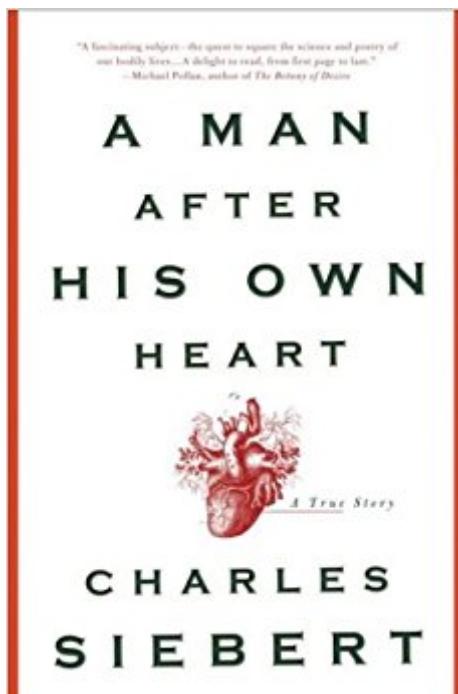


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A Man After His Own Heart: A True Story



Synopsis

Somewhere on this earth tonight, somewhere, I believe, not very far from me, there is a person whose heart I've touched. A person whose heart I've held in my hand. . . . So begins *A Man After His Own Heart*, an extraordinary narrative by acclaimed author, essayist, and poet Charles Siebert on that most elusive of topics--the human heart. On a rainy December night one recent winter, Siebert was given the rare opportunity to accompany a team of surgeons both in the harvesting of a human heart from the body of a young woman who'd recently died of a brain aneurysm, and in the subsequent delivery and implantation of that heart into the hollowed-out chest of a waiting recipient. Beginning with his harrowing week-long wait for the harvest call to come and culminating with the moment in which one of the implant surgeons suddenly, inexplicably, places the author's hand on the wildly beating reanimated heart, Siebert manages to weave a seamless series of ruminations and reflections about his own obsession with the heart and his often-estranged father's fatal heart disease; about history's ongoing fascination with this most central and vital organ; and about modern science's latest startling discoveries concerning both the heart's biological origins and its long-intuited role in the play of our emotions. The resulting mix is nothing less than a radically new, definitive biography of life's most pondered and poeticized protagonist. This story is a journey into the literal and figurative heart of our being, revealing the previously unexplored ways in which the matter of modern science and timeless metaphor meet.

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Customer Reviews

This compelling and complex narrative is based on a New York Times Magazine story by Siebert (Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral) that recounted his involvement with a team of surgeons who "harvested" a human heart from a recently dead person and transplanted it into a waiting recipient. What has evolved from that essay is a combination memoir, biography, science essay, medical history, social study, mythological exploration; above all, it is an excellent piece of journalism. Beginning with a scene in which a sleepless Siebert lies in bed listening to his "heart's tracks" and contemplating his mortality, he ranges widely among topics, including his father's heart ailments and death, Siebert's own heart-based panic attacks and his troubled relationship with his father, a short history of public anatomies from the 16th century to today and, finally, his involvement with the heart harvest, which culminated in an assisting surgeon placing Siebert's hand onto the beating, transplanted heart. Uniting his subjects is his fight against the idea that a greater medical knowledge about the workings of the heart "has led to a diminished appreciation of its abiding metaphysical significance." Siebert wonderfully illustrates how the heart does not serve as the seat of emotions, but rather as "the brain's subtle antagonist, its emotional and psychological counterpoise," and that the mystique of the heart "now requires even newer and better metaphors in order to be conveyed." Best of all is Siebert's exploration throughout of the subtle paradox of "the burden on the heart... which the very life that a heart allows brings." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Starred Review After writing a novel, Angus (2000), Siebert returns to the style of creative nonfiction that made his first book, Wickerby (1997), so striking, that is, a vigorously descriptive and analytical blend of memoir, observation, and history. Here his subject is a mighty one, the human heart, both "medical and metaphoric." This is a subject close to Siebert's heart, if you will, because of his father's premature death from a congenital disease of the heart muscle called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). Siebert poignantly remembers his father, a "fainthearted" man, and candidly chronicles his own bout with "heart paranoia": fears for his father and other anxieties caused what felt like heart attacks. Charmingly self-deprecating and unfailingly ardent, Siebert seeks the deepest possible understanding of all that he learns and experiences, pondering most intriguingly the astonishments of the genome and the mysterious connection between heart and brain. Ultimately, his quest leads to his witnessing a marvel of technical accomplishment and a sheer miracle: the harvesting of the beating heart of a young, brain-dead woman and its transplantation into an older man. Siebert's far-ranging and involving study of the heart is truly an inquiry into the very essence of life. Donna SeamanCopyright © American Library Association. All

Never have scientific and personal oddseys been so deftly woven into whole cloth. Charles Siebert has allowed us to share a personal journey motivated by emotion but marked by intellectual discovery. Apparently, Mr. Seibert is a poet as well as a writer of prose, and his lyricism transforms material that might otherwise be drily academic into the stuff of poetry. And what better subject than the heart? The center, presumably, of our emotional life as well as the focus of complex science and medicine. All of this takes place in this book within the vehicle of a heart transplant operation, which provides a narrative movement that keeps the reader turning the pages. On the path of this riveting account of the writer's personal experience with a heart transplant team, there are surreal landscapes humanized by the characters embodying the scientific and medical details as well as personal landscapes, including Mr. Siebert's confrontations and reconciliations with his own heart and his father's failing heart, all vivified by factual understanding. The special effects in this book are real, making the reader see that knowledge is the true landscape of the imagination. Science has long been seen as the enemy of the spirit; here is one writer who marries the two with astounding results. Artificial hearts, transplanted hearts, broken hearts, and loving hearts: anyone with a heart will love this book.

I am a very enthusiastic reader of medical memoirists such as Nuland, Solomon, and Seltzer, and after reading *A Man After His Own Heart* I'd place Siebert immediately in the same company, and a step better for the exceptional writing. These authors act as literary mediators between the general readership and science and health, where cultural myths and the obscurity of technical information cloud essential understanding of our bodies and ourselves, and ultimately of our own mortality, and perhaps worse, how our genetics may be used to marginalize us and our families. With all the personal pain and difficulty, struggling with the death of a father, and perhaps a genetic death sentence, Siebert, as a journalist, connects in a Whitmanesque way with people all over America suffering from heart disease, in its variants. Reading Siebert's book put me in mind of how critical it is to find a link between science and society, and how desperately we need such gifted authors.

I finally had the chance to read this book, which has been sitting on my night table for a while. Some books are easily forgettable - sometimes you can't even remember if you've read it or not. That is not the case with this beautifully written memoir - it has evoked feelings in me that remain strong even though a few weeks have passed. My father had an aortic valve replacement last year, and

I've had my own episodes of arrhythmia and tachycardia, so I felt a real connection with both the science and emotion regarding the heart. The personal recollections are both honest and real, and kept me wanting more. It's such a delight to find a writer who is courageous enough to let the readers in for a glimpse into his personal relationships.

This book is beautifully written. After finding out about my own congenital heart 'irregularity' I was very interested in the topic. I was engrossed in the story and descriptions about his Father, his siblings, and his own confrontation with his heart 'problems'. I read the book in a day and about 2/3 of the way through I became disappointed. The story shifts from his personal landscape to the 'heart history' he researched in London and to the medical procedure he witnesses. I kept reading, hoping he would deliver the emotional lessons he learned about his own heart or about himself or about his relationship with his Father. But he did not. In the end his beautiful words eclipsed the meaning.

Charles Siebert's book is stunningly beautiful and wonderfully lyrical in its prose, its focus and its intent to communicate Mr. Siebert's quest. As a man who lost his father at a too-young age, and frets about his own mortality, this book struck home like a scalpel, peeling back layers of emotion within myself. Be prepared for an intimate journey into Mr. Siebert's spiritual and actual heart, and into your own.

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