

Down East

# Surgeon, eccentric, contrarian: Meet Nantucket's Dr. Timothy Lepore



Pam Belluck

Courtesy photo | BDN

By **Tom Walsh**, BDN Staff • August 19, 2012 11:41 am

Updated: August 19, 2012 11:45 am

STONINGTON, Maine — It's been almost five years since New York Times reporter Pam Belluck stumbled across an almost parenthetical item in a Tufts University alumni newsletter about a medical school graduate who is the only general surgeon on Massachusetts' Nantucket Island.

At the time Belluck was the Times' New England bureau chief, based in Boston. Like other National Desk staffers she was assigned to find a "character" in her coverage area and to write a 900-word profile.

That she did. And what a character she found. Her 900-word newspaper profile has since evolved into a highly acclaimed new book: "Island Practice: Cobblestone Rash, Underground Tom and Other Adventures of a Nantucket Doctor." The book is now under development as a TV series.

Now a science writer for the Times, Belluck was in Down East Maine last week doing book signings and holding question-and-answer discussions about the project in Bar Harbor and Stonington. Turnout was good, and she was able to meet Dr. Charles Zelnick, a physician who practices in Stonington.

Belluck's book is a warts-and-all overview of the professional life and personal eccentricities of Dr. Timothy Lepore (rhymes with "peppery"), now 67, who came to the island community of 10,000 year-round residents nearly 30 years ago as a medical refugee from an emergency room assignment in Rhode Island. Because of the unique prevalence of Lyme disease on the island, Lepore has since become something of a world expert on tick-borne diseases.

Belluck portrays Lepore as a skilled, versatile and politically fearless clinician — think Dr. Benjamin “Hawkeye” Pierce from M\*A\*S\*H, but on speed. In his practice he handles everything from appendicitis to Alzheimer’s and once even treated a draft horse that had been poisoned by cyanide. Lepore is a hunter who collects knives and antique guns. He apparently has never met a book he didn’t like and has researched all the ways to cheat his son to victory in the local Cub Scouts’ Pinewood Derby.

Lepore is often spotted along Nantucket’s roadways gathering up road kill, which he dices on his kitchen counter and freezes as meals for his pet hawk. There’s a sign in his office declaring it a “House of Pain,” and the most prominent chair in his waiting room is a large, stuffed mountain goat, replete with horns. For certain cancer patients and others with appetite issues, he has been known to prescribe — though not dispense — cannabis-laced cookies and brownies.

By all accounts in Belluck’s book, Lepore’s long-suffering spouse, Cathy, is destined for canonization. One friend told Belluck that Cathy is “the glue that keeps him together. He would be that crazy person who goes out into the moors and never returns if it weren’t for her.”

“This is a quintessential American story that has so many facets to it,” Belluck said. “As a writer, I couldn’t have asked for a better relationship with a subject or the friends and family and community around him. There is an unending wellspring of stuff there. He is such a live wire, and interesting and odd things happen [on Nantucket] all the time.”

Belluck's book explores the everyday challenges of delivering primary health care in a county that ranks first in Massachusetts on measures such as health outcome, mortality and healthy behaviors. At the same time, Nantucket ranks near the bottom in its high number of medically uninsured and its low number of physicians per capita.

Amid that backdrop, Lepore has been actively resisting efforts to see the 19-bed Nantucket Cottage Hospital swallowed whole by the mainland corporate health care system headquartered 30 miles away.

“So many different types of readers seem to relate to this book because there so many things happening on so many levels,” Belluck says. “I want readers to take away the tale of an American original, a colorful contrarian who is doing a life-or-death job in a community that really depends on him. This is a book about how he does it.”

In addition to researching and writing for the weekly Science section at The New York Times, Belluck is a mom to two daughters, ages 9 and 12. As time permits, she plays flute in a jazz sextet that performs in a club in Greenwich Village.

“It's five guys and me,” she says. “It's something we only get to about once a week, as we all have day jobs.”

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