



Possessing Genius: The Bizarre Odyssey of Einstein's Brain

Carolyn Abraham

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April 18, 1955, was an auspicious day for Thomas Stoltz Harvey. As chief pathologist at Princeton Hospital, he had been called to do an autopsy on a corpse seven hours old. It was a routine procedure with one significant difference: This was the cadaver of Albert Einstein.

Harvey saw, in Einstein's corpse, a chance to do something "noble," to contribute in some way to the annals of science. So before he stitched the body shut, Thomas Harvey removed the brain of the twentieth century's greatest intellectual hero. He took it without permission, but struck a deal with Einstein's family to keep it, becoming the custodian of this remarkable relic—preserving it for posterity and the scientists he deemed worthy to study it. He promised to guard the brain from souvenir hunters and publicity seekers and vowed that any information about it would appear only in serious scientific journals. He had no idea that the power of Einstein's celebrity would engulf the rest of his life.

Possessing Genius tells the story of a man obsessed by his conviction that a collection of brain tissue might some day solve the mystery of genius. Painstakingly researched, it includes never-before-published correspondence between Harvey and the executor of Einstein's estate that sheds new light on how the brain fell into one man's hands. It dramatically evokes the shift from scientists' morbid curiosity about an amazing specimen to the serious questions and hypotheses inspired by the existence of the organ, including the widely touted work on Einstein's brain by Canadian neuropsychologist Sandra Witelson.

Possessing Genius won the Canadian Science Writers' Association's 2001 Science in Society Book Award and has been nominated for the 2002 Governor General's Award for Nonfiction.

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