a bottle of wine as a "peace offering" before telling him that

he was giving up a career in science to become a novelist. Another intriguing detail: before returning to the United State from an Oxford visit, Bergman's mother told her son, "Remember, I want that degree!" (4), words that Orville Rose's mother expresses to him in *The Spirit of the Place* (39).

Physicians of Shem's generation have authenticated the medical accuracy of *The House of God*. In a 2016 survey of the ten best satires, Michael Honig ranked *The House of God* second, just below Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and above *Catch-22*. "As a medical student, I was given this book by a well-meaning (or possibly satanically mischievous) relative who happened to be a nurse. My God! It was like being brought to the wall of fire that is TRUTH and having one's eyes held open by a pair of red hot toothpicks." Scores of physicians have made similar comments, testifying to the novel's power and truthfulness.

The House of God continues to generate fierce controversy. A film based on the novel was never shown in theaters or released on VHS/DVD, though it appeared on HBO. Shot in 1981 by United Artists, it starred Charles Haid as the Fat Man, Tim Matheson as Roy, and included as a supporting cast Bess Armstrong, Michael Richards ("Kramer" from *Seinfeld*), Gilbert Gottfried, James Cromwell, Howard Rollins, and Ossie Davis. Why wasn't the film released? David Lawlor, who saw the film, offers several reasons but admits they are speculations: producers claimed it was unwatchable, which Lawlor said was untrue; Harvard Medical threatened to sue; the film horrified the medical community; and United Artists didn't have the money to release the film, the explanation that strikes Lawlor as the most plausible. Shem detested the film. "Hollywood not only came calling, they came screaming," he told interviewer Nina L. Diamond. "The film was made by United Artists, but it was the worst movie in the world and never released. It had the same name as my book, but that's all."

Physicians still debate the iconoclastic "Laws of the House of God," abounding in transgressive insights. Some female readers have assailed the novel's depiction of sexuality and its portrayal of nurses. It's difficult to discern at times Shem's attitude toward Roy. To what extent does the novelist share his narrator's blind spots at the end of the novel? In their

essay on the use of body knowledge in *The House of God*, Clark, Jain, and Coppock refer to the novel as Shem's "pseudo-autobiography" (*Return*, 140), a word that raises the vexing question of the similarities and differences between the novelist's and narrator's perceptions and value judgments. Narrative distance is often tricky in Bildungsromans, especially in those involving first-person narrators. Moreover, it is easy to misread *The House of God* because of its use of exaggeration and distortion for satirical effect; sometimes the novel seems to approve of that which the satirist calls into question.

Shem complained that *The House of God* had the "worst publishing history of any book ever published." The book was not reviewed in the *New York Times* because the newspaper was on strike, and hardcover copies were destroyed by a flood in a New Jersey warehouse. Yet it is also true, as Howard Markel reports in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2008, marking *The House of God*'s thirtieth anniversary, that the publisher was so confident of its literary merit that he distributed 10,000 copies to bookstores and book reviewers, free of charge, when their supplies were exhausted, and then another 25,000 gratis copies. The book survived, first by becoming a cult novel in the medical community, and then, belatedly, through word of mouth, achieving the status of an underground classic.

One cannot exaggerate the notoriety surrounding the publication of *The House of God* in the medical community. Although it did not generate the furious literary storm of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, published nine years earlier, it had much in common with it in its graphic eroticism. The younger generation of physicians loved it; the older generation loathed it. Shem seemed to bask in his infamy, recalling in the novel's Afterword that years afterward, when he attended a potluck summer for his daughter Katie's class, he saw two women talking, both physicians at the hospital in which he had interned. "You know," he said, "I may not be the most favorite person at the Beth Israel," to which one of the women replied, venomously, "Well, you can't be as bad as that guy that wrote that book!" Pausing at "this delicious moment," he responded: "I *am* the guy that wrote that book" (370). She turned beet red, Shem informs us, adding that it was the last play date his daughter had with the physician's daughter. On the one hand, Shem reveled in the moment, enjoying being a cause célèbre; he

set up the situation with the two Beth Israel physicians, perhaps hoping that it would catalyze new material for a book—as it did. On the other hand, it must have been painful if only because it involved his daughter, of whom he has always been protective. As he had done with the "below F" incident, Shem uses this material in *Man's 4th Best Hospital*, eliciting Roy Basch's wife's warning: "Writing one's thing. Admitting it is another" (132).

Janet Surrey

Shem has not written about his wife's reaction to *The House of God*, which evoked hostility from feminist readers who objected to the novel's unsympathetic portrayal of Jo, the only female resident in the story. In his interview with Mara Gordon, Shem acknowledges being "roundly criticized" for his portrayal of women in *The House of God*, though acknowledgment of a criticism is not the same as agreement with it. In his later novels, all of which affirm the life-saving importance of connection in human relationships, Janet Surrey's influence has been striking. Indeed, I can't think of another novelist, living or dead, who has been so profoundly influenced by a spouse. Surrey is the inspiration behind "Berry," Roy Basch's romantic partner and then wife throughout the *Healing Quartet* novels. Shem discloses in a 1991 essay, originating from a talk given at the Stone Center at Wellesley, that in 1985 he and Surrey started to offer workshops together on new visions of the female-male relationship, a paradigm that began to appear in the novels written during this time. Husband and wife worked with over 20,000 people in large and small groups, coauthoring their 1998 book *We Have to Talk*. They also coauthored, with Nancy Beardall, an educational curriculum: *Making Connections: Building Community and Gender Dialogue in Secondary Schools* (2007). In an essay appearing in *Educational Record* in 1993, Shem and Surrey remark on the gender differences in college students. Male students feel "relational dread," which provokes anger in female students, leading to "relational impasses." To overcome this problem, the authors urge forthright discussions of gender differences. "As we help students pursue the dialogue, they begin to discuss the deeper roots and effects of these images of being 'nurturers' or 'macho'" ("The Changing Nature of Relationships on Campus," 17). Other writers would have stopped here, unwilling to

elaborate on how male relational dread affected them, but Shem stepped outside of his comfort zone, indicating that in the 1980s he and his wife, struggling with infertility, nearly divorced:

> Janet had started to go to lectures in California by an Indian woman meditation teacher called Vimala Thakhar—a social activist who had walked with Venova Bhave in the post-Ghandi Land Gift Movement. Janet was about to go off to a retreat alone, in Holland. We stood outside my door in the freezing cold, in silence. I had the sense that if she went off alone, we were finally over. I asked: "Would you mind if I came with you?" She said okay, and I did. ("Conversations, Events & Book Talk")

Further insight into this defining moment of their marriage appears in their coauthored novel *The Buddha's Wife: The Path of Awakening Together* (2015). In "Letter to the Reader" they reveal, candidly and touchingly, the troubled early history of their relationship together. Each offers her or his view of this unsettling time. They met while they were in college, and their relationship deepened until his graduation. Skeptical of receiving a Rhodes scholarship, Shem did not want to talk about his uncertain future, which left Surrey feeling "alone, confused, and depressed." His departure for England fractured their friendship. "The path I took seems clear in retrospect," Surrey admits, "but was full of confusion and doubt and pain along the way" (xvii). She became involved in the growing women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and then began graduate school in clinical psychology at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She soon grew disappointed in the program's curriculum, which never offered what she thought was a compelling explanation of depression in women. She returned to Boston, where she earned a PhD in clinical psychology and received a postdoctoral internship at Harvard's McLean Hospital. She resumed seeing Shem when he returned to the United States, but there were "still great wounds" in her relationship with him and with her family—though she never elaborates on the nature of her conflicts with her parents.

"I, like many men, didn't realize what I had lost until I had lost it." The confessional tone of Shem's remarks conjures up F. Scott Fitzgerald's

elegiac *The Crack-Up* (1945), the story of the novelist's descent, at age thirty-nine, from being one of the country's most celebrated writers to abject depression and despair, when, plaintively, he speaks with the "authority of failure." Upon arriving at Oxford, Shem discovered the depth of his loss over leaving Surrey. "My grief, loneliness, and the feeling that I had made a big mistake by leaving Janet clouded every waking moment, and sleep was tormented" (*The Buddha's Wife*, xix). While at Oxford he began to write and, after beginning medical school, periodically saw Surrey, twelve years after the "severing of our 'first' relationship." Living together in the early 1980s, they still found themselves struggling with their differences—until that fateful moment in the winter of 1985 when he asked if he could accompany her to her retreat in Holland. "This opened a new doorway between us, and led to our walking the spiritual path together" (xxii).

Surrey and Shem called the event of standing outside their door the "total impasse experience," when "things were falling apart—like a dead end" (*The Buddha's Wife*, xxi-xxii). The moment appears in many of Shem's writings. He has long been interested in liminal experiences when two characters, on the verge of being permanently disconnected from each other, have a "breakthrough" moment resulting in their sudden reunion.

Surrey is a clinical psychologist, Buddhist dharma ("right way of living") leader, coauthor of *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center* (1991), and founding scholar of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at Wellesley College. Surrey was an attending psychologist at McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School, and a clinical psychologist in private practice. Through his wife's influence, Shem gleaned the insights of Buddhism, learning the Buddha's first noble truth: the universality of suffering. If we try to walk through suffering alone, he argues in "Selecting Medical Students, Then and Now" (2012), we will suffer more and spread the suffering. If, by contrast, we walk through suffering with others, including physicians, whose role it is to be with suffering patients, then we will suffer less. In several novels, Shem warns against what Buddha said are the three poisons that lead to suffering: craving, hatred, and delusion.

Friendship has always been important to Surrey, especially those that promote spiritual growth and development. In *The Buddha's Wife* she writes

about meeting Kathy Dyer during a two-week silent retreat in 1980. After the retreat, the two women met weekly, first meditating in silence and then listening attentively to each other. The friendship has lasted more than thirty years. "Over the years, in the turmoil of life, one of us has called the other feeling lost and said, 'Please help me remember who I am—what is important. Help me find the path here'" (185).

Shem grasped from his wife a new relational model, developed by the theorists at the Stone Center for Developmental Studies at Wellesley College, that emphasized "self-in-relation," a model that appears in *all* of his writings. "I learned that 'connection comes first,'" he writes in "Conversations, Events & Book Talk," and that "if you're in a good connection you can talk about anything; but if not, you can't talk about anything. For the first time in my life I actually could 'see' not just self and other, but the connection; not just I and you, but the We." Shem never mentions reading E.M. Forster's 1910 novel *Howard's End*, but he would surely agree with its iconic words, "Only connect!" As with Shem, Forster maintains that connection overcomes destructive isolation, leading to heightened love.

Change occurs in relational psychotherapy to both therapist and patient. In her vignette about "Helen" in the coauthored "What Changes in Therapy? Who Changes?", Surrey discusses an unusually difficult case that highlighted the value of relational-cultural theory. Surrey learned to avoid her tendency to "disconnect" when Helen made unreasonable demands on her. "Hardest for me were the times when she needed to tell me in great detail how hurt she has been by me (and I recognized that she needed to test me with this over and over to see that I wouldn't turn it back on her the way her mother did") (43). Both therapist and patient were able to hold onto each other despite moments of disconnection.

Surrey is almost as self-disclosing as her husband. In her essay "Mother-Blaming and Clinical Theory," published in *Motherhood: A Feminist Perspective*, edited by Jane Price Knowles and Ellen Cole (1990), she recalls the "watershed moment" in her life when, to her later dismay, she began, with her therapist's approval, to pathologize mothers' behavior. In *Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers*, coedited

with Cynthia Garcia Coll and Kathy Weingarten (1998), Surrey acknowledges that her feminism as well as her articulation of a new relational model of women's psychological development arose from her lifelong efforts to "understand and negotiate the paradoxes within my relationship with my mother." Surrey would agree with Jean Baker Miller's statement in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* that it is "easier to blame mothers than to comprehend the entire system that has restricted women. It is true that mothers have interacted most with daughters and, thus, were the most direct agents of an oppressive system. But mothers were themselves victims of the system" (139). Surrey spent—or misspent—"many years in therapy being instructed to blame, pathologize, and 'separate' from my mother. This strategy never worked for me, as I have always been deeply connected and enormously inspired as well as wounded and confused in this relationship" (xviii). If, as her husband has said many times, psychiatrists specialize in their defects, then the same is true of psychologists like Surrey. "I have been writing about and walking my way out of mother blaming for the past 20 years, and I am still passionately committed to honoring and supporting the potentially positive power of mother—daughter relationships" (xix). Without being self-disclosing, Surrey and Shem criticize mother blaming in *The Buddha's Wife*, remarking that recently the "challenges of being a 'good mother' have been relabeled with armies of 'tiger moms' and 'helicopter moms'—new labels and descriptions seem to arise in every generation. Ironically, these 'supermom' labels distort the *real* strengths and capacities of mothers as real allies and advocates in partnership with their children, over life" (166-167).

Understanding, as Shem observes in *Fine*, that our parents "lead us into life, and we lead them out" (334), Surrey, the only child in a secular Jewish family, writes about one of the "great (and shameful) terrors" of her life as a young child: the thought of losing her mother. "I simply could not imagine how I would survive" (*The Buddha's Wife*, 212). The fear persisted until her forties, when, on her first solo meditation retreat, she vowed to be with her parents until the end of their lives, promising to give back what she had been given. After her father died in 2008, at age ninety-two, she was her mother's sole legal, medical, and caregiving "manager" until her death in 2014 at age 101. To judge from her obituary, Janet Surrey's mother

was a strong and active woman, among the few of her generation to have a professional career—an educator and political activist, like her daughter. Rosalie Surrey grew up in New York City in 1912, graduated from Hunter College, and taught in New York City and later in Albany, where her daughter was raised. In 1964, Rosalie Surrey was appointed Founding Director of Head Start in Albany County, a position she held for 8 years. In 1932, she married Alexander Surrey, a renowned chemist who worked for Sterling Drug. They were married for 76 years. Shem's description in *Man's 4th Best Hospital of* visiting Berry's parents and his own during brief Thanksgiving trips seems to hint at a complicated relationship with Rosalie Surrey. Berry's mother is a "wonderful woman," but Roy cannot avoid turning into a "monster" in her presence. "Find the right emotional distance from which you can be empathic" (186), Berry advises him, to no avail. Roy experiences the familiar "male relational dread," ruining the Thanksgiving visits.

The impetus behind the Wellesley study group that led to the writing of *Mothering Against the Odds*, the editors disclose in the Preface, came from Surrey's adoption of their daughter, Katie Chun Surrey-Bergman, from China in 1991. Shem's 2016 novel *At the Heart of the Universe* focuses on their adoption experience. Set in rural China in the year of Katie's adoption, during the time of the one-child policy, the novel shows how two mothers and a father fall in love with the same daughter. In the chapter on "Adoptive Mothers" in *Mothering Against the Odds*, Surrey and her coauthors challenge several pernicious fallacies of adoption, including the myth, perpetuated by early psychoanalysts like Helene Deutsch, that adoptive mothers are defective mothers suffering from the narcissistic injury of infertility. "They do not pause to consider that the stigmatizing itself places all members of the adoptive family at risk for psychological hardship" (*Mothering Against the Odds*, 2008). Surrey and her coauthors urge "resistance" to these destructive cultural ideologies, including "resistance for equality," "resistance for liberation," and "resistance for survival," all of which we see in Shem's writings.

Fiction as Resistance

In "Fiction as Resistance," published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2002, Shem observed that writing fiction is an act of resistance, affirming his commitment to social and political change. It is his most singular dictum about art, one that characterizes the entirety of his writings, fictional and nonfictional alike. There is a long and honored tradition of protest and resistance in American literature, beginning with Thoreau's *Walden* (1849), espousing the duty of resistance to civil government. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) are often cited for being instrumental in the abolition of slavery. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905) exposed the horrors of the American meatpacking industry, just as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) spotlighted poor Midwest tenant farmers during the Depression. Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one of the most widely read novels in middle school and high school, dramatizes racial injustice. The American marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson highlighted in *Silent Spring* (1962) the deadly consequences of the widespread use of pesticides. "Books are a form of political action," Toni Morrison wrote, and her 1987 novel *Beloved* explores the harrowing legacy of slavery.

Surely the most famous example of the American novel as resistance is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). A decade after its publication, Abraham Lincoln purportedly greeted Harriet Beecher Stowe as the "little woman who wrote the book that made this great war." Yet as the British historian Andrew Pettegree argues in *The Book at War: How Reading Shaped Conflict and Conflict Shaped Reading* (2023), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains a cautionary tale about the difficulty of evaluating a novel's impact on social and political change. To begin with, Pettegree calls into question whether Stowe met with Lincoln when she visited the White House in 1862 and had tea with the First Lady. It was only thirty-four years after Stowe's death that the first report surfaced about the likely apocryphal meeting. Moreover, Lincoln was not an abolitionist in 1862, and it's unlikely that he would have welcomed the book. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a runaway bestseller, selling 300,000 copies in its first year of publication, there's no evidence that it encouraged a single soldier to enlist in the Union army. A book's sales figure, Pettegree reminds us, cannot be equated with influence: "people

read things precisely *because* they disagree with them powerfully, or wish to understand the workings of their opponent's mind. Otherwise, we should be distinctly worried that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* remained on the bestseller list in Britain for the best part of two years between 1938 and 1940, boosted by the publication of the first unabridged English edition shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War" (59). Southerners hated Stowe's novel, Pettegree suggests; its most profound impact was to reinforce Southern paranoia.

Apart from the question of a novel's actual influence in effecting social and political change, it remains controversial whether any literary text *should* have that purpose. Chekhov's insistence, "Show, don't tell," is often associated with his other often-quoted assertion that literature should raise questions but not be compelled to answer them. Literary critics continue to debate whether literature should be used for social and political change. Steve Westbrook reports that many textbooks on creative writing "ask students to . . . refrain from using writing for purposes of social/discursive change" (144). Shem would strongly disagree with this conclusion, as I do, as long as the novel does not appear overly didactic. In his iconic poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," W.H. Auden avers that "Poetry makes nothing happen," but this line is belied by the rest of the poem, including the injunction, "In the deserts of the heart/ Let the healing fountain start."

It is difficult to know the precise extent of *The House of God*'s influence in eliminating the abuse of medical students and residents. Certainly there have been claims that it has led to a limitation of the number of hours an intern can work in a week (80), including not working more than 16 hours in a row. To judge from the many medical students and young physicians who read *The House of God* at the beginning of their careers, it has had a transformative impact on their lives, an impact that is likely greater than any other novel. Unlike most resistance stories, *The House of God* uses dark humor and exaggeration to dramatize the plight of young interns.

Many of Shem's essays as a social activist appeared under the name of Stephen Bergman in the *Boston Globe* from 2007-2009. In these short articles, Shem points out the exorbitant amount of money spent on administrative costs on the American healthcare system, more than a third of the total

expense, far larger than the administrative cost in Canada's single-payer system. In the *Boston Globe* essays, Shem advocates for tort reform to keep physicians from ordering needless tests to prevent malpractice suits. He calls for national service so that new doctors do not confront, as they presently do, staggering debt, sometimes in excess of $200,000. In one essay, "The Farce of Dueling Psychiatrists," he urges doing away with psychiatrists as expert witnesses for the defense or prosecution, recommending instead a paid panel of expert mental health professionals independent of government or law, charged with determining legal insanity. He proposes a new verdict of "guilty and insane," allowing convicts to be held in psychiatric prisons, where they will be eligible for treatment.

The novels in the *Healing Quartet* are scathing satires of any theory, psychoanalytic or otherwise, that reduces the complexity and humanity of human behavior. Additionally, they attack psychiatrists greedily eager to be funded by drug companies, Big Pharma. Later novels critique the behemoth of Electronic Medical Records (EMR), which are now used less for their original laudatory purpose, making a patient's medical records more efficient, than to increase the revenue of the for-profit insurance industry. In his writings and talks, Shem often states that in a medical emergency in a theater, no one ever cries, "Is there an insurance executive in the house?"

Writing for Catharsis

Another motive behind Shem's need to write fiction is deeply personal, though he wasn't aware of it at the time. "I started to write *The House of God* for catharsis, to share with my buddies what had been the worst year of my life" ("Fiction as Resistance," 934-935). Shem never jokes about suicide, and so we must take him at his word when he told Claire Brash in a 2017 article published in the *London Journal of Primary Care* that writing *The House of God* prevented him from taking his own life. One does not necessarily write a novel to feel good or to engage in self-therapy, but for a writer, the act of writing is almost always generative.

Shem is not alone in experiencing the therapeutic power of writing. "One sheds one[']s sicknesses in books," D.H. Lawrence declared in a 1913 letter about his experience writing *Sons and Lovers*, "repeats and presents again one[']s emotions, to be master of them" (*Letters*, vol. II, 90). Freud made a similar observation to Joan Riviere. "He said, 'Write it, write it, put it down in black and white; that's the way to deal with it; you get it out of your system!" (Riviere, 637). Lawrence and Freud knew from personal experience that writing does not magically release one from physical or psychological illness, but it is often a form of problem solving, enabling the writer to chart a direction toward health, as E.M. Forster observed in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927): "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?" (97). "Writing is a form of therapy," Graham Greene declared; "sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation" (285). The physician-poet William Carlos Williams admitted at the beginning of his *Autobiography* (1951) that time meant nothing to him when he needed to write. "I would be like a woman at term: no matter what else was up, that demand had to be met." Regardless how late it was at night, regardless how exhausted he might have been from seeing patients all day, Williams needed to write. "In fact, I couldn't rest until I had freed my mind from the obsessions which had been tormenting me all day. Cleansed of that torment, having scribbled, I could rest" (xiii-xiv). The novelist John Gregory Dunne, married to a more famous novelist, Joan Didion, understood the healing power of writing. "Clarity only comes," he writes in *Harp* (1989), "when pen is in hand, or at the typewriter or the word processor, clarity about what we feel and what we think, how we love and how we mourn; the words on the page constitute the benediction, the declaration, the confession of the emotionally inarticulate" (15-16). In her 2018 biography *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire*, Kay Redfield Jamison documents the poet's struggle with mental illness, quoting a question he raises in one of his poems: "'Is getting well ever an art,' he asked, 'or art a way to get well?'" (189). The physician-writer Tony Miksanek lists seven reasons doctors write, the most important being therapy. "Physician heal thyself. Nothing promotes healing like writing a poem or short story or even a single glorious sentence. Writing helps a doctor get things off their chest in a much more productive way than yelling at a nurse, ranting at a patient, or being grouchy at home. Poems

and stories written as a form of therapy are easy to spot. They have a confessional quality."

Yet Shem never implies that writing is easy or that it brings immediate or long-lasting relief. Sometimes the writer feels betrayed by the muse, which cannot always be relied on to inspire creativity. One thinks of the wry comment attributed to Hemingway: "There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at the typewriter and bleed." Shem implies elsewhere that despite his love for writing, the process is arduous and sometimes impossible. In "Five Laws of the Novelist," he refers to his struggles with various editors and the humiliation he experienced as a writer. There is only one reason to write, he declares, and then adds a sobering sentence: "During a post-second-novel depression, I spent six months, more or less, in the bathtub, trying to give up being a writer." He ends the essay with a gnomic assertion: "Only write if you can't not." Shem supplies additional information about this event in his Foreword to Nathan Carlin's 2022 edited volume *Contemporary Physician-Authors*. After hearing a "kind" inner voice telling him that he must write, he wrote a sign for his desk: "Joy in the Process, Faith in the Work" (xiii).

Part of the cathartic nature of writing involves the process of overcoming shame—shaming shame. Shem admits in "Fiction as Resistance" that he avoided painful situations as an intern, such as delivering bad news to a woman dying of metastatic breast cancer. "It's not my job, it's her private doctor's job, or her surgeon's," he rationalized. "In retrospect, this is why I wrote the scene, to resist the inhumanity—toward these patients. I started with fact—my avoidance—then imagined what 'should' have been done and put it in terms of the imagined Fat Man" (935). Writing fiction enabled Shem to engage in what the literary critic Sandra M. Gilbert calls "writing/righting wrong," "writing (recording) as well as seeking to right (rectify) wrong" (86). Writing/righting wrong is an essential component of the medical humanities, an interdisciplinary movement, arising near the end of the twentieth century, that explores experiences of health and illness, raising ethical questions about healthcare practices.

Writing is cathartic not only to authors but to their readers. In the beginning Shem believed that novelists should not discuss publicly their works—the

story should speak for itself—but he changed his mind when he received a letter forwarded to him from his publisher that included the line, "I'm on call in a V.A. hospital in Tulsa, and if it weren't for your book I'd kill myself" ("34 Years After"). The letter convinced Shem of the value of openly promoting his work in the media, something he has continued to do on his website. Writers write, and readers read, to convince themselves that they are not alone—and to forge life-saving connections.

Shem tries to avoid anything that serves as a distraction to his writing, especially cell phones. "If I had a smartphone," he told Mara Gordon in a 2019 NPR interview, "I would not be able to write any other novels. I have a bit of an addictive personality. I'd just be in it all the time. I've got a flip phone. You can text me, but it has to be in the form of a question. I have this alphabetical keyboard. You either get an 'OK' or a 'N-O.'" He has the same aversion to emailing, which explains his terse "OK" to me. In his public talks, Shem's only criticism of his wife is her addiction to her iPhone.

The pressure to write becomes greater if one is a full-time author, dependent upon book royalties to live. Shem gave up his psychiatric practice in 2003, having worked at Harvard medical School for over 30 years. A few years later he was appointed professor of medical humanities at New York University School of Medicine, teaching a seminar on *The House of God*. The novel that had scandalized the medical establishment has now become a canon of the medical curriculum! "He's gone from being this pariah to, despite his best efforts, being accepted in polite company," Harvard provost Steven Hyman reported in 2009 (Baker), praise that would have been unthinkable decades earlier. As Stephen Bergman, he has given the commencement address at over fifty medical schools, another sign of the importance of his writings. John Updike was the first to comment on the didactic element in *The House of God*, but the novel remains, first and foremost, a complex work of art, one that cannot be reduced to a single message.

Shem's health has remained good, but he has experienced atrial fibrillation, which became most noticeable when he was writing *Man's 4th Best Hospital*. An early riser, he would write until the atrial fibrillation became problematic, forcing him to stop. It was not that writing was stressful, Shem

told Faust; rather, the "adrenaline and level of concentration" of writing seemed to heighten the problem. He's managed the cardiac condition with propranolol, but when it intensifies, he must stop writing. In *Man's 4th Best Hospital* Roy Basch writes about his harrowing experience with atrial fibrillation that required a visit to the ER "Being a patient, I suddenly felt the whole package of dealing with doctors, waiting, hoping, fearing, left alone on a gurney. Being a doctor, I felt bad that mostly, lately, with patients I had not been terribly nice" (264).

Physicians may not always be nice to their patients, but how do they react when their own children are ill? Shem describes this situation in "Paging Doctor Dad," published in *Men's Health* in 2019. His twenty-five-year-old daughter telephoned him and his wife at 5:00 A.M. with the alarming news that she was in severe pain. Shem asked the usual doctor questions and concluded that she had appendicitis. "You always say that," she replied, recalling his history of (mis)diagnosing her. He recalled the time twenty years earlier when, her face puffed up like a tomato, amidst breathing difficulties, he diagnosed her as suffering from the obscure disease tularemia. Rushing her to the dermatologist, pride in his diagnostic prowess quickly turned to shame. "He took one look. 'Poison ivy,' he said. I believe '. . . idiot' was implied." Shem's self-effacing humor works well here and elsewhere. The appendicitis diagnosis proved correct, and his fast thinking may have saved his daughter's life. The point of the essay, however, is not that he made the correct diagnosis but that he and his wife were there to support their daughter.

One senses throughout his two careers as Stephen Bergman and Samuel Shem the crucial need to write, for resistance, catharsis, and the preservation of identity. In "Psychiatry and Literature: A Relational Perspective," he quotes from Chekhov's writer, Trigorin, in *The Seagull*: "Day and Night one persistent thought takes possession of me: I must write, I must write! I must! I must! No sooner do I finish one story than I must start on another, then on a third, a fourth, and so on" (58). In "Resistance and Healing," the final essay in *The Return to the House of God*, Shem cites another Chekhov story, "Ward 6," citing a passage with which he strongly identifies. "The best of writers are realistic and describe life as it is, but because each line is saturated with the consciousness of its goal,

you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it" (225). A visionary, Shem portrays both existences, real and imagined life. No less than Chekhov, Shem cannot resist writing. One thinks of John Gardner's wry observation in *The Art of Fiction* (1984): "True artists, whatever smiling faces they may show you, are obsessive, driven people—whether driven by some mania or driven by some high, noble vision" (34). Shem is a true artist, driven by both mania and a noble vision. The compulsive need to write is, admittedly, both a blessing and a curse: a blessing when the words flow, a curse when they are blocked. We see more flow than blockage in Shem's writings, for which he and his readers are grateful.

The Plan of This Book

In what follows, I discuss Shem's writings chronologically, which enables us to see the continuities and discontinuities in his fictional and nonfictional works. To give a minor example of a shift in his thinking, he began his career, as did Janet Surrey, sympathetic to Freud and psychoanalysis, but their attitude underwent a sea change, and in later novels he has never missed an opportunity to lampoon the "Viennese witch doctor," as Nabokov mockingly called Freud. The most profound change in his and Janet Surrey's lives occurred when they adopted their daughter Katie in 1991: she remains at the heart of their universe.

A central question animates Shem's novels. It is the same question that Rainer Maria Rilke raises at the end of his 1908 poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo": how does one change one's life? By exploring this question, Shem's characters discover or, in some cases, rediscover their humanity. Shem argues that change is always possible, though some of his characters, like the hero of *Fine*, stumble and fumble before they take control of their lives.

Throughout this book, I discuss the accuracy of Shem's many complaints about contemporary American medicine and healthcare. He is a relentless critic of the medical establishment, offering an insider's critique of hospital administrators and physicians who place profits above patients' welfare.

He never exempts himself or his fictional projections, Roy Basch and Orville Rose, from these criticisms.

Some of Shem's novels, such as *The House of God*, have received several reviews in high-profile newspapers and professional journals, while other novels, such as his most recent, *Our Hospital*, have garnered few if any reviews. Whenever appropriate, I refer to the reviews and offer my own appraisals of Shem's work.

As a satirist, Shem often engages in exaggeration and caricature, as satirists are wont to do, but there is an essential truth in his critique of American medicine and culture. The Roman lyric poet and satirist Horace famously proclaimed two thousand years ago that the purpose of poetry is to delight and instruct, a statement that is also true of fiction. Shem's stories both delight and instruct, and in his nearly half century of writing, he remains a formidable figure, continuing to hone his craft while he does his best to create a better world.