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A hospital and its heroes
With his saga of two medical families, Daniel Kalla expands his range

Of Flesh and Blood

by Daniel Kalla
Forge Books, 445 pages
Review by Catherine J. Johnson

“Where the hell is my heart?” With that pointed question, Vancouver doctor/author Daniel Kalla plunges us straight into the frenzied pace of the OR and a medical drama that spans a hundred years. He’s a strong storyteller who keeps his characters moving and struggling, and we’re right there struggling with them rooting for them.

Of Flesh and Blood is the saga of two families, the McGraths and the Alfredsons, and the establishing of their hospital in the Pacific Northwest during the late 1800s. “The Alfredson” becomes a world-renowned centre for state-of-the-art treatment, especially in cardiac care and childhood cancers.

The story is fuelled by conflict, weaving back and forth through the lives of the founders and their present-day descendants, and Kalla handles this cleverly, through the voice of an elderly aunt and excerpts from a family biography.

Dr. Tyler McGrath is the story’s contemporary central character. He’s a charismatic young cancer specialist, filled with compassion for the children he treats and for their parents. His personal involvement proves detrimental, although he knows intellectually that “the best oncologists detach themselves emotionally from patient and family,” offering “absolute professional objectivity.”

Yet after explaining the potential complications and side effects associated with Vintazomab, an experimental cancer drug, he opts not to tell the parents of 11-year-old Nate “that the only fatalities in the [drug] treatment group had occurred in the smaller subset of patients who, like Nate, needed to have the medicine injected directly into their spinal fluid. “This drug was the patient’s last hope, and Tyler saw no point in adding to the [parents’] overwhelming burden.

His decision subsequently devastates the parents and jeopardizes the Alfredson at a time when the hospital is already wracked by crises.

Dr. Jill Laidlaw is Tyler’s brilliant, ambitious wife. A specialist in neurodegenerative disorders, she is leading a “potentially ground-breaking multiple sclerosis study” based on stem cell research.

Jill and Tyler have moved back to Tyler's hometown so Jill can further her career at the Alfredson. Tyler has misgivings, wondering whether it will be good for him to practise in the shadow of his family's history.

Although the couple's emotional, social and sex life is dwindling rapidly, Jill is "thrilled by the implications of [her] early [research] findings. Her grant renewal would be a slam dunk now. Suddenly, the likelihood of publication in one of the most prestigious journals, such as *Nature* or *Science* loomed large in her mind. She sensed that big scientific accolades might greet such a landmark stem cell study, including major awards or prizes. Maybe even *the* prize."

Other characters we meet are: Tyler's sister, Erin McGrath, a cardiac surgeon whose career may be in jeopardy due to recurring symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder; William McGrath, president and CEO of the Alfredson and father of Tyler and Erin, who lives and breathes the hospital with bull-headed pride; Nikki Salazar, an attractive nurse with a secret and an eye for Tyler; elderly Aunt Dot, and her niece Lorna, both obsessed with the family history but for very different reasons; and three predecessors whose ambitions, desires and struggles have shaped the present.

A criticism of Kalla's 2005 medical thriller, *Pandemic*, was that characters were introduced solely to be lectured to, as a way of giving readers information about the underlying science. This is not the case with *Of Flesh and Blood*. For the most part, we receive our medical background via doctor-patient conversations.

These may be a tad long on occasion, but I'm thinking that the conversations we have with our own doctors would sound similar if someone were eavesdropping.

That Kalla is an emergency room physician lends credibility to the story, particularly to its technical details. I enjoy learning while being entertained—and it's riveting entertainment, the sort that keeps you from getting at your chores.

That said, I wasn't keen on the explanations given in parentheses. There weren't many, but they detracted from the writing and seemed odd in a work of fiction.

One reviewer of Kalla's *Rage Therapy* (2006) felt that the narration didn't differ sufficiently from the dialogue. This happens occasionally here but doesn't detract from the novel's readability. I was so absorbed in the story, eating up the pages, that I was able to shrug it off.

The author uses interior monologue in his characters sparingly and to good effect: "'You self-righteous bastard!' Nikki calmed herself before she fired back a knee-jerk response."

Characterization is strong throughout. We get close enough to this cast of characters that they indeed become flesh and blood—even minor characters, such as an anesthesiologist "with a terse Afrikaner inflection."

As he has done in previous works, Kalla sticks to relevant topics, providing readers with something substantial to latch hold of. Stem cell research, cancer treatment and super bugs all contribute to this fast-paced, intelligent thriller.

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