I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death, by Maggie O’Farrell

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**I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death, by Maggie O’Farrell**

The Edinburgh Neurology Book Club had a unique opportunity to explore Maggie O’Farrell’s memoirs ‘I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death’ with the author present, which provided an intimate forum for reflection on the common ground we shared: an unusual familiarity with death. O’Farrell suffered a mysterious neurological illness in childhood—we settled on acute cerebellitis, but the case wasn’t closed—which was a focal point and catalyst for her unsettlingly frequent encounters with death in childhood and early adulthood. Chapters purposefully meander through time and take their titles from the body part at risk, offering a chilling recount of anaphylaxis in her early life, and as a result, frequent and varied experiences with the typical detachment and panic that her neurological diagnosis—was an observer. The conversation started where our best efforts were in vain. Our readiness to question our assumptions, our explanations, and the parts we play in the real-life emotional dramas unfolding in every day practice was varied. But O’Farrell’s presence, and her willingness and ability to describe vividly her personal experiences—many of which she associated with deep emotional pain—encouraged a rare openness and the discussion slowly softened. We began to share our own painful personal stories with O’Farrell, who admitted her book’s impact on others continued to surprise her.

In our early exchanges, O’Farrell was an observer. The conversation started where we are conditioned to be comfortable: discussion of medicalised experiences through the distorted and dispassionate doctor’s lens. We shared professional experiences with the typical detachment that serves as a coping mechanism to ensure day-to-day maintenance of our sanity: challenging consultations in the clinic and attending cardiac arrest calls where our best efforts were in vain. Our readiness to question our own approaches, our explanations, and the parts we play in the real-life emotional dramas unfolding in every day practice was varied. But O’Farrell’s presence, and her willingness and ability to describe vividly her personal experiences—many of which she associated with deep emotional pain—encouraged a rare openness and the discussion slowly softened. We began to share our own painful personal stories with O’Farrell, who admitted her book’s impact on others continued to surprise her.

As we allowed our vulnerabilities to surface, the conversation came full circle with renewed insight and empathy, and we closed by asking O’Farrell what she valued most in life; her depiction of doctors and the case wasn’t closed—which was a focal point and catalyst for her unsettlingly frequent encounters with death in childhood and early adulthood. Chapters purposefully meander through time and take their titles from the body part at risk, offering a chilling recount of anaphylaxis in her early life, and as a result, frequent and varied experiences with the typical detachment and panic that her neurological diagnosis—was an observer. The conversation started where our best efforts were in vain. Our readiness to question our assumptions, our explanations, and the parts we play in the real-life emotional dramas unfolding in every day practice was varied. But O’Farrell’s presence, and her willingness and ability to describe vividly her personal experiences—many of which she associated with deep emotional pain—encouraged a rare openness and the discussion slowly softened. We began to share our own painful personal stories with O’Farrell, who admitted her book’s impact on others continued to surprise her.

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interrogation of the finer details of her neurological diagnosis—was tempered. Instead, we drew inspiration from O’Farrell’s willingness to share her personal stories with us, both through her writing, and now in person.

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