BOOKS

A Man After His Own Heart

By Charles Siebert
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A Man After His Own Heart: A True Story

Late one winter night in 1998, Charles Siebert, a Brooklyn poet and essayist, witnessed an event that few people outside the medical profession ever see: a heart harvest. He accompanied a team of surgeons as they removed a still-beating heart from a donor (the victim of a brain aneurysm) and transplanted it into the chest, and life, of a waiting recipient. Siebert's voyage that evening took him to the edge of cardiac medicine—and, as he recounts in his luminous book, *A Man After His Own Heart*, to the core of himself.

Siebert's story is at once a medical drama and a memoir, a biography of the heart and of his own obsession with it. His physical descriptions—including the moment when, unexpectedly, an attending surgeon places Siebert's hand directly on the transplanted heart—are delicate and arresting. Meanwhile, suffusing the medical narrative is another, more intimate one. At the outset Siebert admits to being what physicians call a heart hypochondriac. His father's death, from a congenital form of heart failure, has become a driving preoccupation. Mistaking his heart anxieties for heart attacks, Siebert visits the emergency room repeatedly. At night, sleepless, he presses his ear to the pillow and listens fearfully for the sound of his heart's "faint, brief snare-beats, like boot steps through wet snow." He interviews cardiac researchers at the National Institutes of Health to explore whether he, too, carries the gene for his father's disease; he meets a family who has the gene, all of whom live with the knowledge of their eventual undoing. He meets the "pole pushers"—cardiac patients desperately awaiting donated hearts to replace their own. And he follows the harvesters, and so comes to meet the heart firsthand.

With urgency and grace, Siebert transforms the journey into a Conradian exploration of inner space. His goal is nothing less than "the rehumanization of the heart," a recognition that the heart is no mere pump, as some physicians still insist, but a sophisticated participant in the regulation of emotion. The heart has a mind of its own: It secretes its own brainlike hormones and actively partakes in a dialogue among the internal organs—a dialogue on which cardiac researchers are only beginning to eavesdrop. The heart likewise undergoes all manner of organic change inflicted on it by the tempestuous brain and its neurochemicals. As one doctor explains, people do suffer heartbreak, literally.

Consider the fate of William Schroeder, the second—and longest-surviving—recipient, in 1984, of the Jarvik-7 artificial heart. As a pump, the Jarvik-7 was a resounding success, keeping Schroeder alive for an unprecedented 620 days. The patient's mental state was another matter. Schroeder was weepy and deeply despondent. (Barney Clark, the first Jarvik-7 recipient, expressed a wish to die or be killed.) The blood still circulated, but something vital—some emotionally charged communication between heart and mind—had been lost. What is it like, Siebert asks, to watch your favorite sports team rally yet not feel your pulse quicken? To see a loved one yet not feel your heart leap? "When someone's heart is no longer working in concert with those feelings, does he feel that and cry more?" Affirming all myths, the heart truly is a seat of human emotion. The Jarvik-7, in contrast, was deaf to the song of human experience; built to invigorate its patient, it instead alienated him, supplying Schroeder with everything but the will to live. He had the look, Siebert writes, "of a man who has lost his heart."

A Man After His Own Heart is an unusual mix of genres, and Siebert is the rare writer able to pull it off. (His first book, *Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral*, was a witty take on Thoreau and the back-to-nature instinct.) He deftly bridges the gap between intellect and emotion—in the process demonstrating what it means to be, in every sense, the author of one's heart.

—Alan Burdick