

With Dennis L. Breo

M. Therese Southgate, MD—the woman behind 'The Cover'

The day varies, but for this week it is Friday, the target day, the day she wishes "would go away." It is The Day To Write.

Marie Therese Southgate, MD, has written more than 200 superbly crafted essays describing the famous works of art that serve each week as the cover of *JAMA*, but it never comes easy.

The day before writing, she is usually "a bit short" with people; on the target day, there will be no interruptions.

She has no need for an alarm clock. The light streaming through the windows of her 57th-floor condo at Chicago's Marina City Towers will awaken her around 5:30. She is a morning person and intends to be at her writing desk "by 7, 7:15 at the latest."

After a quick breakfast, she will sit and reflect for a few minutes. The view from her living room looks out at nearby Michigan Avenue and Lake Michigan. "On a clear day," she says, "you can see the Indiana sand dunes." She likes to read the Psalms early in the morning, "because they're poetry."

Beside her piano bench are stacked piles of both *JAMA* and *The New Yorker*, the two publications best known for art covers, a tradition she finds both "quaint and classy." Some mornings, she will sit down at her piano and play a few tunes: "Bach, if I want precision; Mozart, to settle down; and Mozart, too, if I need to pick up the pace."

Then, third cup of coffee in hand, she adjourns to the den, turns her back on the magnificent view, and sits down at her large Swedish desk "to start to tear my hair out and begin to write."

This day, she is wearing a favorite gray sweatshirt from Notre Dame, festooned with a green leprechaun. Before writing, she must first dust the oversized desk and carefully rearrange all its favorite memorabilia. She adjusts the Tiffany lampshade and assures herself that her favorite mechanical pencil, the one she has been using for 4 years now, "has in it all the words I'll need."

She'll need 800 to 1200 words, all written in flowing longhand on unlined typ-

ing paper, and, with rewrites, it may take her up to 10 hours. "I need to feel the pencil moving on the paper to create," she says.

The writing has been preceded by, maybe, 20 hours of research on both the painting and its painter, research that is usually accomplished at the Ryerson Library of Chicago's Art Institute, though Dr Southgate also has an impressive collection of art literature at her home. She works from an inventory of 20 to 25 paintings previously selected.

She will stalk each's week cover story for days before writing. Taped to both her window and desk are copies of the painting that she must describe. This one, for the April 4, 1990, cover of *JAMA*, is *River and Hills*, by Edward Redfield. It is an impressionistic landscape painted in New Hope, Pa, showing the spring thaw.

"I try to be seasonal in my selection of paintings," she says. "And I believe that I'm writing for a busy doctor who, maybe, has only a few minutes for relaxation. I'm hoping that these essays can make a connection with him, however brief, and refresh him a little."

The Redfield painting has strong, straight lines, signs to Dr Southgate that the painting has "stability. Diagonal lines would suggest a more dynamic perspective." She believes in the importance of math to a painting and is known to measure a painting's angles and shapes. "I learned that from reading about [Paul] Cézanne," she says. "He wrote that all of nature can be explained by the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone."

'There are no accidents in art'

She believes in capturing the artist in time. "I ask myself, 'Why now—why did this artist paint this picture in this particular way at this particular time?' There are no accidents in art. The painter made every line of his painting a certain way because of who he was at a certain moment of time. This is what art history is all about."

She used to practice "total immer-

sion," writing for 6 to 8 hours in one sitting, but Dr Southgate now does the heavy writing in the first 3 or 4 hours, then breaks for lunch, paces about and reflects, and gets back to it. She tries not to impose herself upon the work of art. "If I get stuck," she says, "I try to stand back and let the painting talk to me. It's like a physician listening to the patient to discover the diagnosis."

After the buildup of tension, the actual writing is a relief, she says. "Once I begin to write, I feel at home. It's as if this is what I was born to do."

"And, you just know when you've finally got it right. Certainly, you know when you don't yet have it."

On this day, although she had the entire weekend as a backup to her Monday deadline, Southgate has "it" by early afternoon. Art and technology meet as she types the final handwritten draft of her essay into a Radio Shack computer and transmits it to the nearby *JAMA* offices. It is 4:18 PM.

She explains, "To finish an essay, to know that you've done something good enough to put your name on, well, it's an absolute high. In a sense, you're growing and re-creating yourself. It doesn't hit me right away, though. The high will come later in the evening, sort of sneaking over me. It's a delicious feeling, but the tension will slowly begin to build the very next day—when I begin to think about the next deadline."

Southgate, who will be 62 this month, is known to thousands of *JAMA* readers solely by her name and the quality of her essays. This is the rest of her story.

Shy, sensitive, and soft-spoken, she is reluctant to be publicized. Although she hasn't practiced clinical medicine since her internship, she considers her medical career—entirely devoted to *JAMA*—to be one of "teaching." She finds "writer" to be "too grand a term" for herself, preferring to be known as an essayist or, even, journalist.

Southgate grew up on the far South Side of Chicago. Her father, who was born in Canada, was a pipe fitter; her mother owned a beauty shop. The es-

sayist-to-be always loved to read, explaining, "I thought that reading was the key to everything."

One memory is vivid. "When I was 8," she recalls, "I got my first card at one of the branches of the Chicago Public Library. I was in heaven. I resolved to read every book in the library, and I had nearly worked my way through the 'A' section of the children's library, when I had this fear: 'What will I do after I've read every book in the world!' I calmed down by telling myself that after I'd read everything, well, then I would be able to write books for myself!"

An honors student, she earned an undergraduate degree at the College of St Francis in Joliet, Ill, majoring in chemistry. Set on a career in journalism, she took an editing job with a chemistry trade publication in Washington, DC. Her ambition "was to write for *Newsweek*." Five years later, most of it spent editing technical articles, she received a telegram directing her to report to *Newsweek* as a research assistant. The summons came too late.

"By then, I had decided to become a doctor," she says. "I looked at what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and I knew that I needed a career that would never be boring and that I could never master. Medicine was the only choice."

Her years at the Marquette U School of Medicine (now the Medical College of Wisconsin) in Milwaukee "were very, very happy." She describes the feeling as "what it must be like to find one's mate in life. Everything makes sense, and, suddenly, you no longer ask any questions about your life."

After interning at St Mary's Hospital in San Francisco and achieving medical licensure in California, Dr Southgate, in 1962, returned to Chicago to interview for a new editorial opening at *JAMA*. Some 28 years later, she recalls of that pivotal moment, "Making a career in medical journalism seemed at the time an impossible dream, but it wasn't."

Hired as a *JAMA* editor, Dr Southgate excitedly walked into the Chicago afternoon and looked up at the skyline. She saw the twin towers of Marina City, a new architectural project that was rising above the Chicago River just north of the city's downtown Loop and just three blocks south of AMA headquarters. She has been there ever since. Never married, she remains close to her mother and to her only brother's family.

In 1962, Southgate quickly fell in love with her new job, working for *JAMA* editor John Talbott, MD. One of the first research papers she edited involved the medical dangers of thalidomide. "We all were so enthusiastic," she

(Continued on p 2112.)

A Southgate sampler

Of the 200+ cover art stories Dr Southgate has written about famous paintings for *JAMA*, she chooses the 12 on the facing page as especially noteworthy. Following are her capsule descriptions; those interested in additional details can consult her full essay in the cited issues. Here, then, are Dr Southgate's dozen favorites:

(1) *The Fight Interrupted*, by William Mulready, appearing as the *JAMA* cover on December 16, 1974. Dr Southgate notes, "This was my first signed cover story; I had done, perhaps, a half dozen unsigned cover stories prior to this one." (2) Appearing March 7, 1977—*The Basket of Apples*, by Paul Cézanne. "This is the first time I began to appreciate geometry in paintings, which was the key to how I began to see paintings after that." (3) April 4, 1985—*Winter 1946*, by Andrew Wyeth. "This short cover essay is probably my favorite, elaborating on the painting's delicate balance [between] a grieving person and the great stability or recoverability of the human spirit."

(4) January 2, 1981—*I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, by Charles Demuth. "This painting owes its existence to the discovery of insulin. Demuth was one of the first patients on whom insulin was used [for his diabetes] in this country, and without it he almost certainly would not have lived long enough to paint this. Demuth did this painting to illustrate a poem of the same title by his good friend, William Carlos Williams, who was a pediatrician and one of America's greatest poets." (5) March 28, 1980—*Still Life With Flowers*, by Édouard Manet. "When he painted this, Manet was unable to stand before an easel and do large paintings, as a result of loss of balance from his syphilis. Thus, at the end of his life, he painted small oils of bouquets of flowers brought to him by a young serving maid." (6) July 15, 1983—*Portrait of Professor Gross (The Gross Clinic)*, by Thomas Eakins. "Probably the greatest medical painting ever done in this country."

(7) May 23, 1986—*The Agnew Clinic*, by Thomas Eakins. "This painting vies with *The Gross Clinic*. The medical details shown in this painting are fascinating." (8) October 25, 1985—*The Doctor*, by Sir Luke Fildes. "Undoubtedly, the best-known medical painting ever done. The US Post Office used this painting on a stamp to commemorate AMA's 75th anniversary." (9) May 25, 1984—*Dempsey and Firpo*, by George Wesley Bellows. "I loved doing this story, describing a painting about a heavyweight championship fight of 1923. Before the days of TV, newspaper reporters gave blow-by-blow descriptions of top boxing matches. I read all the sports coverage in the *New York Times* during the week of this 1923 fight and was able to learn exactly which punch Bellows painted [the punch came from challenger Luis Firpo, and it knocked the champion—and eventual winner—Jack Dempsey through the ropes]. The prefight hype in the *Times* for Dempsey-Firpo was no less than for an Ali or Tyson fight of our time."

(10) April 14, 1975—*Paris, a Rainy Day (Intersection of the Rue de Turin and Rue de Moscou)*, by Gustave Caillebotte. "This is one of the most popular paintings in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. On a trip to Paris, I went to the intersection shown in the painting, and it was the same as Caillebotte had painted it a century earlier, except for cars and exhaust fumes and a traffic island. I meant to leave this issue of *JAMA* at a nearby sidewalk bistro, but I didn't have the nerve." (11) January 25, 1985—*Ennui*, by Walter Sickert. "There is no better description of boredom, futility, hopelessness, and depression than this painting of two people trapped with each other in a London flat." (12) February 28, 1986—*Skull With Cigarette*, by Vincent van Gogh. "This painting, which accompanied articles on the health hazards of smoking, brought more requests for copies than any other painting published in *JAMA*."

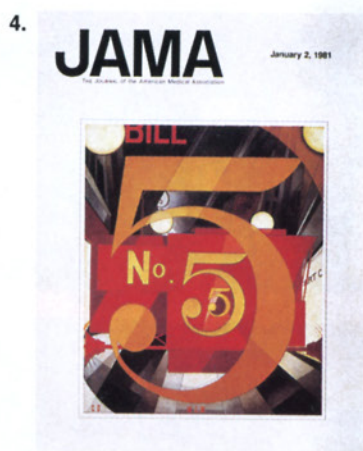
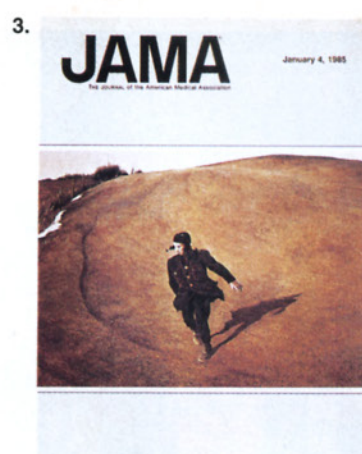
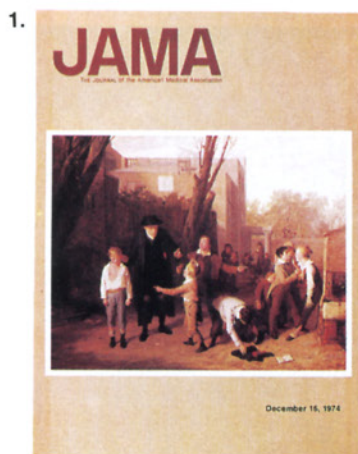


Photo collage: Joe Fletcher, Tom Handrigan



Photo: Joe Fletcher

A Tiffany lamp provides the light, but Dr Southgate must provide her own inspiration as she settles down in her writing den to illuminate another work of art.

(Continued from p 2108.)

recalls, "that we used to joke that we should have to pay AMA for the privilege of being in the forefront of medical knowledge."

Until 1964, the *JAMA* cover simply listed the contents of that issue. Dr Southgate was present "at the birthing of the new art covers. We were afraid that we would blow everyone's mind, but Dr Talbott was convinced otherwise. He belonged to an investment club, he was impressed with the art covers used on many corporate annual reports, and he wanted to give it a try."

On April 20, 1964, the *JAMA* cover featured a reproduction of *St Jerome in His Study*, a painting chosen to highlight an issue on continuing medical education. The editors, however, hedged their bets by running the contents on an inside flap.

The innovation became a tradition and, in time, Dr Southgate its guardian. By the mid-1960s, art covers were the norm, but they were handled by editors other than Southgate until 10 years later. She wrote her first signed essay on December 16, 1974, and from 1975 to 1988, a period when she was the journal's deputy editor, she supervised the cover selections and essays and herself wrote about 12 to 15 essays a year. After her "retirement" as deputy editor on January 1, 1988, she agreed to continue writing cover essays.

She recalls, "When I was asked to take over responsibility for the art covers at the end of 1975, I was absolutely frightened. I knew nothing about art and thought that it was absolutely be-

yond me. At the time, I didn't even go to art museums."

She prescribed a crash course in art appreciation for herself. "To understand medicine," she says, "students first attend lectures and read journals and textbooks. Then, they see the patient. I decided to follow the same process to understand art. I attended classes in art appreciation, read art books, and subscribed to art journals. Since I had taught courses in how to search the scientific literature, I found that it was equally easy to research the art literature. Then, I began to haunt the museums, both in Chicago and wherever I traveled. For me, seeing the painting in the museum was like seeing the patient."

Today, Dr Southgate leads a discussion group on art and medicine for medical students at Chicago's Northwestern University Medical Center. She also lectures to community groups.

She has written, "Medicine and art have a common goal: to complete what nature cannot bring to a finish . . . to reach the ideal . . . to heal creation. This is done by paying *attention*. The physician attends the patient; the artist attends nature. . . . If we are attentive in looking, in listening, and in waiting, then sooner or later something in the depths of ourselves will respond. Art, like medicine, is not an arrival; it's a search. This is why, perhaps, we call medicine itself an art."

She does not paint herself. "I don't have the gene for painting," she says candidly. "I think it's like being a good surgeon or ballplayer; you have to have the necessary hand-eye coordination, and I don't. Oh, I bought a how-to drawing book once, but there was no way."

One art critic, E. F. Porter, Jr, of the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, has termed Dr Southgate's essays "high-level popularizations" that are "utterly devoid of the posturing of which art criticism is so often guilty. . . . [They are] respectful of the reader's intelligence and curiosity, yet presuming nothing and never patronizing. Presuming nothing, that is, except a medical vocabulary."

A tremendous response

The response to the art covers has been tremendous—both vexing and touching. One physician wrote to complain about the high cost of printing the four-color covers. Another, mistakenly assuming that the AMA had bought the priceless paintings, was even more vehement. The truth, she chuckles, "is that our favorite supplier, the National Gallery, in Washington, DC, used to charge \$5 for the one-time use of the transparency. Recently, the rate has

risen as high as \$30!" She almost never pays more than \$200.

Art as a cover illustration is a great bargain. For example, van Gogh's *Iris-es*, which sold at auction for \$53.9 million, was reproduced as a 1985 *JAMA* cover for a one-time fee of \$67.50. This painting is a Southgate favorite (she describes it as "a humble subject raised to its beauty"), but it did not make her short list of 12 great masterpieces.

Southgate loves her fan letters and often draws on them for inspiration. "Recently," she recalls, "I received a letter from a schoolteacher in a small town in Pennsylvania. The town was not big enough to have an art museum, but one of her pupils was the son of a physician and he would bring in the *JAMA* covers. My essays became the basis of their art appreciation class!"

Southgate says she will continue to write her essays "as long as I can and as long as readers enjoy them." An optimist, she believes, "Life is growth and growth is life." Still intellectually restless, she is also studying classical Greek; teaching a course in medical ethics ("When I started out," she explains, "this field amounted to little more than medical etiquette"); and is halfway through a 4-year course on the "Great Books" at the University of Chicago.

Then, too, she talks of earning a doctorate in philosophy or theology and becoming a professor of medical ethics. Unless, of course, she first becomes a poet. In her pantheon of artists, she "now rates poets first, novelists second, and painters third." Accordingly, she is studying the art of poetry writing. However, she still thinks, "If I only had 6 months to live, I believe that I'd choose to spend them in Florence [Italy, studying the paintings]."

Hopefully, though, she will also find time somehow to complete a *book* about the *JAMA* art covers. For years, her fan letters (and editors) have been urging her to assemble the covers into a coffee-table book.

In the meantime, Dr Southgate recently helped her mother, Josephine, celebrate her 89th birthday. "She's very proud of me," Dr Southgate says, "but until recently she never quite understood what I do. She would tell me, 'This [writing the cover essays] is nice, but is it medicine?' She always thought that I should open an office on the corner above the drugstore in our old neighborhood."

"Well, recently, *her* doctor sat down with her and explained how important it is for a doctor to be reminded of the art and spirit of medicine, as well as its science. So, now, my mother has a different view. She's my greatest fan." □