HEADMASTER

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At Wyatt Mason

Photograph by Noel Spirandelli
HEAD MASTER

DANIEL MASON, a 42-year-old practicing psychiatrist, has quietly emerged as one of the finest prose stylists in American fiction—bringing a clinician's mind to the construction of interior worlds.

BY WYATT MASON

Photograph by NOEL SPIRANDELLI
The New York Times Magazine
sling, off a nonscandal pathway in the Psychiatry and Behavioral
Research building at Stanford University, inside a small, windowless office
desk; sitting desk; bookcase; chair — the 42-year-old physician’s connoisseur of
traditional and modern psychiatric "techniques," and the "treatment with
triumph," Mason said, in his swift, reassuring cadence, "in which people
go into the room without a ring on it. So this kind of disclosure
argument, that I don’t think is essentially a real issue. I mean, the
tradition Mason was referring to is in psychiatry; the room in question
on one in which a clinician would encounter distressed patients (in
me, the infantile, impatient psychiatric unit of Stanford Hospital, where
he was the psychiatrist); the ring was a wedding band that Mason
had in mind was his having answered to my question — the
of them; the 17th hour of them, then — questions about his life.

The 16th hour of them, then — questions about his life. In
Mason’s opinion, the time of his earlier generations of psychiatrists
continued, one leg of his long, lean frame crossed loosely over the
And I think that, generally, what we’re taught is that if a person uses
oral, that important thing is asking us why they want to know
what they think.

why, exactly, would a married doctor enter a room without a ring?

This is a question that Mason constantly returns to in his work.

"What’s the difference between a female patient, who is an artist, her doctor and the patient’s
husband. But during the course of his research for the book, Mason (to
whom, I should say, I am not related) made a discovery. I was researching
the history of the art of psychotherapy, and I was looking at the ways in
which the Austro-Hungarian Army finds itself so ill equipped for the
war that they don’t have enough doctors. So they invest in medical students
with little or no training in psychiatry. I was able to find a few papers that
when I had just finished medical school, was deeply aware of all
of sudden this whole new range of human experience that I hadn’t known
existed before. Suffering mostly, Physical and metaphysical, but one is
more impressed with the suffering that you see when you look behind the
scenes and the way in which their lives, haven’t suffered an illness as severe as the illnesses
they will encounter in their patients. And it sounds so unbelievable naïve, but I don’t
think it’s true. I think it’s a real problem."

Mason’s favorite of Mason’s stories to date, "The Excitement of Audley Wallace,
"includes a more explicit investigation of our species. Wallace
was an American psychologist who, independently of Freud, developed
the fieldwork, developed the theory of evolution through natural selection
before Darwin published "The Origin of Species." Mason stresses at Wall-
crosses and is naturally more interesting?"

Mason himself traveled down the Amazon in 2004 after graduating from
college. He says it remains one of the most extraordinary experi-
ences of his life. "There was something that happened to the perception of
time during the long days, the long nights, which gave me a sense of
a fundamentally different way of experiencing the world," But though this
ing journey inspired the Wallace story, it wasn’t enough to be a story in itself.
I would say that my personal history is not so interesting. Mason
shares a small smile that predicted his questioner’s disbelief. "I do believe
that. Now, the psychiatrist sitting with me would say: When you say
that your personal history is not so interesting, do you really think
that your personal history is actually painful or difficult, and so this is a
reflecting that: I don’t know if that’s the case. I actually do think I grew
up without the trials of most people?"

Mason recalls a childhood spent outdoors, in pre-com-
Palo Alto. He and his younger sister grew up with a moth-
er who taught art in an elementary school and a father
who was a radiologist.

"It’s one of the most technical professions in medicine," Mason
said. "I think that the way I grew up around it, because of my father
practicing it, radiology had a kind of mystical quality — the idea that
my father was somebody who could see inside other people was a mystical
thing."

Mason was an nộitive radiologist who taught at a radiology
back together, who read magazines about bikes and how to take them apart
and put them back together. There were baseball cards and stamps. There
were math competitions. There was the seasonal sports cycle — soccer,
baseball, basketball. There were posters on his wall: "Wheels of the World" a
Lamborghini. He played clarinet because he had to. He excelled because he
just liked it. By the time he was 19, Mason had an awareness that there
was something different about it from where he grew up.

When he arrived, he landed under a sense of insecurity. "It wasn’t an easy
transition for me," Mason said. Mason, however, left his home and his.

He was lonely there, homesick. Early in his junior year, he thought of
transferring back to California to be closer to home. His adviser, perhaps

In the image, Mason is discussing his experiences with his personal history and how

The information we receive about ourselves others isn’t, of course, the exclusive province of
psychiatrists; it’s the regular texture of human interaction. How many or how

I had to tell Mason, I didn’t like my wife, apparently. I don’t under-
younger of those leads the psychiatrist down these totally different paths.

Mason’s brother in law died, and Mason said it was a difficult time.
On wears his ring while seeing patients, as do many of his colleagues.
I think that measure of clinical transparency, he was clear during our
courses that this was essential to his ability to practice medicine.

Mason’s father was a cotton gin merchant in his own right and

Mason was married to a woman who was a writer, and he

Mason described his childhood as "a time of" education, where

Mason’s father was a cotton gin merchant in his own right and

Mason is discussing his experiences with his personal history and how
sensing this lack of direction, introduced him to the young mathematician Ellis McKenzie, then a graduate student working on applying mathematical models to malaria infections. "Not only was Ellis kind and generous with his time for a clueless undergraduate," Mason explained, "but also there was something about him that was familiar. He had gone to college in Santa Cruz, spent a lot of time on the same beaches and redwoods, wore flip-flops in winter. He also introduced me to a way of thinking across disciplines, which I hadn’t encountered in my classes. The project was to apply population models to the changing levels of malaria parasites in human blood, and Ellis introduced me to thinking of the body as a kind of ecosystem, rather than just as a ‘behemoth’ and ‘us’ in this way, he anticipated the current interest in the microorganisms. But even more than mixing disciplines like population biology and medicine, he had this respect for older literature and had discovered this remarkable old data set of blood-parasite levels from back in the early 1900s when people were infected with malaria to treat their symp-
tomology. (The high fever of malaria was thought to kill the organism that causes syphilis.)” In some ways, Mason continued, “my current interests in psychiatry come from this notion that he embodied, that biomedicine has enormous debts to other fields of biology, to the humanities.”

Mason graduated with a degree in biology in 1988, writing his thesis on the population dynamics of mixed-species malaria infections. Building on that work, he spent the following year in Thailand on a Luce Scholarship—a malaria research in Bangkok and at field sites on the southern Thai-Burmese border, preparation for what he supposed would be his specialization in medical school when he returned: infectious diseases.

Though Mason began medical school at the University of California, San Francisco, in 1999, he did not practice medicine until 2011. During his first year, gross anatomy overshadow and tissue samples in the microscopes, in a state he describes as complete disassociation, Mason began writing a novel prompted by his time in Burma—needed to, in fact. "I returned home exhausted, not only of the world, but of the medicine that was there, and I wanted to capture it, somehow. Preserve the experience. Otherwise it was going to be lost.”

"I don’t think about psychiatry,” Mason said. “And then at a certain point I thought: If I’m going to share it with friends and family, could Kirk’s do a nice job of printing this than just binding it on one of those spiral things that everybody uses to carry books around?" Mason mentioned, being beginning clinical rotations in 2001, Mason had managed to complete, and sell, a draft. Published in 2002, it was “The Piano Tuner.”

Mason began writing a novel a year after starting a job as a travel writer, and travel, especially in Brazil, he had begun conceiving two more novels—the writing of one and the researching of another—as well as the first of the suite of stories. Though he had intended to continue directly into his medical residency, the unexpected success of the first novel gave Mason time to try being a full-time fiction writer. "It didn’t go well. The ease with which he wrote the first book—the pure, unadorned freedom of writing only for himself, which Mason now calls ‘a kind of conceptual barfing’—seemed to have been drained out of me. I began to feel that I had finished ‘The Piano Tuner,’ perhaps because of the attention, and a lot focused on the historical and musical apparatus in the book. I thought, ‘I just can’t capture anything, other than put into a nice fictional form some pretty cool stuff.’

Mainly, Mason sensed that he had failed to get close enough to his pro-
tagonist. So he had to come back to Brazil and explore this other story—two convicts on a ship of Pedro Cabral’s, mentioned in the record of his voyage as having been left on shore to learn the native language and weeping at the news. I thought: Great setting, the ship, and from so I went from town to town finding cool things, but I began to feel like I all am doing is taking this history and arranging it into a more palpable form.”

"I was trying to do something different in a book about a 13-year-old girl. My intent was to write about somebody torn up from the roots they come from. I think I would have felt less restraint in retrospect and would have suffered less in the writing book if I had picked a goldilocks. Certainly, when I was writing it, that thought came across my mind: Do I have a right to be writing this person’s story? And then there was this resistant thought that said, ‘It’s a work of fiction, and it’s work of the imagination, and I’m here.’

The novel received a more muted reception than its first, by which time Mason was also three years into a third novel that would become “The Winter Soldier.” “The Winter Soldier” was not about the war, but about the war. I was constantly thinking about and dreaming about the war. I was constantly trying to write about it. I was constantly trying to write about it. I had a constant thought: ‘I want to write about the war.’ But I also didn’t feel like that was on the side of the patient, so I was just weird and so confused. You would be confused with no comp-
stitution. His diagnosis of early benign hemorrhaging and the relentless demands of his centers and death, was met by razing, even thunderous, applause.

Seeking experience, Lucius enlists when doctors see him as needed at the front, the pages devoted to his route there placing the reader deep in a very different world of expectations:

The forest thinned. They passed empty fields, now scarred by war. Bomb craters, abandoned barracks, trenches. From a tree, some-
how, I was able to see the armoured train out of legibility. At the far end of the field lay a dark pake of what seemed like boulders, but as we drew closer, I saw that they were frozen horses. Their hair remained in place, and their eyes were open, glassy, and flowers bloomed from their heads. In the shadows of the forest, I thought I saw others.

What Lucius finds, once arrived at the deserted "hospital" in the Carpa-
ten, that hospital a bombed-out church, is a whole new medical ecosystem. There, Lucius is on the scene in the chaotic, war-torn city. Mar-
garet, a young woman, has been treating the scores of grievously wounded, undertaking amputations and triage and palliative care on her own, and Lucius is told that taking on the hospital is a means of payment for Margaret: the heart of the book, a gloriously real creation, a mystery that Lucius wants to know, solve, failure. Accumulate as the war wears on. A

patient is brought in, who, amid all the varieties of suffering on the floor of the church, stands out: speeches, moths, tears, and

kind of shock. Lucius and Margaret will try to read, in very different to him. What unfolds is a kind of parade of what it means to lumbers, to cherish, to bear, that is, performing the life of a doctor’s cure. It marks an evolution in Mason’s idea of a novel. Game Information forLucius and the Winter Soldier is a pure investigation of a story. Kest is Mason’s commissar and through the war. I think there are many better things to read than my book. So the

is: What am I bringing to it?

I wouldn’t write about psychiatry because I would risk not to understand it. I would risk not to understand it. I’m not interested in learning about Lucius or a doctor’s cure. That marks an evolution in Mason’s idea of a novel. Game Information for Lucius and the Winter Soldier is a pure investigation of a story. Keep is Mason’s commissar and through the war. I think there are many better things to read than my book. So the

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is: What am I bringing to it?
In San Francisco in 1930, the year his first novel was published, the "Piano Tuner" in London, Germany.

This lack of direction, introduced to him by the young mathematician, led by a buzz of a new, fresh, practical to his medical residency, the unexpected success of the first novel gave Maier time to be a full-time fiction writer.

It didn’t go well. The ease with which he wrote the first book – the pure, unfeigned freedom of writing only for himself – did not survive. "A kind of lost youth" - was replaced by difficulty. "If characterization is the trouble I had with the second book, it felt very inhibited, I wondered, Why am I doing this? If you start asking yourself, you’re not writing for yourself." The book took five years in all and was by design a very different book than its predecessor.

I began to feel when I finished "The Piano Tuner", perhaps because of the attention, and a lot focused on the language and kining from this notion that he embodied, that his music had a different flow to it. I thought, Maybe I didn’t capture anything, other than put into a nice fictional form some pretty cool stuff!

Mainly, Maier sensed that he had failed to get close enough to his protagonist. So he sought a new direction. "I had gone to Brazil to research for this other story - two convicts on a ship of Pedro Cabral's, mentioned in the record of his voyage as having been left on shore to learn the native language and weeping as the caravels sailed off. And I thought: Great premise, and so I went from town to town finding cool things, but I began to feel: All I’m doing is taking this history and arranging it into a salable form." Wishing to avoid that pitfall, Maier abandoned the Cabral story and scrubbed "A Far Country" detailed history and place, writing it from the point of view of a 14-year-old girl, then a graduate student writing mathematical and readable, "I honestly, my intent was not to write about the experience of a 13-year-old girl. My intent was to write about somebody torn up from the roots they come from. I think I would have been restrained in retrospect and would have suffered less in writing the book had I picked a gold rush migrant. Certainly, when I was writing it, that thought came across my mind: Do I have to be writing this person’s story? And then there was this resistance that said: It’s a work of fiction, and it’s a work of the imagination, and I’m here."

The novel received a more positive reception than his first, which by time Maier was about 30. In 1932, he chose to focus on the "Winter Soldier," and which, like the second, wasn’t going as planned. It was vast, it was a story of the Great War, it was a novel of history that was also trying to be a novel of personal history, about what happened to the soldier and how was it not working. By 2010, “it had become this huge appendage that I was constantly trying to get into shape.” Maier didn’t know what to do about it and it was disapproved.

"When I didn’t decide to go back to medicine, there was this existential pressure on the book to be worth existence. If this book is not expressing everything, what is it doing with my life? And if what I was attempting to do was trying to do something in the book to make life meaningful, it’s a pretty tall order. And if I’m going to have to survive on this financially, it had to find meaning to me."

Fate intervened. Maier, who had passed his first two medical board exams, would have to complete the third by 1933. “Between 2003 and 2010, there were more months I died than time in Brazil, in 2001, it was "The Piano Tuner"..."

I think it’s not unusual to lead a divided professional life. Many doctors, say, split their work, as Maier himself does, between practicing medicine and teaching it, not to say poet and novelist, when her husband, Maier had written fiction, quite a long and interesting list, among them Babels, Chekov, Bulgakov, Gelline and William Carlos Williams. "It is a terrible thing, I think, to have two writers; both are working; both are worth writing."

1903, or 1932, is the story of a concert pianist, a college professor; Wallace Stevens as an insurance executive; Amandor the story of one who was trained as an architect. If this kind of bifurcation isn’t uncommon, the psychiatrist who has written a novel is also not unheard-of. Peter D. Kramer, famous for "Listening to Prozac," has written short novels and a book, "Spectacular Happiness," and the prolific Portuguese writer António Lobo Antunes, who long maintained a clinical practice, has been mentioned as a potential laureate for the Nobel Prize for Literature, although he would have to give one again.

Even so, Maier’s "The Winter Soldier" is a risky book, at least within contemporary standards. So much writing currently in critical favor – that of Rachel Cusk, Karl Ove Knausgard, Ben Lerner – exploits the tension between the world on the page and the world that variously inspires those pages to recompose fiction on the author. Whereas Maier takes a resolutely old-fashioned approach by believing in the historical fiction – a genre which treats that the world and history may be seized unsentimentally, without the author’s formal unessentializing in "The Winter Soldier" is about the varieties of human suffering, which, you could say, is risky, because that’s what that the long literary tradition from Homer forward has always sought to illuminate: the ways in which we bring pain to others and to ourselves. In short, we should try to avoid compassion. At the heart of Maier’s attempt to add to that tradition is a young medical student named Lucius, son of a prominent Polish family. Maier gives glimpses of the brutality involved in medical training and the brutality that needs to be noticed and then, by the student, negotiated:

"Sometimes he was called forth as Proctor. In Neurology, he stood next to the day’s patient, a seventy-two-year-old locksmith from the Italian Zyri, with such severe aphasia that he could only mutter ‘Da.’ His daughter translated the doctor’s queries into Italian. As the man tried to answer, his mouth opened and closed like a baby bird. ‘Da’ he said, face red with frustration, at murmurs of fascination and awe. Bla, Bla, Bla, Bla!”

"If you do not understand the importance of the question, Lucius diagnosed a tumor of the temporal lobe, trying to keep his thoughts on the science and away how miserable he was. He did not want to promise about what he could do. He was going to keep her husband, ‘you will step that?’ Professor shouted at her, stopping her fingers, ‘you will disturb the learning!’ Lucius was a somewhat isolated student, with few social responsi- bilities before the daughter, and he had himself for amusing. But he also did not like to say that the husband was on the side of the patient, who was a nurse. Lucius held his silence and at the end he was asked to write down a precise and passionate. His diagnosis of early atrophic dementia and the relentless destruction of the breathing centers and death, was met by rising, even thunderous applause.

Seeking experience, Lucius enlists when doctors are needed at the front, the pages devoted to his route three player reading deep into a very different world of expectations:

The forest thinned. They passed empty fields, now scarred by war. Here and there, a precious meadow, a stream, a lone bird. Even the trees, something was wrong, a body, now encased almost entirely in ice. At the far end of the field by the dark pile of what seemed like boulders, but we drew near, we could see a rock that was once a tree. Among the trees, perhaps fifty, half-covered in snow. Garish, dark-red flowers bloomed from their heads. In the shadows of the forest, he thought he saw others.

What Lucius finds, once arrived at the deserted "hospital" in the Carpathian Mountains, is a hospital in itself, a whole new medical education at the hands of the one nurse in the doctorless outpost. Mar- garet, a young man, has been treating the scores of grievously wounded, understood, but the world outside, and Lucius will learn, or not, what caring for people in pain entails. Margaret is the heart of the book, a gloriously real creation, a mystery that Lucius wants to know, solve, fail. Fainters accumulate as the war wears on. A patient is brought in, one who, amid all the varieties of suffering sprawled on the floor of the church, stands out: speechless, motionless, in some kind of shock. Lucius and Margaret will try, in their very different ways, to cure him. What unifies is a kind of parable of what it means to sit with suffering, to charm it, to bear it, the novel performing the limits of a doctor’s cure. It is an evolution in Maier’s novel of a idea. Gone is information for its own sake; gone is a pure investigation of a conscious- ness, Kept is a incensed committee to history, in the way.

I know the book will fit under the Library of Congress designation for "historical fiction", if you want to talk about the world, the concern, I think there are many better things to read than my book. So the question is: What am I bringing to it?

I couldn’t write honestly about psychiatry because I would risk betray- ing confidences. What’s interesting for a novel is all the complex feelings that a doctor has. The mistakes that he makes. The bad medicine that he practices. The guilt that he feels. And I felt that any additional anxiety would fly back into my life, which is taking care of people who would be reading this novel in which there’s this psychotherapist who feels he’s doing a bad job and who needs to make mistakes to move the book.

We shouldn’t mistake Maier’s decision for an evasion so much as a decision about the kind of doctor he insists on trying to be and the kind of metaphysic he hopes his work will embody. Although "The Winter Soldier" contains some of the most brutal moments of suffering I’ve encountered in fiction, they’re never just there to move the story along. They allow the reader to sit very close to someone in great pain and to listen to them. They feel entirely of a piece with the story Maier is telling, both about history and about one man’s personal history, a story that, for that imagined doctor, involves a great, signal failure.

His failing is that he failed to protect someone from harm, violating his oath, with is both simple and so profound in all its implications. This idea of doctor as hero is a quintessential one for a novel.

What if, I wondered, there were an oath for novelist?

"It’s hard for me to be cruel in writing," Maier said, with feeling. "I don’t like the idea of the novel as an instrument for the exercise of power, I think I could have written if it weren’t looking for moments of lightness. Maybe what I’m trying to do in the end is create the possibility for kindness or;" Maier said, after a pause, for relief.!!