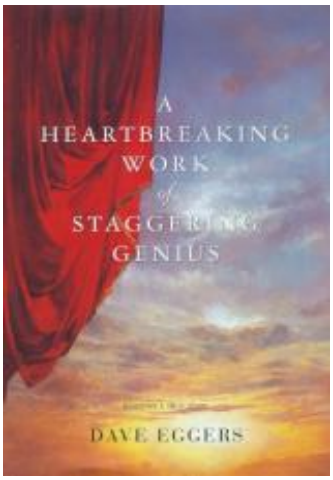
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A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius

by Dave Eggers



About the Book

The literary sensation of the year, a book that redefines both family and narrative for the twenty-first century. **A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius** is the moving memoir of a college senior who, in the space of five weeks, loses both of his parents to cancer and inherits his eight-year-old brother. Here is an exhilarating debut that manages to be simultaneously hilarious and wildly inventive as well as a deeply heartfelt story of the love that holds a family together.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius is an instant classic that will be read in paperback for decades to come. The Vintage edition includes a new appendix by the author.

Discussion Guide

1. The material preceding the main text in this book--called "front matter" in the publishing business--has been entirely taken over by the author, including the usually very official copyright page. Why might the publisher have allowed Eggers to take this unconventional route? Why does Eggers work so extensively at disrupting the formality of publication and his status as an author?

2. On the copyright page we find the statement, "This is a work of fiction"; and at the beginning of the preface Eggers writes, "This is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction." What point is Eggers making by casting all these doubts on the veracity of the book's contents? In his discussion about the current popularity of memoirs [pp. xxiÐxxiii], Eggers admits that the book is a memoir but encourages his readers to think of it as fiction. What is the difference, in a work of literature, between fact and fiction, and does it matter?

3. In the remarkable acknowledgments section, which is a brilliant critique and discussion of the book as a whole, Eggers points out that "the success of a memoir . . . has a lot to do with how appealing its narrator is" [p. xxvii]. What is

appealing about Eggers as a narrator?

4. Eggers notes that the first major theme of the book is "The Unspoken Magic of Parental Disappearance" [p. xxviii]. It is a psychological truism that most children occasionally fantasize about being orphans, because parents often stand in the way of their children's desires. Along these lines, Eggers admits that the loss of his parents is "accompanied by an undeniable but then of course guilt-inducing sense of mobility, of infinite possibility" [p. xxix]. Does he ever find a way to resolve his conflicting emotions of grief and guilt?

5. If it is true, as Eggers points out, that he is not the first person whose parents died or who was left with the care of a sibling, what makes his story unique?

6. Eggers worries that because he is neither a woman nor a neat, well-organized person [pp. 81, 99], people assume that he can't take care of Toph. Which aspects of Eggers' parenting are most admirable? Which are most comic? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each aspect?

7. How do Eggers' memories of his father compare to those about his mother? To what degree are his feelings about his parents resolved, or at least assuaged, through the act of writing this book?

8. Much of the central part of the book relates to the business of launching and producing *Might* magazine. What does this section reveal about the concerns, desires, and frustrations of thoughtful, energetic twenty-somethings in contemporary America?

9. Eggers expresses ambivalence about having written this book because he feels guilty about exploiting his family's misfortune and exposing a private matter to the public. Among the epigraphs that Eggers considered, and then didn't use, for the book are "Why not just write what happened?" (R. Lowell) and "Ooh, look at me, I'm Dave, I'm writing a book! With all my thoughts in it! La la la!" (Christopher Eggers) [p. xvii]. How do these two epigraphs crystallize the memoir writer's dilemma?

10. Why does Eggers judge himself so harshly for returning to the family's old house in Lake Forest and for trying to retrieve his mother's ashes? Does the trip provide him and his story with a sense of closure, or just the opposite? Is there a central revelation to Eggers' narrative, a strong sense of change or a significant development? Or would you say, on the contrary, that the book has the haphazardness and lack of structure that we find in real life?

11. Eggers refers, half-jokingly, half-seriously, to himself and Toph as "God's tragic envoys" [p. 73]. Is it true, as Eggers suggests, that tragic occurrences give those to whom they happen the feeling of having been singled out for a special destiny? Is it common among those who have suffered intensely to expect some sort of recompense?

12. Recurring throughout the interview for MTV's The Real World [chapter VI] is the image of what Eggers calls "the lattice." What does he mean by this, and does it amount to a kind of spiritual belief on his part?

13. Mary Park, writing for Amazon.com, notes that "Eggers comes from the most media-saturated generation in history--so much so that he can't feel an emotion without the sense that it's already been felt for him. . . . Oddly enough, the effect is one of complete sincerity." How does Eggers manage to turn his generation's burdens of self-consciousness into strengths? What are the qualities that make his writing so vivid and memorable?

Author Bio

Dave Eggers is the author of THE CIRCLE, THE MONK OF MOKHA, A HOLOGRAM FOR THE KING, WHAT IS THE WHAT and THE MUSEUM OF RAIN, among other books. He is the cofounder of 826 National, a network of youth writing centers, and Art + Water, a nonprofit visual art hub on San Francisco?s waterfront. A classically trained artist and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Eggers has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and is the recipient of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and the American Book Award. In 2024, THE EYES AND THE IMPOSSIBLE was awarded the Newbery Medal.

Critical Praise

"A virtuosic piece of writing, a big, daring, manic-depressive stew of a book that noisily announces the debut of a talented-- yes, staggeringly talented new writer."

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Publication Date: February 17, 2000

Genres: Nonfiction

Hardcover: 416 pages

Publisher: Simon & Schuster

ISBN-10: 0684863472

ISBN-13: 9780684863474