



# Hot Lights, Cold Steel: Life, Death and Sleepless Nights in a Surgeon's First Years

*Michael J. Collins*

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**Hot Lights, Cold Steel: Life, Death and Sleepless Nights in a Surgeon's First Years** Michael J. Collins  
When Michael Collins decides to become a surgeon, he is totally unprepared for the chaotic life of a resident at a major hospital. A natural overachiever, Collins' success, in college and medical school led to a surgical residency at one of the most respected medical centers in the world, the famed Mayo Clinic. But compared to his fellow residents Collins feels inadequate and unprepared. All too soon, the euphoria of beginning his career as an orthopedic resident gives way to the feeling he is a counterfeit, an imposter who has infiltrated a society of brilliant surgeons.

This story of Collins' four-year surgical residency traces his rise from an eager but clueless first-year resident to accomplished Chief Resident in his final year. With unparalleled humor, he recounts the disparity between people's perceptions of a doctor's glamorous life and the real thing: a succession of run down cars that are towed to the junk yard, long weekends moonlighting at rural hospitals, a family that grows larger every year, and a laughable income.

Collins' good nature helps him over some of the rough spots but cannot spare him the harsh reality of a doctor's life. Every day he is confronted with decisions that will change people's lives-or end them-forever. A young boy's leg is mangled by a tractor: risk the boy's life to save his leg, or amputate immediately? A woman diagnosed with bone cancer injures her hip: go through a painful hip operation even though she has only months to live? Like a jolt to the system, he is faced with the reality of suffering and death as he struggles to reconcile his idealism and aspiration to heal with the recognition of his own limitations and imperfections.

Unflinching and deeply engaging, *Hot Lights, Cold Steel* is a humane and passionate reminder that doctors are people too. This is a gripping memoir, at times devastating, others triumphant, but always compulsively readable.

## Hot Lights, Cold Steel: Life, Death and Sleepless Nights in a Surgeon's First Years Details

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Author : Michael J. Collins

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## From Reader Review **Hot Lights, Cold Steel: Life, Death and Sleepless Nights in a Surgeon's First Years** for online ebook

### **Khezu Khez says**

"I'm not god" is quite possibly the most irritating pseudohumblebrag anyone could ever come up with. There are some great moments, but most of what's in here are formulated and stale. The sort of thing way too common in doctor autobiographies - more about what the writers think the readers want to hear.

Some reflective moments were great. Vaguely disturbed by how casual Collins is about regularly breaking confidentiality to entertain the wife (but I guess in their culture it counts as "good family man" moral point or something). At least one chapter was creepy beyond any doubt. Mostly insincere vibe.

Just go and read some surgeons' blogs instead.

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### **Kimberly says**

Fantastic account of a surgeon's years in Residency. Learning the ins and outs, trying not to make mistakes, learning to accept them and move on if he does.

This book was hilarious at times, the author is very funny. I even learned a thing or two about medical jargon.

Highly Recommended!

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### **Sonja Arlow says**

3.5 stars

I think the reason I love medical memoirs, and specifically those dealing with the first few years of a newly graduated medical student is that their first year as interns are as relatable as they will ever be to us non-medical folks.

You can have all the book learning you want but the first time you see a trauma case you are going to react the same way I would – freeze and panic.

What makes this one noteworthy is that Mike Collins is an orthopaedic resident, paying his dues over 4 years to go from junior to senior resident. Late nights, no sleep, hospital politics, a wife that keeps on getting pregnant (at least he had time for that!) and moonlighting to supplement the low pay during these years.

As with other memoirs there are moments of doubt whether medical intervention causes more harm than good for a patient. There are some touching as well as funny moments and the writing is seamless and engaging.

My favourite among these memoirs is still **This Is Going To Hurt** It had me howling with laughter and I completely understand why that particular Dr chose to show the funny and not the hopelessness that this job

can sometimes bring out.

Another great memoir is **The Real Doctor Will See You Shortly** and if you want something a little more serious I can highly recommend **When The Air Hits Your Brain**.

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### **Jenn says**

Found this while I was browsing a library that had a display of medical-themed books. I had to laugh when I realized I'd read almost half of them. I have a thing for this kind of book. Of the dozen or so books like this that I've read, Atul Gawande's 4 books definitely rank near the top. I like his writing so much, I actually approached this book with serious skepticism - no way I can like any other book as much as Gawande's right? But Michael Collins did not disappoint. This book isn't nearly as emotionally gripping as, say, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* by Gawande, but it is just so fun to read. The accounts of tricky surgeries and tough decisions is balanced by pretty hilarious anecdotes of his residency buddies and his saintly wife.

Also have to mention how impressed I am with this guy's work ethic. He worked 3 jobs in medical school to make ends meet. And during residency, he moonlighted at a rural hospital every other weekend for 36 hours straight. Definitely not ideal circumstances here and I actually feel a little uneasy about doctors working such long hours without sleep, BUT what an impressive guy to work so hard to provide for himself rather than just racking up debt. (That seems less common today - few students seem to work during university anymore. Call me crazy, but when we were students, we LIVED like students - crappy apartment, secondhand clothes, hand-me-down furniture, working any available job.)

Anyway.....fun book to read and it goes really quickly. Definitely recommend this.

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### **Kathy says**

Dr. Collins could easily launch a second career as an author. This book is the story of his four years as an orthopedic resident at the Mayo Clinic--the final four years before he was officially labeled "MD." At the same time, he and his wife were having their first four children! (They topped out at twelve, according to his biography on the book jacket.) The book left me wishing he would write a book covering the rest of his life and career since then. This book made me laugh out loud, cry, and cringe (at some of the medical procedures.) I enjoyed it tremendously as he deftly wove together the strands of his career with his personal life.

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### **Jen says**

Told through flashback, Michael J. Collins' *Hot Lights, Cold Steel* is a sleep-deprived romp through four years of orthopedic residency at the Mayo Clinic. Although published more than 20 years after his days as a resident, readers will feel as though they are along for the ride with Collins and his colleagues. He walks us through his thought process as he confronts his first views of surgery and many sleepless nights moonlighting in a rural emergency room. While the book doesn't give great insight into the practice of orthopedic medicine, it does have enough descriptive scenes to make the squeamish blanch. But the focus is

really on Collins' journey and how he overcomes his feelings of inadequacy. Devouring textbooks and journals with Stedman's Medical Dictionary by his side, Collins pushes to acquire the knowledge and experience needed to rise to chief resident. His story gives readers an appreciation for the financial and emotional sacrifices that doctors (and their families) make during training. It also might have some readers asking their surgeons when they last slept. This entertaining read is recommended for public, academic and medical libraries.

- Read and reviewed for LIS2586

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### **Katie says**

In my continuing obsession with medical student/doctor memoirs (begun last spring with Atul Gawande's wonderful books) comes this memoir about a doctor who used to be a construction worker. Collins only started medical school in his mid-twenties, and this book is primarily a story about his four years of residency as an aspiring orthopedic surgeon at the Mayo Clinic.

This book was different from Gawandes' (and probably most other medically-themed memoirs) primarily in its tone, because Collins is rarely serious. In fact, I laughed out loud more than once during this book--he has a lot of funny stories revolving around both his family and his fellow medical personnel, and of course, the neverending stream of patients. He turns serious at times, but mostly this was just a really engaging memoir about how unbelievably hard doctors have to work, both to become doctors in the first place, especially during their residencies, and then well, basically for the rest of their careers. Collins actually worked about 100 hours a week as a resident and ALSO had to moonlight at a hospital, because you don't make very much money as a resident. He worked constantly and never slept more than a couple hours. I don't know how they do it.

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### **Alina says**

"I was a counterfeit, an impostor who had infiltrated this society of brilliant surgeons. [...] I would have thrown myself on the floor and asked them to shoot me and put me out of my misery." When I read these lines, I knew that this book was the real thing.

There's something in Collins' self-deprecation and love of his work that reminds me of James Herriot, but the humour of "Hot Lights, Cold Steel" is starker, though no less funny. The laughter is there, of course, but it sounds more like a man joking at the stake than in front of a fireplace.

I wonder if the author has finally gotten some sleep since he finished his residency - then there might be hope for the rest of us!

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### **Carmen says**

This is a book about a resident at the Mayo Clinic in Orthopedics. It's about his struggles and his own doubts

about why he was picked to get a residency in one of the top programs in the nation! So far, this book is proving incredibly interesting - although I must admit his residency experience appears to have been a LOT more demanding than mine!

Despite the sleepless nights and such - there is something to be said for the insanity and friendships that bloom in such a time! Some of my best friends are those that I made during my residency!!! I will admit that I viewed my residency as something to "just get through." In reality - it was one of the best times in my life! The end of the book is so true - there's something in you at the end of various chapters in life that demand acknowledgment. Some closure if you will. This book helped me remember the absurd, demanding, but fun times I've had and hopefully have yet to come in my professional life.

I would highly recommend this book for anyone who is considering undergoing a healthcare professionals residency or extra education! It was a a PLEASURE to read!!

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### **Sophia says**

*Hot Nights, Cold Steel* is the autobiography of an orthopedic residency. Dr. Michael J. Collins came to the prestigious Mayo Clinic out of medical school feeling unprepared, but through 2 years as a junior resident and 2 as a senior (and then chief) resident, he found the experience worthwhile. Collins manages to pepper the story with salty humor despite the hard times, including horrific traumas, extreme sleep deprivation, and moonlighting at a rural ER to make ends meet for his growing family. (He fathered children 3 children, #2-4 of 12!, during residency.) However, there are also serious moments where the author contemplates the meaning of this never-ending work; such moments becomes more frequent as his seniority grows and the chapters become more spaced out. Like other books in this genre, this is a retrospective approximation which inherently paints the protagonist in a favorable light, the one who preserves. Nonetheless, *Hot Nights, Cold Steel* is a fine memoir by an orthoped (often stereotyped as the dumb jocks of the medical world) with a truly supportive wife.

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### **Mari says**

Dr. Collins is kind of like the Augusten Bourroughs/David Sedaris of medical writing. Some of the stories are funny (the patient with a dildo stuck up his butt), others are heartbreaking (an 18 year old girl with cancer of the ilium). The book is the first medical writing I've read that is more than just clinical stories but also gives insight into what the life of a resident is like -- the long hours, the low pay, the lapses in confidence -- all the sacrifices that must be made for training to be completed. It shows the passion necessary for pursuing medicine in this country. Overall, very informative, easy to read, and thought-provoking.

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### **Cheyenne says**

This book had a lot of potential, but it was unfocused, sexist, and unappealing. The doctor writing this tried to set it up like a bad 80s movie where he was the underdog that would then rise up to be top dog, defeating all odds. The sexism was so apparent, and I hated how he always had to comment on how attractive or unattractive his female patients were. At times he even seemed like he was hitting on other women despite having a wife and 12 kids!! To say the least, I did not like this man much, and so large portions of the book

were unbearable. Also he daydreams a lot and imagines conversations that never happened and it was just really annoying.

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### **Imran says**

This was one of my favorite “doctor” books. Dr. Collins is an amazing author who brings truth and humor to his life as a resident. In stark contrast to “Intern Blues”, Dr. Collins isn’t caught whining; rather, he understands his job is tough, the hours long, and the decisions difficult with a sense of journey. That is, he engrosses himself in his life and enjoys the ride.

You really can feel his emotions when he succeeds, fails, is uncertain. You grow in compassion and respect for his supportive wife. He really lets you in to his life. It has given me insight into what I have to look forward to as well.

This book gives me, a medical student, hope and perspective. He shows an attitude I aspire to. “Doctors are whiners” some say. I agree with the statement but disagree with the sentiment. Regardless, here we see a physician in training who decides to give up what is in his full right.

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### **Ellie says**

I thought it was really cool when I read the description of Collins on the back flap and saw that he has 12 children. He’s Irish Catholic, I guess, but he doesn’t come across as the least bit religious in the book. I think he and his wife don’t have so many children for religious reasons so much as because they just love having children. In any case, this description of the four years of orthopedic surgery residency at the Mayo Clinic is awesome. It’s very engrossing, with lots of medical details and patient stories. The insights Dr. Collins has about human life and mortality are interesting, but not the best part of the book. He’s very good at describing scenes and engaging the reader in what’s happening. One thing I could never get over was how after treating so many people for injuries sustained from accidents while driving drunk, even a few people who are mentioned as not having blood alcohol levels above the legal limit but still being impaired, Dr. Collins and his fellow residents continue to go out and drink and then drive home. Overall this is a really excellent book. I read it all in one night – couldn’t put it down.

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### **Peter Tillman says**

This is Dr. Collin's memoir of his four years as a surgical resident at Minnesota's Mayo Clinic. It's quite a story. I don't usually think of memoirs as page-turners, but this one kept me up until 2AM. Appropriately enough, since most of the book deals with a sleep-deprived resident's life....

I don't know when Collins did his residency, but his memoir has something of a sepia tone. All the doctors are men, all the nurses are women. Collins and his wife are good Irish Catholics -- they made four babies during their four years at Mayo (and went on to have eight more!). They lived paycheck-to-paycheck, eating mac & cheese, driving old beaters -- he goes through three in the book, setting a Mayo record. The residents like beer, sports and other manly stuff. They and the girls are always ready with a polished (or rough) quip to match the occasion....



OK, so Collins is a good Irish storyteller -- but he really did have life-or-death decisions to make, there in the ER and OR at 3AM, and he did find out that, even when he did everything right, he would lose patients....

So there's something primal here, that we folk living ordinary lives don't get to see. And you'd be very lucky to see Mike Collins waiting in the ER, when your ambulance pulls in....

Highly recommended.

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