



# The Good Doctor: A Novel

*Damon Galgut*

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## **The Good Doctor: A Novel** Damon Galgut

Taut, spare, and compellingly readable, *The Good Doctor* is a brilliant literary high-wire act short enough to be devoured in one or two sittings. When Laurence Waters arrives at the small rural hospital in a South African homeland where Frank works, Frank is immediately suspicious. Everything about Laurence grates on Frank, from his smoking in their shared room, to his unfamiliar optimism about what the doctors can truly accomplish among the local population—but Laurence seems oblivious, immediately and repeatedly declaring Frank his friend despite the other's indifference. Frank originally came to the hospital to get his bearings after his wife left him for his best friend—but denial of the higher-level post he was promised when he came, and the disillusionment of working at a completely ineffectual hospital (it's always deserted, an entire wing closed off and gradually being looted of any reusable equipment lacks basic supplies), has hardened him into cynical apathy—which makes Laurence's optimism all the more irritating.

Laurence starts planning a campaign to “bring the hospital to the people,” by running clinics in nearby villages. A group of soldiers have arrived in the village, reportedly looking for holes in the border where smuggling has become rampant. Then Laurence's African-American girlfriend Zanele, who has adopted an African name and dress, and who shares his political idealism (but not much actual intimacy, it seems) comes to visit, and Laurence and Frank host a party. During the flush of drunkenness the tensions between the staff melt away (the Cuban couple estranged by Frank having had an affair with the woman; the strained power relations between Frank and the other doctors and Tehogo, the young black African man who works as the caretaker and unlicensed nurse). But in the aftermath of the party this quickly melts away—especially when Frank goes to return the cassettes Tehogo lent him for the party, and accidentally discovers a cache of looted metal fittings from the hospital in Tehogo's room. Finally, Laurence talks Frank into spending an evening with Zanele while he is on duty—which ends in a bizarre encounter with an apartheid-era local despot and a furtive sexual union with Zanele. Frank is understandably relieved that a few days later an appointment to see his estranged wife to sign divorce papers allows him a chance to get away.

When Frank returns, Laurence meets him by telling him everything's changed. Laurence has ignored Frank's wish not to report Tehogo's theft, and in so doing has revealed that Frank was the one who discovered it. The clinic has become a huge public relations coup, raising awareness and goodwill toward the hospital though its capacities are no better than before, and everyone but Frank seems swept up in its success. And a secret Frank has been keeping from Laurence since their first day of friendship—the married poor black woman Frank has been sleeping with off and on for years, sometimes for money—comes to light, in a way, when the woman comes to Laurence at the end of the clinic to tell him she needs an abortion, and that it must be done at her home. Enjoying Laurence's discomfort with this moral dilemma, Frank does not help with the procedure and when he guiltily goes to check on the patient the next night, she and the shack where she lived, where he would go to meet her, are gone. Meanwhile Tehogo has more or less completely stopped coming in to work. Convinced that his affair's husband is somehow linked to the former despot and to a rash of recent robberies because of his white car, Frank tips the colonel leading the group of soldiers—a brutal Afrikaner under whom, as a conscript, Frank had been forced to help torture black informants before the end of apartheid—as to where he thinks the despot's encampment is hiding. Soon after, a soldier turns up with Tehogo, vitally wounded from a gunshot. As Frank tends to the wound obsessively to assuage his guilt at possibly having exposed Tehogo to the colonel, Laurence for once is completely apathetic—whether disgusted at Tehogo for being a thief and complicating his image of human perfectibility, or too distracted by the apparently more noble work of tomorrow's second village health clinic, which seems more than ever to

Frank like lip service. Frank volunteers to move Tehogo to the bigger hospital where his life can assuredly be saved, but when he wakes in the morning Tehogo, the soldier guarding him, the bed to which he was handcuffed, and Laurence, who was on night duty, are all gone. Soon the soldiers leave town too, and as the stultifying silence of the pre-Laurence days returns, Frank is left to make some sense of the strange almost-year of the young doctor's presence.

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