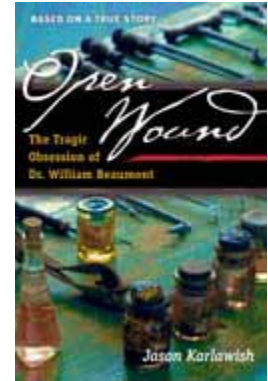


Open Wound: The Tragic Obsession of Dr. William Beaumont
Jason Karlawish
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Q&A with Jason Karlawish, author of *Open Wound: The Tragic Obsession of Dr. William Beaumont*

A shotgun misfires inside the American Fur Company store in Northern Michigan, and Alexis St. Martin's death appears imminent. It's 1822, and, as the leaders of Mackinac Island examine St. Martin's shot-riddled torso, they decide not to incur a single expense on behalf of the indentured fur trapper. They even go so far as to dismiss the attention of U.S. Army Assistant Surgeon William Beaumont, the frontier fort's only doctor.

But in the name of charity and goodness, Beaumont ignores the orders and saves the young man's life. What neither the doctor nor his patient understands—yet—is that even as Beaumont's care of St. Martin continues for decades, the motives and merits of his attention are far from clear. In fact, for what he does to his patient, Beaumont will eventually stand trial and be judged.



Rooted deeply in historic fact, *Open Wound* artfully fictionalizes the complex, lifelong relationship between Beaumont—a prominent figure in Michigan's medical past and present—and his illiterate French Canadian patient. The young trapper's injury never completely heals, leaving a hole into his stomach that the curious doctor uses as a window to understand the mysteries of digestion. Eager to rise up from his humble origins and self-conscious that his medical training occurred as an apprentice to a rural physician rather than at an elite university, Beaumont seizes the opportunity to experiment upon his patient's stomach in order to write a book that he hopes will establish his legitimacy and secure his prosperity. As Karlawish portrays him, Beaumont, always growing hungrier for more wealth and more prestige, personifies the best and worst aspects of American ambition and power.

Jason Karlawish is Professor of Medicine and Medical Ethics and Senior Fellow of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. He studied medicine at Northwestern University and trained in internal medicine and geriatric medicine at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago. His research examines issues in bioethics, and his clinical practice focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of persons with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders.

UMP: *Open Wound* is your first novel; when did you take on writing fiction?

Jason Karlawish: I suppose I've always been a writer - even when I was a boy I tried to write a novel, and then in college, I wrote another one, which I actually finished. Along the way I did a lot of short stories - I've got boxes of them - and some journalism as well. I wrote a column for a local newspaper and wrote some journalism in college as well. When I got to med school, I would get up at about 4 or 5 in the

morning to try and take some time to get some writing done. And then in residency, I remember I chose an apartment that was close enough to the hospital so that I could get up in the morning and have some time to write. The result was picking a neighborhood that was like something out of “The Wire.” By the time that I finished residency, I realized that if I’m going to make a career going as a writer, I needed to focus, and the most obvious way to focus was on academic writing. So I focused on the work of a researcher, doing papers, presentations, talks and essays.

UMP: What started you writing *Open Wound*?

JK: I had heard about the story of William Beaumont when I was a boy. You know, this sort of mythic, hero of a physician who saves a patient and does good. And then later, when I was a fellow in bioethics at the University of Chicago, I met this pediatric intensivist who liked to collect classics of medical history. I remember he showed me his collection of classics and one of them was Beaumont’s experiments and observations book. At the time, as I was doing an ethics fellowship, it sort of clicked to me that as I was looking at that, there’s an interesting story here and I just sort of filed it away. I just sort of collect ideas and that struck me as a good idea to hold on to. Then I started my career in academic medicine and set aside writing fiction, but after about six years or so of doing that, things were working. The papers were being published, the research grants and projects were becoming more and more successful. I started to get itchy and restless, kind of wanted to move on to some writing. I remember I went back into my notebook and said, “I filed that away; now is the time to take on that story.” So I began doing research about William Beaumont. It was an interesting journey going from Beaumont the mythic hero to Beaumont the real man – a much more complex and, frankly, real character.

UMP: What were some of the challenges of writing *Open Wound*?

JK: The biggest challenge was trying to get the language right. What’s the true way that people then spoke? Obviously I don’t have audio or video recordings from 1823 in northern Michigan that describe how people spoke and words they used. Granted, part of my research was reading newspapers and other primary sources to get a sense of how people spoke and how they interacted - but I was really keen to get the language right for the times so it was a credible language. So for example, the word “okay” which is ubiquitous in our language now, back then - as best as I could tell - it essentially didn’t exist. So I was very keen, for example, to strike that word out. I also paid great attention to getting the medical and related scientific language right. It’s easy to sort of find myself writing using more contemporary terms to describe things. But I was keen to kind of occupy the mind of an early nineteenth century physician and scientist and that was quite a lot of fun to do.

UMP: Why did you choose to write it as a novel versus a biography?

JK: Well I think we go to non-fiction for the facts and we go to fiction for the truth. I actually did consider initially writing it as a non-fiction book. But the more I read the history, the more I wanted to tell the story. I originally composed this book where [Beaumont] was this underdog, who despite all odds, did what was right and tried to make the world a better place. But the more I read about the facts of the man, the more the story became interesting. He was a very complicated man. If you really want to tell what the truth is about, not just about William Beaumont but people like William Beaumont, the most effective way to convey that was with story as opposed to history. Sometimes I didn't want the facts to get in the way of truth.

UMP: So was William Beaumont a bad man?

JK: William Beaumont wasn't a bad man, but he wasn't a great man. He was just a man; like most of us, a mixture of the bad and the good. He's a complicated character. He came from humble roots, a simple rural farming community in Connecticut; struggled to make it on his own on what was then the frontier of northern New York state; struggled to find a trade that he could excel in and make money; and in some sense, almost stumbled on the role of training to be a physician as an apprentice; but then [he] stuck with it. Fortuitously he became a surgeon's mate in the War of 1812, and got a lot of on the job training being a surgeon and a physician. He was a complicated guy, and he wanted to make it. He came from simple roots and he had to make some tough choices, and luck, frankly, handed him Alexis St. Martin. I think he recognized, not only something that was a part of his responsibility as a physician (that is to take care of a patient); but also to recognize something bigger and larger and different, which I think he had a hard time getting his ethics around, which was how to use this man to create something bigger and greater. His life story is a complicated one, but I think it's the story of many ambitious, hard-working Americans who want to make it in the world, provided they're given the opportunity.

UMP: You're a physician yourself. How did that prepare you for writing?

JK: Some basic things I could kind of get my head around what Beaumont went through when he first met Alexis and was taking care of him and the efforts to treat him. I could get a handle, even though the medicine he practiced was completely foreign to what I do now. I could get a sense of what he went through to become a physician, so those things helped – the character I could occupy fairly easy in that sense.

The other aspect of medicine that I found very helpful was the medical interview, especially as I engage it: what we call bedside medicine. The patient comes to me with their complaint, you know, "I'm having a memory problem," and then my job is to get them to tell their story. So it's not me actually talking, it's

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them talking with me asking the questions along the way. You know, one of the standard questions that I ask patients and their families is, "What 's a typical day?" and out of that I get this very vivid story about what a typical day is. My job, as the writer and the physician, is to take that very unique and individual narrative and make sense of it and tell the story of someone's disease. The end of the story in the patient's case is, what do I think the problem is, and what we can we do about it? Of course that's very different than what the end of the story is for any given novel. But I think that there is a lot of similarities between the act of gathering history and making it into a coherent story that explains a patient's story of illness, and the act of sitting down and saying I want to write the story of William Beaumont as an ambitious American, fueled by that passion, and what that says about being an American coming up from humble, simple roots.

UMP: Do physicians today still struggle with the kind of ethical questions that Dr. Beaumont had to deal with then?

JK: They do. Certainly the particulars are dramatically different, and the kind of medicine that Beaumont practiced now seems, frankly, entirely unscientific. But though those particulars are very different, the core issues remain. Namely, how do you advance your career and advance science? Those two tend to be very intermingled - even more so now, when physicians and scientists can make great profit from their research by patenting their results and otherwise spinning off companies. But how do you do that activity, while at the same time respecting the dignity and rights of the people who make that research possible, the people we call subjects or participants? That fundamental ethical, moral challenge was present there, when Beaumont met Alexis St. Martin, and it's still present now when people like myself and my colleagues try to move our science along.

To read more about *Open Wound: The Tragic Obsession of Dr. William Beaumont* by Jason Karlawish, visit The University of Michigan Press at

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