

O P E N B O O K

From Literature to the Lab

\$24.95), he traces a career that led to a Nobel Prize with J. Michael Bishop, M.D. '62, S.D. '04 (whose memoir was excerpted March-April 2003, page 48), and then to the National Institutes of Health and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

Despite outward signs that I had chosen a life of studying and teaching literature, soon after starting my graduate work at Harvard, I began to suffer some further internal doubts about abandoning medicine. The

Enrollment in graduate study led Harold Varmus, A.M. '62, S.D. '96, to discover that his initial inclination (medicine) was the right one. In *The Art and Politics of Science* (W.W. Norton,

Ether Dome at the Massachusetts General Hospital, entranced by diagnostic dilemmas discussed at the weekly clinical pathology conference. These stories struck me as far more interesting than those I was reading, and my medical school friends expressed genuine excitement about their work. They also seemed to have formed a community of scholars, with shared interests in the human body and its diseases and common expectations that they would soon be able to do something about those diseases.

These Saturday excursions probably account for an influential dream that I had one night about my continuing indecision. In that dream, my future literature students were relieved when I didn't turn up to teach a class, but my future patients

A dream reinforced the future Nobel laureate's choice of a medical career.

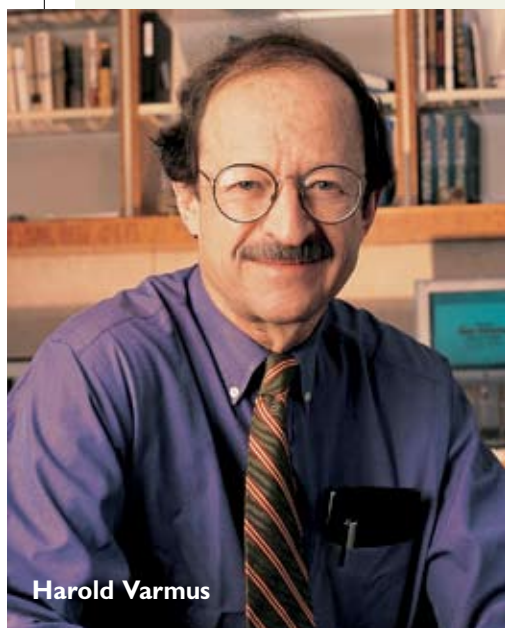
were disappointed when I didn't appear. It seemed I wanted to be wanted....

I decided to consult the augury again, by reapplying to medical school. Harvard Med had the first deadline....I was soon granted an interview with the notoriously confrontational dean of admissions, Percy Culver, who quickly made it clear, in a parental tone, that he found me too inconstant and immature in judgment to be admitted....In contrast, ...[t]he Columbia interviewer, an esteemed physician and anthropologist-rheumatologist named David Seegal, asked about the translation of the Anglo-Saxon phrase *Ich ne wat*. This was easy; it simply means "I don't know." Seegal used it to discuss why a physician might admit fallibility to a patient....By the fall of 1962, I was happily enrolled [there], helped for the first, but not the last, time by someone's exaggerated appreciation of my competence in two cultures.

who had a deep interest in pedagogy. (Matteson is now a professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice). And like Bronson, Matteson is the father of a daughter who possesses what he calls "a consuming desire to write"—a 14-year old who is hard at work on her own first book, a trilogy of fantasies based on the animals that appear in the first canto of Dante's *Inferno*. "A light bulb went on," Matteson says, "and I decided to use my experiences with my own daughter as a way of reading between the lines. This biography became a melding of life and art, of heart and head."

To get a deeper look, he went back to Harvard. Houghton Library has a large and lush collection of Alcottiana: everything from locks of Bronson's hair to correspondence between Louisa and Alf Whitman (the model for Laurie in *Little Women*). Bronson Alcott did not have his daughter's gift for writing—most of his mystico-philosophical publications were brutally mocked by the critics of his day—but he shared with her an obsessive desire to set his life down on paper in any way he could. He was a fanatical diarist, chronicling the minutest milestones in his daughters' development and just about every thought that ever crossed his mind.

In many ways, Matteson's training in legal scholarship made him the ideal person to glean this bounty, which he describes as both "utterly marvelous and utterly frustrating." *Eden's Outcasts* brims with highly specific insights (at one point Matteson notes Louisa's use of the word "nook" to describe a play space and contrasts it with Bronson's earlier philosophical decree that "there should be no 'nooks' or secret places in the youthful mind"). It also sets out a compelling, almost lawyerly case for Bronson's relevance and importance despite his many failures. His fiery insistence on living out his philosophy produced some spectacular embarrassments, but his experiments also bore spectacular fruit—including his own wild, introspective scribbler of a daughter. Matteson feels that the same is true of his own unconventional career. "Leaving a secure place in the law to go back to graduate school was thoroughly reckless and irrational," he says, "but I had to do it, and it saved my life. It taught me the supreme value of choosing what is authentic rather than what is safe."



Harold Varmus

JON R. FRIEDMAN

graduate curriculum in English literature was not especially onerous, but it felt like a prolongation of college. Most of my courses were heavily populated with Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates. First-year graduate students had little sense of identity as future scholars, we were often taught by older graduate students, and Harvard's famous professors, with the notable exception of the wonderful playwright and poet William Alfred, paid little attention to us. Making a commitment to literary scholarship under these circumstances was not easy....

Occasionally on Saturday mornings, I traveled across the Charles River to join some Amherst classmates at Harvard Medical School, while they sat in the