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READING GUIDE:

Gillian Wigmore's *Night Watch: The Vet Suite*

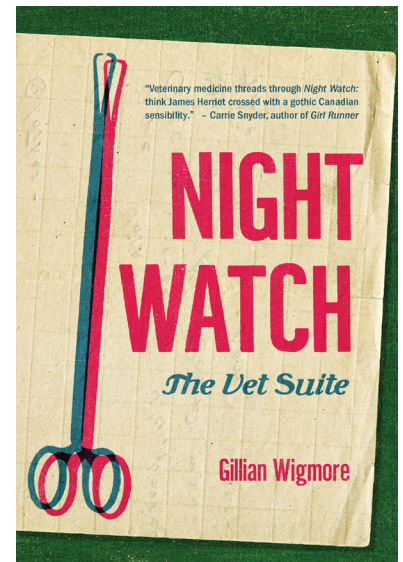
Dear Readers,

Thank you for choosing to read *Night Watch*. I hope the book offers you insight into veterinary work and an opportunity to consider how what we do, and what those we love do, shapes our lives.

I started writing about vet work as soon as I started writing. Poetry and stories have always been a way for me to figure out my world, and growing up right across the driveway from my dad's clinic on a little farm, the lives and illnesses, deaths and love of animals has been in my mind all along. In a second-year university poetry workshop, I handed in a poem about taking dead animals to the mill down the highway with my dad, where he disposed of their frozen corpses in the beehive burner. It was a bit much for some of my classmates, but I started the poem to try and understand this tender weekly task my dad and I had done together from the time I was very little. I realized with that poem that I didn't want to shy away from the gory in my dad's work, because it mattered equally as much as the beautiful; in vet work, even though it hurt sometimes, these things happened, and the way my dad approached them with grace and love, even if he was exhausted, mattered.

The stories in *Night Watch* were a way for me to reconsider what I'd observed growing up. I used the individual stories of Hugh and Tom, Celia and Dustin, and Ramona and Charlie to view through the lens of human relationships what is really an extraordinary profession. Some of the things I considered were how exhaustion and burn-out can affect a marriage, how being a sole owner of a rural vet practice takes its toll on all family members, including young children, but how those situations have the potential to pull people extraordinarily close as well—I'm thinking here of the siblings Celia and Dustin, and of the tender relationship between Tom and his animal health technician Janelle. I also thought about what it means when the partner of a veterinarian either doesn't understand, or doesn't take into consideration, the enormous effort or impact the job entails. This might be true of the spouses in each story—I wonder whether Hugh, or Ramona, or Celia and Dustin's mother really looked at what their sweetheart did every day, or recognized the cost of administering euthanasia or losing a patient in surgery.

Place was another consideration of mine in writing these stories. Because I come from a small town where everyone knows each other, or has at least heard of one another, I knew there was risk of conflating characters with actual people. In an effort to overcome that, but remain dedicated to showing the beauty of the Nechako River Valley in all seasons, I named the towns in the stories after old rail stops on the CN Railway. In a way, these are fictional towns, but I hoped to bring this part of North Central BC to life for readers far away, as well as to represent this part of the world in



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fiction, which, as a reader myself I've always wanted—I like to travel, but I also want to see my place in literature. How would these same stories be different in another rural region—or would they be? How would a rural vet practice compare with an urban vet practice? Would place come into it at all?

I hope that readers come away from these stories with a soft spot in their hearts for each character's humanity. Both Ramona and Celia have expectations that don't materialize, and each struggles with that in her different way. Hugh, too, had hopes for a different life. How do each of these characters come to terms with the way things turn out? Do they? I wonder if what they wanted is more important than what they actually have, and whether each of them is strong enough or inventive enough to have a good life with what they have.

I had to pare right down to the bone in regard to the animals I included in this collection. Initially, I wanted to write about every pet I ever had, but it hurt my heart too much to do so. One thing you learn growing up at a vet clinic is not to fall in love with the animals there, for many reasons: lots of them are sick, some of them will die, some will find new homes, and some will end up coyote food in the field behind the house. There are hard truths in opening your heart to animals, and I tried to convey them in these stories. How does that make you feel? What does it mean that one vet punches a cow in the head, and one vet cries at the notion that his old donkey will die of cancer? Did I go too far when I gave Teapot Mountain his own chapter?

Vet's kids are a league of our own. I've had the pleasure of running into a few as an adult, and there is a level of understanding between us that is a relief and a delight. I met another vet's kid whose job it was to drive animals to the hazardous materials section of an Ontario dump. I met one who, like me, had the important job of driving her dad on farm calls once she got her licence so he could sleep in the passenger seat and wouldn't fall asleep at the wheel. If I could go back in time to talk to my barefoot self, and my brothers and sister as we ran between the house and the clinic, I'd say: "Try to remember everything. This is special. Even if you cried when that mangy, deaf, blind old dog someone abandoned at the clinic died, it is expanding your capacity to love." Well, no. Really, I'd say: "Don't forget to wipe the cow poop off your feet before you come in the house!" Just like my mum.

Thanks for reading *Night Watch*. I hope you enjoy it.

Gillian Wigmore



A library branch manager and the daughter of a veterinarian, Gillian Wigmore has published three books of poems: soft geography, winner of the ReLit Award; Dirt of Ages, shortlisted for the George Ryga Award; and Orient. In addition to Night Watch, she has written a novella, Grayling, and Glory, a novel. She lives in Prince George, BC.