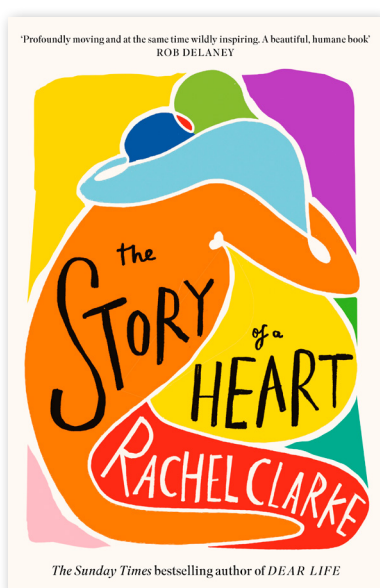


The Story of a Heart

by Rachel Clarke



PLOT SUMMARY

The first of our organs to form, the heart is both a simple pump and the symbol of all that makes us human: as long as it continues to beat, we hope.

One summer day, nine-year-old Kiera suffered catastrophic injuries in a car accident. Though her brain and the rest of her body began to shut down, her heart maintained its rhythm. In an act of extraordinary generosity, Keira's parents and siblings agreed that she would have wanted to be an organ donor. Meanwhile, nine-year-old Max had been hospitalised for nearly a year with a virus that was causing his young heart to fail. When Max's parents received the call they had been hoping for, they knew it came at a terrible cost to another family.

This is the unforgettable story of how one family's grief transformed into a life-saving gift. With tremendous compassion and clarity, Dr Rachel Clarke relates the urgent journey of Keira's heart and explores the history of the remarkable medical innovations that made it possible, stretching back over a century and involving the knowledge, dedication and care not just of surgeons, but of countless physicians, immunologists, nurses and scientists.

The Story of a Heart is a testament to the many ways we honour our loved ones, and the tenacity of life.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Clarke uses the present tense to guide the reader through Keira's journey, making us feel her story is unfolding in real time. This enables Clarke to take the reader carefully and step-by-step through a complicated process, taking time to consider the roles of a variety of medical professionals that lent a hand in Keira's final days at every stage. Keira's story and that of her family is so emotive that this sense of pacing feels essential – much in the same way that paediatric cardiac specialist nurse Clair Noctor knows it is essential to introduce the idea

“Meticulously researched and superbly written, this book combines the author’s expertise with the emotional resonance of the subject to bring together an extraordinary story.”

DR ELIZABETH-JANE BURNETT,
2025 JUDGE



Shortlist
2025

that Max will need a new heart slowly and gently to his parents, Emma and Paul.

However, the use of the present tense in telling Keira’s story also gives a sense of the speed at which everything has to happen in emergency medicine, and the split-second decisions that have to be made so that the patient has the best possible opportunity for survival.

By contrast, Max’s story is told in the past tense. Because we know that Max will survive this story, Clarke’s narrative does not have to be paced in quite the same way, although the emotions in play are just as profound, and Max’s story is deeply moving. The sections in which Clarke discusses the history of transplants in medicine are fascinating, and also serve to give the reader a break between the highly emotive story of the two children, as well as providing the historical, scientific and social context for the practice of transplants.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Rachel Clarke’s remarkable book treads a difficult line very successfully: between the medical realities of transplant surgery, and the heartbreaking and poignantly uplifting human story of Keira, Max and their families – all of whom were changed forever by their experience.

We learn that a heart transplant is a most delicate operation, and Clarke’s narrative walks the sensitive line between empowering the reader with the facts and compassionately holding them through heartrending moments. She is at all times clear-eyed, humane and kind, managing to fascinate the reader with her passion for medicine, even though, for many reading, the subject of her book – the severe illness and loss of a child – is the most horrific thing they can imagine.

Many of the parts of Max and Keira’s story could be triggering to readers who may have experienced having a seriously sick child or loved one being treated in hospital, or worse. How did you feel about the more difficult parts of the book? What parts were the most difficult for you? How does Clarke’s prose encourage you to read on?

QUESTIONS

What did you think about the film *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital* that Clarke describes?

How did you reflect on the parallels between polio in the 1950s and the Covid-19 pandemic? Were you aware of the number of children with polio at that time?

Do you think that surgeons do have a higher incidence of psychopathy, as Clarke discusses in the Judgement chapter? Do you think that surgery is as ‘macho’ an area of work than it might have once been perceived to be?

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

How did you feel about the NHS staff who looked after both children and their families? The doctors and nurses organising Christmas in the children's ward, or Max's care team, dancing around his bed?

NEXT STEPS

Clarke says: 'Later, Emma would have no recollection of how Max was transferred from the ambulance to intensive care. Stress had wiped her clean, erased everything, as though the human mind can only take so much before clamping shut like a shell'.

Have you had this experience? Are there things in your life that you know have happened but you don't remember them? You might like to write this as a poem, using the senses to explore what is remembered and what is forgotten. Begin the poem 'I remember' – perhaps start each one of the first five or ten (or more) lines with that. Then, begin the next five or ten (or more) lines with 'I don't remember'.

Alternatively, inspired by the accounts of the medical practitioners Clarke describes in the book, write a letter to the NHS (or the health service in your country). You could address the circumstances under which it was founded and how it has changed over the years. How is the NHS seen now? Do you interact with medical practitioners? What would you like to say to it? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Clarke is a palliative care doctor and the author of three *Sunday Times* bestselling non-fiction books. *Breathtaking*, was adapted into an acclaimed television series, broadcast on ITV in 2024. *Dear Life*, depicting her work in an NHS hospice, was shortlisted for the 2020 Costa Biography Award and long-listed for the 2020 Baillie Gifford Prize. Before going to medical school, Clarke produced and directed current affairs documentaries focusing on subjects such as Al Qaeda and the Iraq War.



W9
Shortlist
2025

If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

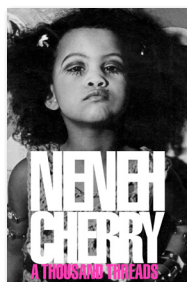
In *Dear Life: A Doctor's Story of Love, Loss and Consolation*, Dr Rachel Clarke, a specialist in palliative medicine, considers the strength, kindness, joy, tenderness, grace and compassion found in hospices.

In *In Shock: How Nearly Dying Made Me a Better Intensive Care Doctor*, Rana Awdish tells her extraordinary journey from doctor to patient, fighting for her life in her own hospital, enduring a series of organ failures and multiple major surgeries: a brave roadmap for anyone navigating illness and a call to arms for doctors to see each patient not as a diagnosis, but as a human being.

Want more? Our website is packed full of book recommendations, reading lists, author interviews and more. And our Women's Prize Library is brimming with books, both fiction and non-fiction, that will satisfy every reader from gripping mysteries and inspiring memoirs to magical romances and thrilling historical accounts.

womensprize.com

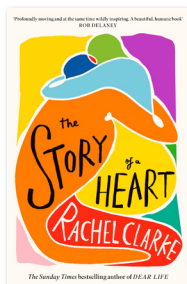
EXPLORE THE 2025 SHORTLIST



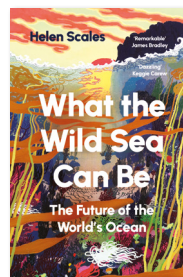
A Thousand Threads
by Neneh Cherry



Agent Zo:
The Untold Story of Courageous WW2 Resistance Fighter Elżbieta Zawacka
by Clare Mulley



The Story of a Heart
by Rachel Clarke



What the Wild Sea Can Be:
The Future of the World's Ocean
by Helen Scales



Raising Hare
by Chloe Dalton



Private Revolutions:
Coming of Age in a New China
by Yuan Yang

DISCOVER MORE!

There are many ways to get involved with the Women's Prize:

Join our book-loving community and subscribe to our newsletter, chat on social media and join us at our events, both in-person and online.

We run free writing workshops, online book clubs and an annual book festival to bring our community together. And listen out for our podcast *Bookshelfie*, where each week a guest picks her five favourite books written by women and

discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

The Women's Prize Trust is a registered charity, and we appreciate donations of any size to support our outreach work with writers and readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. So, however you wish to, **join us and help put more books written by women into the hands of more readers.**

womensprize.com
[@womensprize](https://www.instagram.com/womensprize)



SUPPORTED BY

Find my past