

Reader's Guide

The Heart Specialist

A Novel by Claire Holden Rothman

Introducing *The Heart Specialist*:

Agnes White understands that her life isn't going to be easy. As a young child, she is fascinated by her father's medical practice and drawn to unladylike pursuits such as peering into microscopes and dissecting anatomical specimens. Just before she turns five, her father is embroiled in a scandal and abandons his wife, little Agnes, and his unborn daughter, Laure.

Agnes's mother dies shortly after of consumption and grief, leaving Agnes and her sister in the care of their grandmother, who has little trust of things academic or scientific. Fortunately, a governess with a keen intellect is hired and ends up not only encouraging Agnes to learn but becoming a life-long friend and ally. Agnes enrolls in McGill University at a time when women students are rare. She then applies to study medicine, but McGill's doors are resolutely closed..

Years later, after obtaining a medical degree elsewhere, Agnes is hired to curate McGill's pathology museum. Women are still barred from study at the McGill medical faculty, but Agnes makes it in the door. Unexpected treasures await her, including a misshapen, three-chambered human heart with links to her missing father.

Inspired by the life of Dr. Maude Abbott, one of Canada's first female physicians, *The Heart Specialist* is testament to the power of longing and perseverance. Agnes White is proof that in a world on the brink of change anything is possible.

Important Themes:

Perseverance and Success

Several characters in the novel are determined to be successful. Agnes is willing to devote her life to medicine, but she is continually thwarted due to her gender and society — beginning with her grandmother, who fears Agnes is doomed to the life of a spinster if she pursues her passion for science. She must overcome significant obstacles to be admitted to McGill, and although she meets with success throughout her life, nothing is handed to her. Jakob's situation mirrors Agnes's. He too strives to achieve his goals.

Marginalization

Abandonment is at the root of many of the character's situations. Agnes is abandoned by her father at a young age and it affects her greatly, prompting her to live a life largely isolated from others. Unattractive even by her own standards, Agnes accepts early on that she will never be an object of desire. Outside of the members of her family, she has few

friends that she seeks for emotional comfort. Agnes's isolation is, in a sense, comforting to her; she feels at ease spending long hours alone working in her museum. Laure, unlike her older sister, is beautiful and popular. However, she is abandoned by her husband early in their marriage which leads her to isolate herself. Other characters also isolate themselves, such as Jakob or Miss Skerry.

Mentorship

The novel consists of a number of mentors and their protégés, and each pairing is linked to another. We have Honoré Bourett, who trusts his protégé William Howlett more than anyone else. Howlett then serves as both the object of Agnes's affections and as her mentor in the field of medicine. Agnes feels as strongly towards Howlett as she does towards her father, even mistaking the two of them when they first meet. Likewise, she learns several lessons from Jakob, who in turn falls in love with her without her knowledge. These connections form some of the strongest bonds we see in the novel.

Death and Hope

The novel opens with death, and early on there is foreshadowing of more to come: "All morning I had been waiting for death, even though when it finally came the change was so incremental I nearly missed it." Death seems to follow Agnes wherever she goes due to her profession — she is continually dealing with the organs of both the newly and long-dead. Embracing the morbidity, she turns death into hope with the breakthrough research she conducts throughout the novel. But the death Agnes deals with isn't solely a byproduct of her profession; with the first world war raging through Europe, and the Spanish Influenza epidemic, those she loves are dying all around her.

Discussion Questions:

- 1.) How can we apply the line, "All morning I had been waiting for death, even though when it finally came the change was so incremental I nearly missed it" to different sections of the novel and to the world of the early 20th century?
- 2.) Discuss Honoré Bourett as Agnes's opinion of him changes throughout the novel. Does he become a sympathetic character in the end?
- 3.) Discuss the differences between Jakob and Agnes. How are their positions and roles in society similar? How are they different?
- 4.) On page 87, Agnes thinks "I had been too strong for too damn long. That was the problem. I had borne so many blows, losing my step sometimes from the impact but always picking myself up afterward and continuing as if nothing had happened. Strength was a lie. I saw it now so clearly." Can we conclude that Agnes needed, in a sense, to be rejected by McGill?

- 5.) Discuss the various instances of unrequited love in the novel. Can we draw parallels among the different examples?
- 6.) Discuss Laure's adult life after marrying Huntley. What judgment does this imply of the time period's idea of conventional marriage?
- 7.) Agnes White is inspired by one of Canada's first female physicians, Maude Abbott. Does this change your opinion of the novel? How?
- 8.) Is the Howlett Heart a metaphor?
- 9.) What role does Dr. Dugald Rivers play in the latter half of the novel?
- 10.) How does time factor into this novel? We see roughly forty-five years of Agnes's life; how does her character evolve? What are her highest and lowest points? What does she learn or discover?

Author Q&A:

1) How did you first discover Maude Abbott, and what made her life novel-worthy?

CHR: I stumbled upon her in some research I was doing. I liked the fact that she spent most of her life studying deformities of the human heart. I could just picture her sitting in the pathology museum at McGill (a strange place for a woman to be in that era) surrounded by pickled anatomical specimens. She seemed to me anomalous herself, a woman not quite of her time. It meant that her life would be difficult, full of challenges and obstacles.

2) What were some of the challenges you faced while writing fiction inspired on a real person?

CHR: I wanted to write a novel, not a biography. I wished to honour Maude Abbott's scholarly and professional accomplishments, but give myself the freedom to shape a satisfying piece of fiction around a fully imagined fictional character, so I had to know Maude Abbott well, but also free myself from her. I did a lot of research on the historical period (late nineteenth century to the end of the First World War) and I followed the basic professional path of Doctor Abbott, but that is where fact ends. The rest is imagination and the mysterious, subliminal process of allowing fiction to emerge.

3) Did you do any research on cardiology for your book?

CHR: I did. I used the internet and the library to learn about the human heart and heart defects. I read Maude Abbott's own writings on the subject and visited the remnants of her pathology collection at McGill. I also interviewed a Montreal cardiologist who

graduated from McGill in the 1940s and showed me research he had done on cardiac anomalies before heart surgery had been developed.

4) Were there any elements of Maude Abbott's life you had to leave out because they didn't fit into the story?

CHR: This is a novel, and novels tend to dictate their own structure. They require conflict and reversals and discoveries. Life tends to be less dramatic than fiction. So of course there were things in Maude Abbott's life that I left out. She lived until 1940, by which point McGill had finally recognized her worth, as had the international medical community. I left out the later chapters of Abbott's professional life, which are fascinating and entirely worthy but did not fit the story here. There were also things I added and changed from Maude Abbott's life. She was not a natural historian as a child, for instance, and her father was not a medical doctor. She had governesses, but no one like George Skerry. Her grandmother raised her, but the real-life grandmother was more sympathetic than the grandmother in my novel. The novel's structure demanded these elements.

5) Just as Agnes White is inspired by Maude Abbott, William Howlett seems to be inspired by Sir William Osler. Were there any other characters that were based on real-life people?

CHR: The sources for my characters vary. Agnes is inspired, at least in her professional accomplishments, by Maude Abbott, but she has elements of my own self, a bit of my real-life sister, who happens to be a doctor and bits of other people I know. My characters are often composites. George Skerry, for instance, was inspired by Jane Eyre and by various real women I admire and love. Jakob Hertzlich came from a photograph I found of Maude Abbott and her lab assistant (about whom I know nothing), but I kept thinking while I was creating Jakob of the character of Duncan, the improbable love interest in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. Jakob's family history was based on accounts I read about early Jewish immigrants to Montreal.

6) Did you begin the book with the ending in mind?

CHR: I knew it would end with a union of sorts, with love and connection. The image of the heart was too strong in my mind for any alternative. The three-chambered heart, which was based on a real specimen known as the "Holmes Heart," was what impelled me to write in the first place. The Holmes Heart dates back to the 1820s when the McGill faculty of medicine was founded, and was one of the pathology museum's first specimens and still exists today, shelved on a display case in the basement of McGill's pathology building. I knew the story was basically a search for love, and that the search would not end badly.

7) You've previously published two short story collections, but *The Heart Specialist* is your first novel. Aside from the length, what were the key differences for you?

CHR: Novels are a completely different species from stories. The structure is different. So is the subject matter. Stories are moments, often quiet, of insight and perceptual shift. Novels are noisier, more boisterous and jostling and full of action. They need drama to sustain them. Conflict must build to a moment of great tension and then release.

8) What are you working on now? Would you consider writing another novel based on a historical figure?

CHR: I am working right now on a play set in the present-day. I'm also working on a novel that has a historical component. But this time the subject matter is history that I have lived through and witnessed, so the research is less daunting.

About the Author:

Claire Holden Rothman is a writer and translator. She holds a B.A. in philosophy and a B.C.L. from McGill University, as well as an M.A. in literature from Concordia University. For thirteen years she taught English and humanities at Marianopolis College in Montreal, and for several years after that, creative writing at McGill. She is the author of two collections of stories. She lives in Montreal with her husband and two sons.