

**GARCÍA'S HEART.** 2007. By Liam Durcan. Published by McClelland and Stewart. 378 pages. Price C\$35.

We are used to reading newspaper stories about contributing members of society who turn out to have done monstrous things. But what if it hits closer to home? What if you learn that your mentor -- a good man, the man who inspired you to become a doctor -- may be a monster who's participated in torturing political prisoners in his home country? Patrick Lazarenko, the main character in Liam Durcan's debut novel, wrestles with this question, a timely one in a world where physicians in Britain, for example, have recently been arrested for alleged participation in terrorist attacks.

Lazarenko grows up in Montreal and, as a teenager, comes under the beneficent influence of Hernan García, a Honduran grocer and former cardiologist, who turns Patrick's life around and starts him on a course that leads to medical school and a residency in neurology. Patrick abandons clinical neurology for research using functional MRI to assess the efficacy of advertising. As the novel begins, Patrick has travelled to The Hague to attend a War Crimes Tribunal where García is on trial for tortures that occurred in Honduras a few years before he and Patrick met. The evidence of García's guilt looks solid. How can Patrick come to terms with the fact that a man whose humanity he's always admired could ever have been so inhuman?

Patrick Lazarenko is not a likable character. He is a lost soul, too self-absorbed to realize that, while García may have prostituted his art to participate in mind control through torture, Patrick too has profaned his art by contributing to mind control through advertising. Clearly, torture and advertising are vastly different, but Durcan invites us to see each as the extreme points on a continuum.

García's Heart deals with weighty matters and isn't exactly a feel-good read. However, it is not as unremittingly bleak as it may sound. Durcan is a skilled writer and I was won over by many small touches like the waitress who brings "a prodigious glass of beer, an aquarium of beer," or a description of the noise of an airplane in flight as, "an anthem to Bernoulli's law." Turns of phrase like these show that Durcan never loses his sense of fun despite contemplating dark material.

Liam Durcan is a neurologist in Montreal and it shows -- neuroscience and Montreal figure prominently in the novel. It's hard to point to a strong tradition of neurologist-novelists but there's always Silas Weir Mitchell, a pioneer of American neurology who was turning out best-sellers over a century ago. García's Heart is a thought-provoking first novel likely to interest neurologists and neurosurgeons. It leaves one looking forward to Durcan's next book.

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