



Figure. Areas of Rutherford, New Jersey, where William Carlos Williams made home visits in his capacity as a pediatrician/obstetrician-gynecologist. September 17, 2008, marks the 125th anniversary of Williams' birth. Photographs reproduced by permission of Thomas Roma.

HOUSE CALLS WITH WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, MD

Edited by Robert Coles and Thomas Roma
 108 pp, \$29.95
 Brooklyn, NY, powerHouse Books, 2008
 ISBN-13: 978-1-5768-7475-2

PHOTOGRAPHY, MEMOIR, AND POETRY ARE SKILLFULLY fused in *House Calls With William Carlos Williams, MD*. This charming little book does much more than honor the life of the renowned physician-writer. It evokes a compelling impression of his work a half century ago. It pays tribute to the drama and majesty of house calls. It lays bare the landscape of a city in the United States. In words and pictures, the book retraces Williams' drive between Paterson and Rutherford, New Jersey, as he made house calls in the early 1950s. The book is a collaborative project between photographer Thomas Roma and Robert Coles, a protégé of Williams. As a young man (and would-be physician), Coles tagged along with Williams during many home visits.

Place has great significance in matters of sickness and health. The gravity of home and the influence of the local environment were important to Williams: "Look around, let your eyes take in the neighborhood—the homes, the stores, the people and places, there waiting to tell you, show you something." He emphasizes the unique nature of a home visit: "A house call brings two

worlds together." He identifies the multiple roles of a physician making a house call—visitor, advisor, and helper. He relishes the mystery and clout of the physician's black bag.

Williams shares many lessons he has learned about medicine. He lists 3 crucial elements of the job: watching, listening, and thinking. He acknowledges the worth of a hunch; intuition should not be underestimated. He embraces the harmony between physicians and artists: "Doctors with a stethoscope, an ophthalmoscope, try to figure things out, get the right medical picture, as do artists, painting or photographing, trying to get their kind of 'right picture.'"

My only minor complaint about the book is that the balance between photographs and poems is skewed. Fewer photographs and more poetry would be preferable: the book includes only 7 poems and 3 excerpts from *Paterson* (Williams' magnum opus) but more than 60 black-and-white photographs. The amount of memoir is just about right. Even so, Coles' reminiscing is stirring, and more would be welcome.

Streets, skies, houses, and trees dominate the photographs. Individuals are often dwarfed by their surroundings. These images achieve much of their splendor from simplicity and clarity. The photographs all convey a similar message: place has character, and location has a voice of its

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own. Beyond the sprawling trees and weathered houses, images of neighborhood streets with parked cars, graffiti on buildings, a church, a hamburger joint, tombstones, and power lines light up the pages.

Special mention needs to be made of “Complaint”—a remarkable poem about a physician traveling a snowy road after midnight to care for a woman. Williams’ verse flashes the call of duty, the spirit of medicine, and the essence of the patient-physician relationship—all in less than 100 words. The opening line is straightforward: “They call me and I go.” It is the final sentence, however, that would thaw even the coldest heart: “I pick the hair from her eyes/and watch her misery/with compassion.”

This book flaunts the beauty of words and the muscle of visuals. The profession of medicine rarely glows as brightly and warmly as it does in these pages. Do not just read this book. Savor it.

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Financial Disclosures: None reported.