



Heart Sister

Michael F. Stewart

9781459824874 PB

Recommended For

Late middle grade and up; ages 12+

Key Curriculum Areas

- Learning areas: English, drama
- General Capabilities: literacy, critical and creative thinking

Reasons For Studying This Book

- Examining different writing styles—variations in voice, literary devices and multimodal writing
- Analyzing how language and writing evoke mood, tone, tension and characterization
- Discussing moral and ethical dilemmas
- Creating empathy for others within the community
- Encouraging critical thinking in our decisions
- Encouraging creative and imaginative writing

Key Themes

- Organ donation
- Identity
- Depression

Book Summary

After Emmitt's twin sister, Minnie, dies in an accident, his world goes sideways. He's lost his best friend and it feels like the family is falling apart without her. But Minnie was an organ donor and Emmitt soon receives an anonymous thank-you letter from one of the transplant recipients. Inspiration strikes: he decides to put his sister back together—in spirit—by creating a virtual reality (VR) movie of the people she helped with her transplanted organs. It's an ode to his sister, which he hopes will free his mom and dad from their grief.

But the transplant organization guards the names of organ recipients closely, and Emmitt must puzzle out identities by scouring social media and online forums. Unfortunately, the recipients don't meet Emmitt's expectations. But, in these unlikely companions, Emmitt finds friendship and purpose as he struggles to help them to do better if only for the sake of his sister.

Then the girl who received his sister's heart refuses to meet him, and Emmitt has to turn to extreme measures to find her. Eventually he locates her in the hospital's pediatric intensive care unit. Emmitt assumes a fake identity and masquerades as a volunteer clown to try and get to her in hopes of completing his movie. What he doesn't know is that his "heart sister" is hiding an agonizing secret, one that could push Emmitt to the breaking point.

Prereading Idea

Most people, when surveyed, believe that organ donation is a good thing, yet a far smaller percentage of people register to be organ donors and even fewer go on to become donors after they die. Discuss why this may be the case. What might prevent people from making the decision to be organ donors? Ask students what information may help people understand the potential benefits to recipients and donor families.

Author's Inspiration

I wrote this novel after my big brother received a lifesaving heart. A new heart is such a monumental gift, I didn't really know what I could do to show my gratitude. As an author, I figured that writing a book that could be used as a tool to help others consider their own thoughts about organ donation would be best. In a way, it's my thank you letter to all donors and their families.

Critical Thinking About Organ Donation

The question of whether to register as an organ donor is an excellent opportunity to learn critical thinking and media literacy skills. Like with many complex issues, there is a lot of false information relating to organ donation, but unlike many such issues, organ donation is a topic for discussion that is safe to explore. Identifying false or misleading statements allows students to gain an appreciation for where their knowledge comes from and the impact the media has on our lives.

Because it is also a personal and actionable decision, which can have a significant impact on the lives of others, it is an empowering topic. Using the novel *Heart Sister* as a springboard, the following are some activities for students to try.

True or False – *Heart Sister* is factually correct.

FALSE!

In some instances the author uses artistic license in order to improve the storytelling. In the following list of statements, can you determine which ones are fact and which are fiction?

Fact Vs Fiction

1. After an organ donation, the recipients become a part of the donor's family.
2. The recipients of a donor's organs are listed on, or connected to, the donor's medical record.
3. To ensure brain death has occurred in the donor, doctors administer a series of tests including ice water in the ear and painful stimuli.
4. The deceased person's choice to be an organ donor can help the grieving family.
5. If you register as a donor, the family can't stop the organ donation from occurring.
6. Minnie's organs went to five individuals. An organ donor can save five people's lives.

Answers

1. FALSE: In rare instances, organ recipients connect with the donor families, but in the vast majority of cases the donor and recipients remain anonymous. What is true in the story, is that many recipients and donor families fear being found or do not wish to be found.
2. FALSE: There is no recorded connection between recipient and donor that could be 'hacked' by an individual. The author needed a plausible method of tracking down the organ recipients and so conceived the idea of engineering a hack of the intensive care unit.
3. TRUE: These tests to determine brain death, as well as others depicted in the novel, are true to life. Also true is Emmitt's discovery that the confirmation of death is more rigorous for organ donors than it would be for non-organ donors. A common objection to registering as an organ donor is the "What if I'm not really dead?" question. Harvesting organs without confirming a person is dead simply does not happen.
4. TRUE: Many families describe organ donation as a source of meaning and hope in the face of great loss. While nothing can change the devastation of losing someone they love, families find comfort in knowing that their loved-one's legacy lives on in the many lives changed or saved.
5. FALSE: Families carry the responsibility of consenting for organ donation on behalf of their loved one. This is why it is so important to discuss organ donation and other end-of-life issues as families before difficult decisions need to be made. In the story the decision for the donation to move forward was accurately made by the parents, even though Emmitt himself had reservations.
6. FALSE: An organ donor can save eight lives and improve the lives of up to seventy-five others! But that would have been too many characters for one book.

Myth Busting

There are a lot of myths and magical thinking associated with organ donation. When you think of registering as an organ donor, do you think of any of the following? You're not alone if you do!

- If I register as an organ donor, it's more likely that I'll get into an accident or die. *This is a common superstition, but registering as a donor won't change whether you'll live a long life or not.*
- Doctors are less likely to try to save my life if they know I'm an organ donor. *The doctor caring for you is focused on you and your recovery. He or she will never be involved in recovering or assigning organs to anyone else.*
- It's against my religion to be an organ donor. *All major religions support organ and tissue donation.*
- I already have a chronic illness, so my organs are no good. *In fact, there are few ailments that disqualify an organ donor. The oldest organ donor was ninety years old!*

How do I register to be an organ donor?

- Most provinces have registries to document wishes to donate, but most only allow individuals over a certain age to register.
organissuedonation.ca
- The best way to 'register' your wishes is to share them with your family members

I still have questions, how can I learn more?

- blood.ca/en/organs-tissues/deceased-donation

Multimodal Writing

The author does not just use prose to tell the story, but uses a range of writing styles. These include flashbacks, film script, emails, text messages, story within a story and letters.

1. What impact do these multimodal forms have on the novel? Did their inclusion add to or detract from your enjoyment of the novel? How would the novel be different without them?
2. How do these varied writing styles help to add to the messages in the novel? Is one form of writing superior to the others? Is the book better because of this variety?

Minnie's Questions

What was the significance of the questions Minnie posed when she was at the campfire? How are the questions and the dioramas used as devices to tell the story and help readers learn more about the characters?

In many ways, Minnie was asking questions about what's important to us in our lives. Write yourself into the campfire scene. How would you respond and react to Minnie's questions?

1. Why might the concept of choosing an animal be important part of this process?
2. What animal would you be?
3. What would you put in your diorama? (How do you see yourself?)
4. What would others put in your diorama? (How do you think people see you?)
5. What would you change about it? (What are you prepared to work toward changing?)

Story Structure and *Heart Sister*

Heart Sister is an opportunity to discuss story structure. One method of structuring a story is to use theme as a device. In such a story, the hero moves from disbelief in a theme to belief and embodiment of a theme. This is a common structure for many books and movies ranging from *Star Wars* to *Finding Nemo* to *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *Heart Sister*, the author also uses the arc of a protagonist to take the reader through many of the potential objections a person might encounter when determining whether they wish to register to be an organ donor.

IN THE BEGINNING

We meet Emmitt in disbelief of organ donation, having tattooed a “Do Not Recycle” symbol on his shoulder. He has not yet faced the death of his sister and fears that the donation of her organs was wrong. That she wasn’t yet dead. This part of the story is sometimes called the “ordinary world,” in which we meet the character in a state of disbelief of the theme. Emmitt’s story problem is that his mother is in a depression and he wants to help her. The theme of the story is that to move past a tragedy one must face it. At the outset, Emmitt is not yet ready to face his sister’s death.

INCITING INCIDENT

The ordinary world shows our hero in stasis. He is passive. Without the inciting incident life wouldn’t change for him. In *Heart Sister*, the inciting incident is this: Having received a letter from his “heart sister,” Emmitt considers the possibility of bringing his sister back by putting the pieces of her together. The inciting incident confirms the theme for the hero. In this case, he believes that if the pieces of his sister live on, she must too.

OBSTACLES AND ESCALATIONS

By this stage in the story our theme is clear: Can we overcome our grief without facing it? Emmitt believes he can bring his sister back and is living in a state of denial. His sister was an important part of his social and intellectual life, and he doesn’t think he can go on without her. So he clings to the hope that by collecting stories from the recipients of her organs he can bring her back.

The middle parts of stories are designed to test the theme, to inch our hero closer to belief in the theme and understanding. In this case, Emmitt’s hopes of recreating his sister are dashed as he discovers that the recipients don’t meet his expectations. Worse still, some don’t even wish to meet and, in his efforts to do so, he goes to extremes that could spell deep trouble.

CLIMAX

The climax of *Heart Sister* occurs just as he thinks he’s getting what he needs: his sister back in the form of his “heart sister,” Becca, which is when she tells him that the heart is rejecting. This forces Emmitt to finally face the loss of his sister. Moreover, he’s caught and kicked out of the hospital. But by this stage of the novel Emmitt has overcome obstacles, created friendships, and realized that he has value. He’s more prepared to face his grief and a life without his sister.

DENOUEMENT

In the process of coming to terms with his sister's loss, you'll note that Emmitt has gone from disbelieving in the case for organ donation to being an advocate. He's learned that the doctors did everything they could to help his sister and ensure she was treated humanely in death, and that it's not for Emmitt to judge the recipients. He's created a new identity for himself that doesn't include his sister and he's repaired the damage he'd done through the process of discovery. His tattoo is gone and he's now a registered donor.