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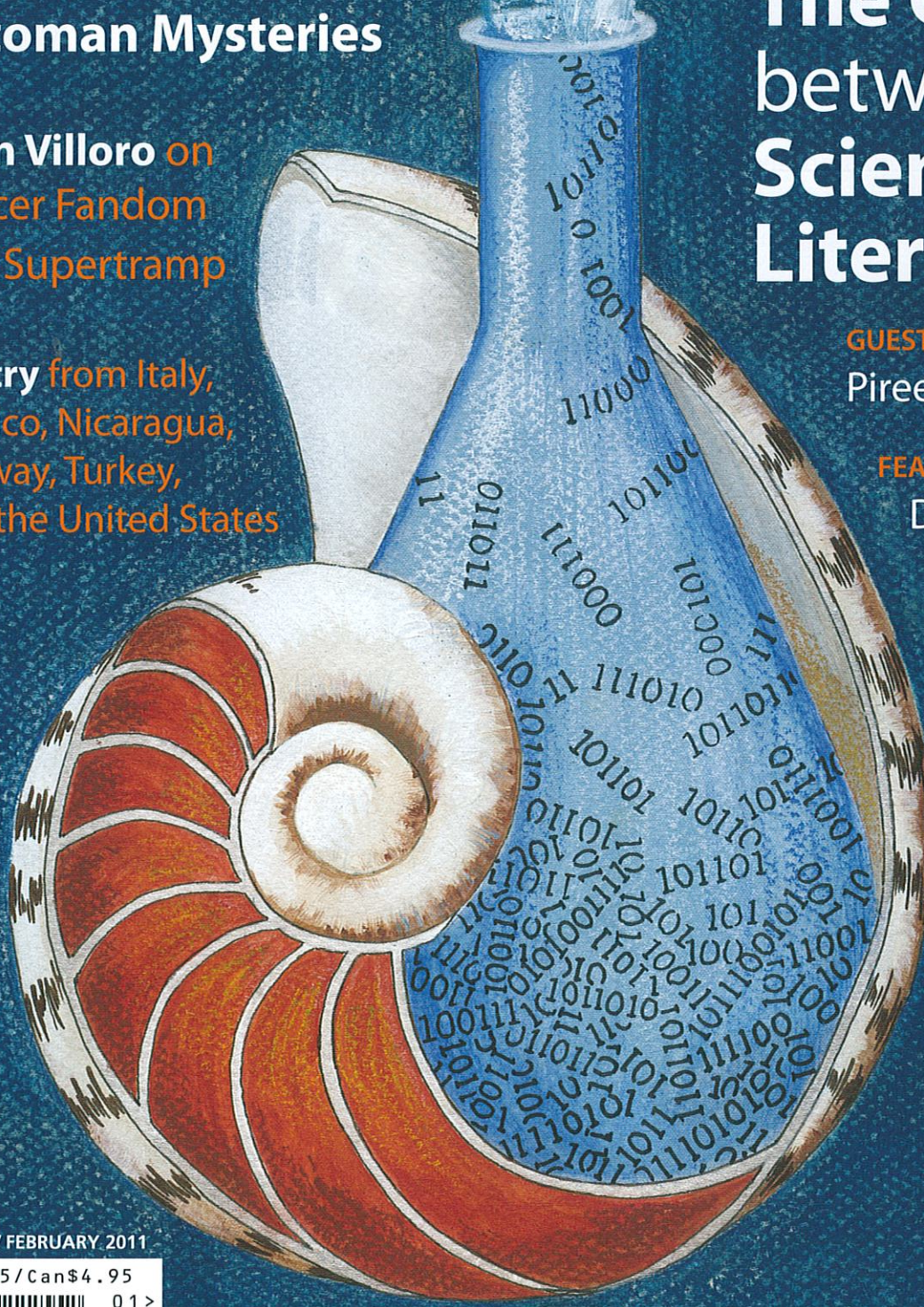
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Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care[®]

Lizz Sinclair

Participants have already begun to discuss Pat Barker's *Regeneration*, the novel for tonight's meeting, as they walk into a conference room after a long day of work. They sit down with fifteen others and, with the help of a facilitator, embark on a deep discussion of this award-winning novel about the relationships between a psychiatrist and his soldier patients during World War I. Group members call each other by their first names, listen carefully and ask hard questions, disagree, laugh, and, after two hours, continue their animated discussion as they walk to their cars.

If this sounds like a typical book club, it isn't. It's called *Literature & Medicine*, a reading and discussion group for health-care workers developed by the Maine Humanities Council and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. In the fast-paced, high-stress, hierarchical world of medicine, there is little time for reflection, particularly with a mixed group of colleagues, leaving many to feel isolated and in danger of burnout. But in this group, where the participants' positions in the hospital hierarchy are left at the door and everything said is kept confidential, the poems,

plays, fiction, and memoirs they read provide a welcome and often challenging lens for those in health care to look through. Literature encourages them to step into another's shoes and wonder what an experience might be like for their patients or colleagues. It also pro-

participants listen and look around the room, they recognize that others share their questions, joys, worries, and concern for patients. They are not alone.

More than two thousand health-care professionals working in hospitals in twenty-five states have participated in the Maine Humanities Council's *Literature & Medicine* program since 1997, with more participating each year. And what difference does it make? As one participant wrote, "Both patients and providers are crying out for health care to become more humane. . . . This program can help to restore the heart and soul of health care that so many of us believe has been weakened." This conclusion is supported by a program evaluation, which reflects significant increases in factors such as participants' empathy with patients and cultural awareness.

More information about this program, including a list of favorite readings, the program evaluation, and the two anthologies created by the program, can be found at mainehumanities.org/programs/litandmed.

Lizz Sinclair is the *Literature & Medicine* program officer at the Maine Humanities Council.



Group member Christine diPretoro poses with a stack of the book group's recently selected titles.

provides a safe way to explore important issues and concerns they face every day but may not always talk about. Because the readings can lead them to dwell in places that may be foreign or uncomfortable, it can also be enlightening. And as