

Sheard, Tim (2015) *Someone Has to Die*, Hardball Press, Brooklyn, Ny.

Review by Cherie Rankin

Someone Has to Die is the latest installment of the Lenny Moss mystery series written by Timothy Sheard. Lenny Moss, a custodian at James Madison Medical Center, this time finds himself investigating the case of Anna Louisa, by all accounts a first-rate, conscientious nurse whose patient is discovered dead at the shift change, allegedly the victim of misadministered insulin at Anna Louisa's hand. Facts don't add up, however, and Lenny enlists the help of his wide network of co-workers to figure out what really happened and to save Anna Louisa's job and reputation.

Anna Louisa's case is used in the novel to highlight multiple tensions currently plaguing American medicine. One of the primary tensions represented in the book is the pitting of humans against machines in the practice of medicine -- of the difficult but absolute necessity of drawing the line between technology and human care, kindness, and decision making. At James Madison, the administration is heavily pushing a system called ADTP, or 'the Advanced Diagnostic and Treatment Program,' a computer program into which symptoms and history are fed, and which responds with suggested tests, possible diagnoses and courses of treatment. In one early exchange, the issues here become clear. After a patient's history and symptoms are fed into the program, staff looks over the resultant list of possible diagnoses and suggested tests:

Bilici [the presiding doctor] looked over the Fellow's shoulder, frowning. 'Hmm, that's a very long list.'

'Do we have to order all those tests' the female intern asked.

'Yes and no,' said Bilici. 'Technically the computer makes 'recommendations.' But if you don't order one of them and in the end that failure leads to a delay in diagnosis, or worse, to medical complications, you will be roasted alive by the performance improvement people. And of course, the family will sue you from now until you give up your practice and get a job at a McDonald's flipping burgers.'

'No wonder medical care is so expensive in this country,' the intern said.

'Ours is not to reason why, ours is to cover our ass,' said Bilici. (29)

At multiple points in the narrative, the ADTP suggestions run counter to the intuitions of seasoned diagnosticians while patient lives hang in the balance, and Sheard does a solid job in the book of making clear that human intuition and experience are discounted at the peril of patients.

A second tension in the story has to do with workers' right to privacy and autonomy on the job, free from administrative monitoring. Sheard paints an infuriating picture of work life and working conditions for nurses. Nurses are forced to wear GPS devices on lanyards around their necks, which not only record their every move but

also all verbal interaction and conversation: ‘When Mimi heard the dispatcher order her down to Mr. Hatcher’s room ‘STAT,’ she grasped the GPS unit hanging from a lanyard around her neck and silently cursed, knowing the dispatcher could hear every word she spoke. Since curses were a violation of hospital policy, Mimi and the rest of the nurses had learned to silently mouth their curses or to express them with hands signals that expressed their anger and disgust’. The movements of nurses are tracked constantly and they have no privacy, even during restroom breaks (when they can get them) and meals.

Finally, there is the constant battle by administration to maximize profits and cut costs, against the rights of workers to decent wages and working conditions. Labor strife is a major part of the narrative, with Anna Louisa’s case taking place as the hospital system is trying to cut workers’ benefits. The union president says at a rally, late in the book: ‘They want to take away our prescription benefits while they receive million dollar salaries and golden parachutes when they leave! They want you to live on charity or in a shelter when they cut off your pension checks!’. It’s clear throughout the book that the criminal actions being taken in the James Madison hospital system are not those of Anna Louisa; it is the cost-cutting, profit-first hospital administration that is truly putting patients at risk and ruining the lives of hospital workers.

The counter to all these tensions -- the administrative pressure, unfair treatment of workers, and danger to patients -- is clear in the narrative. The counter is solidarity, communality, on the part of the workers. It is Lenny’s network of contacts, built up over years of demonstrated trustworthiness, that he calls on to help solve Anna Louisa’s case. It is years of favors given and then returned that help him do what needs to be done, as workers circumvent the broken system to help Lenny find answers. It is the workers’ willingness to band together and take risks as a group that prevents their benefits and protections from being taken away. We see Lenny Moss’ world in this book, and it is a connected world. Workers protect each other, workers protect their patients, and even the lowest in the order of things are vital to the system, right down to custodians like Lenny Moss.

Reviewer Bio

Cherie Rankin is a Professor of English at Heartland Community College in Normal, IL. She is currently on sabbatical, researching the workers who were employed as part of the William Scully land empire in the midwestern U.S. during the mid-19th and early 20th centuries.