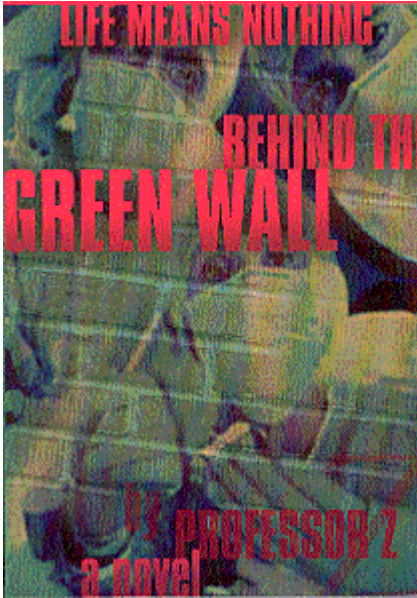


Life Means Nothing: Behind the Green Wall

by Professor Z, 314 pp., with gloss, US\$ 19.00 ISBN 0-9665240-5-5, Griffith Publishing, 2002. See the book at [this web page \[http://www.hodi.com/greenwall.html\]](http://www.hodi.com/greenwall.html), for sample chapters.

Reviewed by
Barry Armstrong



Surgery has a dark side. To operate is to harm, at least in part. The surgeon is human and fallible. Hence, as a surgeon progresses through his schooling, his training and his practice, he gathers an emotional entourage – he is followed by a parade of ghosts. This graveyard of unsuccessful cases follows him, haunts him and sometimes besets him.

Professor Z, the hero of **Behind the Green Wall** has laboured, from his early days of training, with the mantra, “*Life means nothing*”.

Z arrives in a prestigious New York hospital, to a position of comfort and respect. Still, he must fight off the ghosts. “*Life means nothing, I remind myself after losing another patient.*”

Medical errors are making the news -- with increasing and annoying regularity. The 1960's had a passion for murder mysteries, on television and in the movies. I expect that a popular basis of shows, for the next few decades, will be medical calamities (murder mysteries, of a sort). Professor Z is positioned to draft the scripts for this new genre, and we hope that a sequel to this novel is underway.

“No wonder every radiologist drives a Mercedes,” I commented to the resident acidly. I left the ER in disgust. As I climbed the stairs to my office, I recalled that last week an HMO rejected my bill, because I'd admitted a patient for observation and did 'no investigations' on him ...”

“...All his charts underwent such improvements,” said Carducci. “There are new pre-operative notes -- explaining the indications, and there are new post-death notes justifying the mortality...”

This book could be compared with Samuel Shem's, [House of God](#) (1979). Both are insiders' looks at the sordid side of teaching hospitals. Like **House of God**, it can be seen as a rollicking good story or as a tragic portrayal of an all-too-real hospital culture. But, **Behind the Green Wall** is written from the heart and soul of a wise and mature surgeon, not the passion of a confused youth. The viewpoint of the youthful doctor was also taken in Belkin's [First, Do No Harm](#) (1993). That book is too simplistic and syrupy, for my taste. I prefer the brutal honesty and flawed characters portrayed in Professor Z's novel.

A more fitting comparison is to Gawande's [Complications](#). Gawande is the surgeon who wrote the recent review of iatrogenic foreign bodies in Massachusetts. Comparing the writings of these two surgeon-authors, we suspect that Professor Z is at least a New York doppelganger, if not an identical twin of Boston's Gawande. The similarity of their approaches is haunting, but superficial. Who is Professor Z? I note that Gawande's articles were first published in the [New Yorker](#) magazine. I wonder...

Professor Z goes beyond the genre of the Morbidity and Mortality conference, a genre that so limits Gawande's articles. In **Behind the Green Wall**, Professor Z develops characters, their passions and scheming, boldly and effectively. Z paints, more clearly and understandably, the crude financial and political forces that can corrupt care.

The flaws in Z's novel included a few grammatical or spelling errors, in the first edition. Sadly, most of the sexual activity occurs offstage. Although there is obviously animal heat in the hospital, Z teases us with allusions and oblique references only. The woman approaches the hot tub, her robe falls away, she invites him to stroke her foot... and Z begins daydreaming about the Health Department! In contrast to the muted sexuality, the social intrigue, political manoeuvring and operating room action are each placed in the forefront of the novel with Dickensian clarity (blood and pus splashing our shoes, or worse).

[*Life Means Nothing: Behind the Green Wall*](#) should find a home on the reading table of every surgeon and of every surgical trainee. First, it will remind them of the limits to their medical skill and medical science. Second, it will serve as a caution – warning of the dark side of medical practice and of those who serve that darkness.