In the summer of 1985, two days after finishing his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, Dr. James J. O'Connell entered the Nurses' Clinic at Pine Street Inn for his first day of work. As he tells the story in his new book, “Stories from the Shadows: Reflections of a Street Doctor,” his swagger drew a “stern grimace” from Barbara McInnis and the other nurses. She immediately set him straight about how to be effective with his patients: “Have coffee, play cards, share bits of yourself. Never judge. Remember that people have lived through hell and listen carefully to their stories. With that as bedrock, delivering health care might just be possible.”

One of his first patients was an elderly schizophrenic gentleman whose feet were so swollen that each foot needed its own soaking bucket. For the first month O'Connell focused on the man's feet, gradually offering him medication to improve his sleep and mood. In his chart, the patient had been labeled “treatment resistant.” Yet months later he was functioning so well that, after 25 years on the streets and in shelters, he moved into a group home.
of individual patients. He chronicles moments of triumph over illness and dysfunction, and acknowledges setbacks in Boston’s efforts to care for homeless people, such as the precipitous closing in 2014 of the shelter on Long Island. O’Connell writes, “A dueling sense of fulfillment and failure has been inescapable.”

O’Connell will speak at Porter Square Books in Cambridge at 7 p.m. on Aug. 31 and at Trident Booksellers and Café at 7 p.m. on Sept. 9.

Lauriat’s Lusitania tale

Erik Larson’s “Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania” (Crown) has been a staple of bestseller lists this summer. Nearly 100 years ago, one of the Lusitania’s most famous passengers, Boston bookseller Charles E. Lauriat Jr., beat him to the punch. Lauriat’s first-person account, “The Lusitania’s Last Voyage,” became a bestseller when Houghton Mifflin published it in 1915, months after the Cunard ocean liner was struck by a German torpedo and sank. Nearly 1,200 passengers died, while about 765 survived.

Lauriat, son of the founder of Lauriat’s bookshop, was on his way to London to buy books for the shop. At the time, it was one of the country’s leading sellers of rare books.

After the ship went down, Lauriat swam to one of the Lusitania’s collapsible rafts and got in. He helped steer it through wreckage and corpses as they picked up 32 passengers. Two miles on, they were rescued by a fishing boat. Among the possessions he lost in the disaster was a book he’d borrowed from a friend — a copy of “A Christmas Carol” that contained Charles Dickens’s handwritten notes.

Coming out

- “The Taming of the Queen” by Philippa Gregory (Touchstone)
- “Off to College: A Guide for Parents” by Roger H. Martin (University of Chicago)
- “Pedigree” by Patrick Modiano, translated by Mark Polizzotti (Yale University)

Pick of the week

Alden Graves of Northshire Bookstore in Manchester Center, Vt., recommends “Avenue of Spies: A True Story of Terror, Espionage, and One American Family’s Heroic Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Paris” by Alex Kershaw (Crown): “Dr. Sumner Jackson was the chief surgeon at the American Hospital in Paris during the Nazi occupation. At great risk to himself and his family, he joined an underground network that smuggled imperiled people to safety in Spain and Great Britain.”
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