

NOTES OF A MEDICINE-WATCHER

The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine-watcher. Lewis Thomas. 1983. The Viking Press. New York. 270 pages. \$14.75 (cloth).

Lewis Thomas is a renowned physician and medical researcher, essayist for the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and winner of the National Book Award for his first collection of essays, *Lives of a Cell*. Thomas is more than the sum of his parts, however, and in his latest, autobiographical, book he reveals more of himself to his readers.

As a medical researcher, he is keenly aware of evolutionary forces, which operate on disease organisms as relentlessly as on dinosaurs and Darwin's finches. His evolutionary approach has led him and his colleagues to many medical discoveries, some of which are useful, others of which have no immediate application, but all of which were intellectually challenging. His curiosity drives him to dwell on experimental results, often decades old, that defy easy explanation. Such stubborn persistence often stimulates true advances in science.

As an essayist, he claims not to work hard or systematically at his writing, and I tend to believe him: his words appear to have flowed from him, a simple but faithful reflection of a man of easy wit, deep intelligence, and real concern for his world and the organisms he shares it with.

He writes of many things: early medical practice — when physicians could do little more than wait for diseases to take their natural course, his own training, medical research on the battlefronts of World War II, and his adventures in medical academe. He writes with equal facility of mycoplasmas and endotoxins, and of comparative philology and the politics of medicine. Thomas rarely touches on his personal life, but his own character and personality shine through.

The present book is in the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation series, designed to stimulate public understanding of science by encouraging accomplished and articulate scientists to write accounts of their lives. Thomas fulfills his role masterfully, with an easily read book that does not attempt to proselytize, but nonetheless conveys a message as to how science is done, and what stimulates scientists.

Douglas H. Johnson
Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center
Jamestown, ND 58401