

ROOM TO READ BOOK GROUP

The Story Of A Heart by Rachel Clarke

This month we discussed the winner of the 2025 Women's Prize for Non-Fiction, by journalist and doctor Rachel Clarke. It explores the human experience behind a heart transplant. We meet nine year old Max, facing imminent heart failure; his family; and the family of nine year old Kiera, who died after a road accident. Unusually the families had met, as a result in the first place of a publicity campaign in the Daily Mirror to increase the availability of organs for donation by a change in the law.

In addition to the highly emotional stories about the two families and the events leading to the transplant, Rachel Clarke details advances in medicine which led to heart transplantation, with insight into the technicalities involved, the characteristics of the surgeons who first attempted it and the difficulties they overcame, for example in obtaining funding and ethical approval as well as the highly complex medical obstacles.

It is interesting to read how the NHS deals with the patients themselves and their families with enormous compassion, but also the procedural complexity of matching donor and recipient and the practicalities involved in just one transplant. We were grateful for the insights offered by our member, Ruth, who in her working life was clinical director of pathology for an NHS trust.

We were not however uncritical. The writing was felt to be at times sentimental, especially about the sisters of the donor child. The story having originated with the Daily Mirror, it appeared to be directed at that particular target audience. Written to promote heart transplants, it did a good job, but possibly at the cost of avoiding many crucial issues.

Our discussion covered amongst other things, the morality and emotional and financial costs of medical advances. We wondered about the long term outcomes for Max, as well as the emotional toll and practicalities faced by his wider family. The story of the donor family similarly seemed to gloss over harsh reality. The book was felt to glorify cutting edge surgery without always addressing its long term impact on individuals and families.

These are massively complex issues many of which were necessarily touched on lightly, if at all, in a book which concentrates on reporting facts in a journalistic style. Most of us were glad to have read it and we all appreciated the opportunity for discussion.

Rounded up, the scores for discussion were 5/5 and for recommendation to a friend 4/5.

Review by Ann Whitfield