A Literary Ventures Fund Book

The Spirit of the Place

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Book Synopsis: Samuel Shem's first novel, *The House of God*, the classic novel of life and death in an American hospital, has sold more than two million copies and is required reading in medical schools throughout the world. Thirty years later Shem returns with *The Spirit of the Place*, his most ambitious work yet. It goes beyond a focus on young doctors-in-training to that of a world-traveled doctor called home in the early '80s to become the doctor to the small town he ran away from, to face his own history and that of the town itself. A novel of love and death, mothers and sons, ghosts and bullies, doctors and patients, illness and healing, *The Spirit of the Place* spins a tale of universal human experience and the changing life of a small town with genuine warmth and humor.

"The Spirit of the Place is written with a large heart, a healing touch, wry and wise insight into the human condition. Worthy of the Best of Samuel Shem, which is worthy indeed."
- James Carroll,
National Book Award Winner
and author of *House of War*

Included in this Press Kit
• Advanced Praise for Book
• Author Biography
• Additional Information
• Reading Group Guide
• Book Flyer

http://literaryventuresfund.org/books/the_spirit_of_the_place
Advanced praise for *The Spirit of the Place*

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"A deeply moving and profoundly intelligent exploration of the complexities and rewards of family, profession, and place. The story of a young physician returning to his small town becomes a tale with universal meaning. This book continues to resonate in the mind and heart long after it is read"
—Jerome Groopman, M.D., Author of *How Doctors Think*

"In this lovely novel Samuel Shem brilliantly describes scenery from the Italian Lakes to the Hudson River Valley with vivid enchanting detail. But his real subject is the landscape of the human heart with its dangers and delights, its vertiginous cliffs and mossy woods, its comforts and contradictions. This is a wonderful book about the surprises of human connection and the infinite power of love."  
—Susan Cheever, Author of *American Bloomsbury*

"This new novel from Samuel Shem, raucous and insightful physician of the soul, captures a town, a man, a time of life with all the verve and nerve that marked THE HOUSE OF GOD. Hooray!"
—Bill McKibben, author of *The Bill McKibben Reader*

"Samuel Shem captured the humor, the angst and pathos of medical training in that unforgettable book, THE HOUSE OF GOD. His new book is an incredible and heartfelt story of a physician whose life has taken the most unexpected twists and turns. THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE entertains, satisfies, and affirms; it is beautifully conceived and brilliantly executed. Shem has done it again!"
—Abraham Verghese, author of *My Own Country and The Tennis Partner*

"As in THE HOUSE OF GOD and MOUNT MISERY, I was riveted by this story of a world-weary young doctor called to heal the body and spirit of his ailing hometown—and of himself. THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE is special—a grand, wonderfully insightful story of love and death, mothers and sons, doctors and patients—filled with larger than life characters and told with outrageous Shem-humor and authentic humanity."  
—Michael Palmer, New York Times Bestselling author of *The First Patient*

"From many perspectives, this new Samuel Shem novel is a delight. More insider doctor lore, complicated families, love and marriage, great rendition of small town upstate New York and idyllic Italy with a bit of magical realism thrown in await you in *The Spirit of the Place*. And those are just the basics.”  
—Dana Brigham, Brookline Booksmith

"A nice, light read for a summer afternoon, this is a story about why coming home is never quite what you expect."
—Kirkus Reviews

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Author Biography

SAMUEL SHEM
(pen-name of Stephen J. Bergman, M.D., Ph.D.)
(website: www.samuelshem.com)

Samuel Shem’s classic novel about medical internship, THE HOUSE OF GOD (1978), was recently named by the British medical journal The Lancet as one of the two most important American medical novels of the 20th century, the other being Sinclair Lewis’ ARROWSMITH. It has sold over two million copies, in thirty languages. John Updike wrote in an introduction to the 25th anniversary edition: “It glows with the celebratory essence of a real novel…A tale of venture into the valley of death and the truth of the flesh…more timely than ever.” Newsweek listed it in 1999 as “the novel to read about becoming a doctor.” The sequel, MOUNT MISERY (1996), about psychiatric residency at a mental hospital of that name, has been called “another medical classic,” and, by the Boston Globe, “outrageously funny, a sage and important novel by a healer and a Shakespearean.” These novels have been bestsellers in America, Germany, Spain, and the Czech Republic. Shem is also the author of a FINE (1986), a novel about a psychoanalyst (“Funny…Full of dazzling, zany intelligence…energetic and exuberant”—New York Times”), THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE (to be published in June 2008), and THE MISSING GIRL, a novel set in China (manuscript).

A 30th anniversary world-wide symposium—“Return to THE HOUSE OF GOD: Medical Education Revisited 1978-2008”—will be held at the Cleveland Clinic in October 2008, and published by Kent State University Press.

Biography Continued:
Two of Shem’s plays, ROOM FOR ONE WOMAN and NAPOLEON’S DINNER, have been published in THE BEST SHORT PLAYS anthologies. With his wife, Janet Surrey, he is the author of BILL W. AND DR. BOB, a play about the relationship between the two men who founded Alcoholics Anonymous, which was named one of the “ten best plays” of the season in San Diego, is published and represented by Samuel French (2007, www.samuelfrench.com), and was an Off Broadway hit with 148 performances at the New World Stages in 2007 (www.billwanddrbob.com). The DVD of the Off Broadway production is available from Hazelden (www.hazelden.org). BILL W. AND DR. BOB and Shem and Surrey were awarded the 2007 Performing Arts Award by the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

Shem and Surrey are also authors of a nonfiction book, WE HAVE TO TALK: HEALING DIALOGUES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN (1999, Basic Books) which received the 1999 Paradigm Shift Award of the Boston Interfaith Counseling Service, and a curriculum for middle/high school students, MAKING CONNECTIONS: BUILDING GENDER DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOL (2007, Educators for Social Responsibility).
Additional Information

Kent State University Press Online
http://www.upress.kent.edu

Literary Ventures Fund
http://www.literaryventuresfund.org

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The Literary Ventures Fund, a first-of-its-kind, not-for-profit private foundation, serves as a primary "partner-in-risk" with authors and publishers in advancing works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Using a philanthropic investment model, we provide supplementary support to literary authors and publishers by offering them our foundation's resources, including expertise and publishing ties to bookstores and media outlets, publicity assistance, innovative marketing and sales programs, and in some cases direct cash investments as well. LVF's efforts help ensure that exceptional works of fiction, literary non-fiction, and poetry with a potential for broad readership reach the widest possible audience and remain in print for years to come. In addition, LVF fulfills its public-policy mission by presenting programs that generate discussion about the broader literary landscape, the role of publishing in serving literary writers, and how more readers can become engaged with literature.

Kent State University Press publishes in history, literary studies, poetry, and titles of regional interest for Ohio.
Reading Group Guide
The Spirit of the Place by Samuel Shem

How would you describe the relationship between Selma and her son Orville? How would you describe the relationship between Miranda and her son Cray? Compare these two mother/son relationships.

Orville falls in love with two different women—Celestina and Miranda—each of whom he feels is “the real thing.” How would you talk about the similarities and differences between these two relationships. What does each tell you about Orville? When he chooses between the two of them, does it make sense?

Bill Starbuck and Orville are doctors from two different eras. What does it tell you about medicine then and now? The novel is set in 1983-4. How has doctoring—and medicine—changed from that time until now.

There is a great deal in the novel about secrets, and public presentation of self. Selma, Celestina, Miranda, Schooner—even Cray and Amy—deal with the issue of how you “are” in private and in public. Is this familiar?

As a novelist and doctor and person, my life makes me believe in the possibility of redemption. Peoples’ lives don’t just stay the same or go straight to hell. Thinking about the characters—not only Orville and Miranda and Celestina and Selma, but Henry Schooner (from boyhood to manhood, and in re-meeting Orville) and Amy and Cray and Milt and Penny—does this make sense? Who is redeemed, who is not? Have you known redemption in your lives?

Suffering plays a central role in the novel, not just in the medical elements but also in each of the movements of the characters. Can you look at this prevalence of suffering, and try to see if it leads to more suffering, or to understanding and action for the good? What does Orville’s hearing the words “Don’t spread more suffering around” (when he is on the train) mean, and where does it come from?

My novels “ride” on humor. How is this true of THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE?
The Spirit of the Place
by Samuel Shem

Samuel Shem’s first novel, *The House of God*, the classic novel of life and death in an American hospital, has sold more than two million copies and is required reading in medical schools throughout the world. Thirty years later Shem returns with *The Spirit of the Place*, his most ambitious work yet. It goes beyond a focus on young doctors-in-training to that of a world-traveled doctor called home in the early ’80s to become the doctor to the small town he ran away from, to face his own history and that of the town itself. A novel of love and death, mothers and sons, ghosts and bullies, doctors and patients, illness and healing, *The Spirit of the Place* spins a tale of universal human experience and the changing life of a small town with genuine warmth and humor.

Samuel Shem (pen name of Dr. Stephen Bergman) is a novelist, playwright, and, for three decades, a member of the Harvard Medical School faculty. His novels include *The House of God*, *Fine*, and *Mount Misery*. He is coauthor with his wife, Janet Surrey, of the hit Off-Broadway play *Bill W. and Dr. Bob*, the story of the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (winner of the 2007 Performing Arts Award of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence), and *We Have to Talk: Healing Dialogues between Women and Men*. 