



# The Heart Specialist

*Claire Holden Rothman*

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## **The Heart Specialist** Claire Holden Rothman

Set in Quebec at the turn of the 19th to 20th century, *The Heart Specialist* is the epic story of Agnes White, a lonely orphaned girl fascinated by the "wrong" things—microscopes, dissections, and anatomy instead of more ladylike interests—who rises to the status of one of the world's most celebrated pioneering women doctors. Not only does she break through patriarchal academic barriers; she masters the science of the human heart, becoming a scholar of international fame, all in a place and time inimical to intelligent women.

When Agnes is small, her father, a French-Canadian doctor living in Montreal, is charged with the murder of his handicapped sister. Although he is eventually acquitted, his reputation is ruined, and he flees, abandoning Agnes and her pregnant mother. Less than a year later, her mother dies of consumption, leaving Agnes and her baby sister Laure on their own. Agnes's sparse memories of her father have an abiding impact on her, and she is determined to find him, as well as to follow in his footsteps as a doctor, even though medical schools in Canada are closed to women at the time. She eventually gets her degree and finds a niche for herself as the curator of the McGill University pathology museum. But even as her professional star rises, her life is solitary and her happiness remains incomplete because of her missing father. One of the only clues in her quest to find him is a strange, misshapen heart that teaches her an invaluable lesson about love. Agnes ultimately must recognize that though she's a world-reknowned expert on the human heart, she still doesn't understand the her own.

Inspired by the career of Maude Abbott, one of Canada's first female physicians, *The Heart Specialist* is a novel about the mysterious, painful journey into selfhood.

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