

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

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Frank Huyler, **RIGHT OF THIRST**, 355 pp. Harper Perennial \$14.99 978-0-06-168754-9

Frank Huyler's trenchant novel is rife with reversals and refusals on the part of author as well as hero. Charles Anderson, a cardiologist who has helped his terminally ill wife die, volunteers to assist with earthquake relief in a remote and mountainous Islamic country (unnamed). Here Dr. Anderson encounters, as well as a beautiful young fellow volunteer, much sinister military and political maneuvering on the part of his hosts at the refugee camp. But although *Right of Thirst* features not only suspense, a breathtakingly vivid account of an emergency amputation, and starkly lovely scenic descriptions, this novel refuses to be a thriller. Nor is it an uplifting story of redemption, of new meaning and love achieved in middle age. Anderson's guilt-sparked, idealistic sire to start afresh and help those in need founders in disappointment, betrayal, confusion.

Not that *Right of Thirst* is cynical or satirical. Like *The Blood of Strangers*, Huyler's riveting non-fiction book about E.R. medicine, this novel is scrupulous and severe in its allegiance to truth-telling. Huyler has written of "the fine line between altruism and self-interest that pervades medical life – the good and the bad together." *Right of Thirst* never glosses over Anderson's helpless sense of alienation: "I had expected to lose myself in work, in a foreign land, freed from the burden of the familiar. Instead I felt as if I was gazing into a clear pool, bottomless, searching for signs in the depths, and all I found was the ghost of my own faces, and the faces of all the others, in imperfect reflections."

Yet this unsentimental novel, like its hero, manages to wrest a measure of meaning, hope, and beauty from the most unpromising circumstances. With the resources he has – medical expertise, money – Anderson tries to make what restitution he can for a death for which he feels partly responsible; he also leaves funds for an artificial leg for the girl whose foot he has amputated, and for the education of the daughters of the man to whom he has no choice but to entrust the money. As the novel ends, neither Anderson nor the reader can know whether his trust will prove to be justified.

-Rachel Hadas