



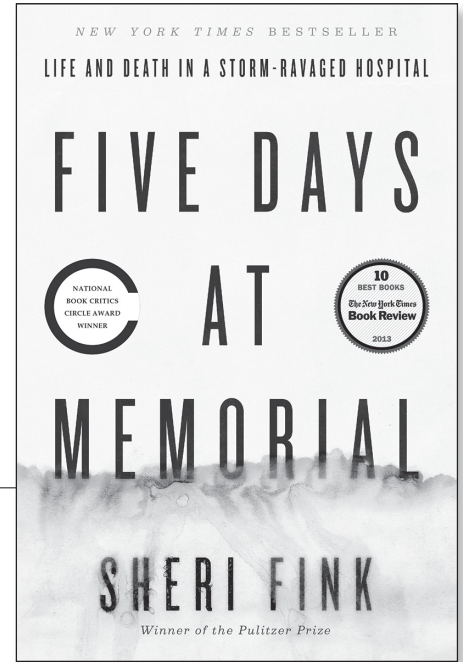
Five Days at Memorial:

Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital

by Sheri Fink

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“What we have here is masterly reporting and the glow of fine writing.”

— Sherwin B. Nuland,
The New York Times Book Review

“Fink’s six years of research and more than 500 interviews yield a rich narrative full of complex characters, wrenching ethical dilemmas, and mounting suspense. General readers and medical professionals alike will finish the book haunted by the question, “What would I have done?”

— *Library Journal* (starred)

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• about the author

SHERI FINK'S reporting has won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Magazine Award, and the Overseas Press Club's Lowell Thomas Award, among other journalism prizes. Most recently, her coverage of Hurricanes Sandy and Isaac received the Berger Award from Columbia University and the Beat Reporting Award from the Association of Healthcare Journalists. Fink, a former relief worker in disaster and conflict zones, received her MD and Ph.D. from Stanford University. Her first book, *War Hospital: A True Story of Surgery and Survival*, is about medical professionals under siege during the genocide in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

• note to discussion leaders

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast in 2005, it revealed the weaknesses in both our nation's preparedness for a catastrophic disaster and our ability to respond effectively in the aftermath. *Five Days at Memorial* examines the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina as it unfolded, focusing on events at Memorial Medical Center, where medical staff cared for patients without running water or electricity for four days as they awaited evacuation. After the storm, three medical professionals—a doctor and two ICU nurses—were investigated for intentionally administering medication to hasten the deaths of critically ill patients.

As a work of nonfiction, *Five Days at Memorial* provides a springboard for discussing a range of issues including medical ethics, euthanasia, the role of government, the legal system, disaster preparedness, and social justice. It is especially applicable for use in courses on public health, nursing, pre-medicine, business administration, law, communications, sociology, and criminal justice. Fink's thoughtfully researched text raises significant ethical questions about the way that care is rationed, the end-of-life options we allow (and who we allow to make those decisions), whether circumstances dictate moral and ethical codes, how public vs. private sectors function in a disaster, and whether euthanasia should ever be an option for patients and/or doctors. In the humanities, the text can be used to study structure, research, and rhetoric. It is an exceptional choice for courses in communications and media literacy since its careful research and objective tone place it in stark contrast to the initial news reports about Katrina.

• discussion and writing

1. The Louisiana State Museum's exhibit "Living With Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond" ends with the following quote from Lt. General Russel L. Honoré: "Until we as a nation develop a sense that preparedness means actual preparation, not just thinking about it, there will come a time when other communities find themselves in the same situation as New Orleans did after Katrina." After reading *Five Days at Memorial*, do you think we are prepared for another disaster of Katrina's magnitude? What concrete things need to be done to "actually prepare" ourselves? What ethical questions need to be addressed?
2. Memorial Medical Center began as a nonprofit Baptist hospital. In the mid-1980s, Dr. Horace Baltz commented on the increasingly commercialized landscape of medicine in the Baptist Hospital newsletter: "Many of us have trouble accepting the business motive in medicine rather than the professional ethic" (page 45). Should medicine be practiced using a "business motive"? What are the intended and unintended consequences of having a market-driven healthcare system? What complications arise when for-profit medical facilities are forced to respond to a disaster? Would things have been different at Memorial if it had been a nonprofit facility? What differences, if any, are there between the two types of entities in today's healthcare system? Note that the hospitals in New York City that suffered during Hurricane Sandy are technically nonprofit.
3. Dr. Bryant King told investigators that he had been deeply troubled by the events at Memorial, saying "he had sent messages to his best friend telling him that 'evil entities' were planning to euthanize patients"(page 267). Examine the way that King responded to both the crisis and its aftermath. Does a person have a moral responsibility to stand up to the powers that be when they believe something is immoral or unethical? If you had been in Dr. King's position, what would you have done?
4. One of the striking revelations about Fink's investigative reporting on the events at Memorial is the fact that there were widely differing opinions among medical professionals working at Memorial regarding end-of-life care. Should a doctor's personal beliefs or religious convictions be allowed to influence the types of care that they provide to patients, especially if those personal beliefs involve end-of-life treatment, emergency care, and/or contraception?
5. How did the advent of intensive care complicate the field of medical ethics (pages 45-48)? What is the idea behind what Dr. Baltz referred to as the "Governor Lamm philosophy"? Do you agree with this philosophy? Should there be limitations on intensive care treatment? If so, how would these limits be determined? By a patient's ability to pay? By the severity of their illness or injury? By their age? By the patient's wishes? By the patient's family's wishes? By the doctor's judgment? What would be the ramifications of rationing or limiting intensive care?
6. Examine the structure of Fink's book, looking closely at the way she interweaves biographical information about the people in the text with details about the events at Memorial. How do the biographical sections highlight issues or raise questions in the reader's mind? How do they help provide a more nuanced story?

7. Consider the following quote: “Emergencies are crucibles that contain and reveal the daily, slower-burning problems of medicine and beyond—our vulnerabilities; our trouble grappling with uncertainty, how we die, how we prioritize and divide what is most precious and vital and limited; even our biases and blindness”(page 464). When have you experienced an emergency or trauma? What did it reveal about yourself and those around you?
8. Read Sheri Fink’s “Note to the Reader” at the beginning of *Five Days at Memorial* and examine the notes at the end of the book. What sources did Fink use to write her book? How did she ensure accuracy and objectivity? How did she reconcile conflicting personal accounts of the events at Memorial? How important is objectivity in journalism?
9. Fink discusses the difficulties people had caring for their pets in the aftermath of Katrina, sometimes using these details as a juxtaposition for the way people were cared for. This became so much of an issue that, after Katrina, the Louisiana legislature passed legislation that requires local governments to develop evacuation plans for service animals and household pets. Should pets be included in emergency evacuations? If so, how would this be handled given the scarcity of resources after a disaster? If not, what should be done with pets? Should different ethical guidelines regarding euthanasia apply to pets?
10. Discuss advance care directives (living wills). Do you have an advance care directive? How would you reconcile a case where you disagreed with a loved one’s advance care directive? How should these cases be resolved? What are the limitations of static documents written years in advance when people face actual medical problems?
11. Hurricane Katrina was a national tragedy, and, as is the case with all national tragedies, we have an impulse to move on and not dwell on it. While this approach can be helpful for those that experienced firsthand or remember the events in question, it raises a potential problem: how to inform future generations about the tragedy in a way that gives them an adequate understanding of the tragedy. What are the lessons of Katrina? How should students be made aware of what happened?
12. Read the excerpt from Dr. Horace Baltz’s reply to Dr. Richard Deichmann (pages 389-90). Do you agree or disagree with his stance on euthanasia?
13. One of the ethical issues raised by the events at Memorial was the complex task of creating a triage system to deal with emergencies where the number of people requiring care outnumbered the available resources. While there are several models of triage protocols, there is not a consensus about which one is the best; in fact, there is not even consensus about what the goal of triage care should be and who should make the decisions. How do you think emergency triage should be handled?

14. Dr. Bryant King believed that race played a role in the way that doctors handled the events at Memorial, and his criticism is mirrored by criticisms of the way we, as a nation, responded to Hurricane Katrina. How much of a role do you think race played in the handling of the disaster at both local and national levels?
15. On page 348, Fink writes: "The hospital was a microcosm of these larger failures, with compromised physical infrastructure, compromised operating systems, and compromised individuals. And also instances of heroism." Discuss the ways that you see Memorial serving as a microcosm of the overall failures and successes of our nation in the way that we responded to Katrina.
16. What rules, ethics, and social codes should govern people in the face of a disaster? Is it true that a person's actions should "be judged by a different standard from the one normally applied because they occurred in the confusing, dangerous environment of a disaster" (page 424)? How do you hope that you would respond in the face of a disaster like Katrina?
17. Consider the Ebola outbreak that began in December 2013, applying the lessons and questions raised in *Five Days at Memorial*. What has the Ebola crisis revealed about our ability to respond to a public health crisis both domestically and internationally? What ethical questions has the crisis raised? Are we any closer to answering questions about how to ration and distribute care and supplies that we were before Hurricane Katrina? Compose a thoughtful research paper that connects the issues raised by Sheri Fink to the Ebola crisis.

• other works of interest

1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina by Chris Rose

A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge by Josh Neufeld

Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012) dir. Benh Zeitlin

Blindness by José Saramago

Denial of the Soul: Spiritual and Medical Perspectives on Euthanasia and Mortality
by M. Scott Peck

Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom
by Ronald Dworkin

Salvage the Bones: A Novel by Jesmyn Ward

Trouble the Water (2008) dirs. Tia Lessin and Carl Deal

War Hospital: A True Story of Surgery and Survival by Sheri Fink

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006) dir. Spike Lee

• archival resources about hurricane katrina

- <http://www.sherifink.net/resources/> - Includes interactive map of Memorial, timeline, photos, and the original series of articles: *The Deadly Choices at Memorial*
- <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/was-it-murder/> - *60 Minutes* episode featuring Dr. Anna Pou
- <http://www.nola.com/katrina/> - This *Times-Picayune* site includes original local reporting on the disaster
- http://youtu.be/eHcyC5sc_so - 105 minutes of archival 24-hour news footage from a variety of media outlets

• about this guide's writer

Amy Jurskis is the author of a number of teaching guides, including *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot and *In the Garden of Beasts* by Erik Larson. She holds a B.A. in English from the University of Georgia and an M.A.T. from Agnes Scott College. She currently serves as a chairperson of curriculum and English teacher at Oxbridge Academy of the Palm Beaches.

• notes

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