Heart

By Jonathan Chalstrey

Review by roseauburn.com

Heart follows the adventures of Hernando Bustamante, a sixteenth-century surgeon. Apprenticed at sixteen to the renowned Doctor Bartolo in Seville, he is forced to flee to Italy by the Spanish Inquisition, where he becomes a professor of medicine at Bologna University.

But when Hernando falls in love with Euphemia, a nun, he is expelled from Bologna and instead works as an assistant surgeon in Padua. Yet fate conspires again, and Bustamante finds himself used as a political pawn between the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul and King Charles of Spain, while desperately trying to return to Seville to exact a long-awaited revenge and, hopefully, salvage his marriage…

Heart is inspired by the life of Hernando de Bustamante, a barber-surgeon and explorer active in the early 1500s. Little is known of his early life, which is where Chalstrey enters, imagining Bustamante's exploits from ages sixteen to twenty-nine and crafting an entertaining historical romp.

The agreeable Bustamante and his sidekick, the merchant Lorenzo Botti, find themselves in extraordinary situations marked by a high, often amusing level of derring-do. It's a packed plot, but Chalstrey keeps the momentum going with nicely unpredictable and imaginative twists.

Nonetheless, beneath the swashbuckling and espionage, Bustamante is a medical pioneer, and Chalstrey never loses sight of this. The anatomy of the heart and cardiovascular system is rendered with visceral intricacy, yet Chalstrey also ensures it is glossed with a curious, artistic beauty.

The story begins strongly in Seville in 1506. It's atmospheric, steeped in the Renaissance age, and, given the nature of Doctor Bartolo's work, tinged with the macabre as he and Bustamante search for cadavers to dissect.

In these opening pages, Chalstrey sets up a couple of events that will become pivotal later, chief among them being teenager Hernando's altercation with Lono Marroqui, the apothecary. Chalstrey writes with purpose. His prose is

straightforward, with a slight archaic slant in parts that complements the narrative and is embroidered with a wealth of period detail.

Hernando is an interesting, likable character. Single-minded and ever-optimistic, he is also prone to reckless decision-making, flights of fancy, and intermittent naiveté. However, he does begin to develop a ruthless streak, which is a convincing trajectory.

Indeed, despite several subplots involving him in non-medical situations, he always returns to his surgery and its study, though not always for ethical reasons, even though his original intentions were well-meaning.

Euphemia, who becomes Hernando's wife, appears in swift, almost comedic style. There is a sense of farce among her, Hernando, and the Abbess of the Convent in Bologna as the lovebirds ride off. Nevertheless, the reader infers, even at this early stage, that Euphemia may be somewhat disingenuous, a fact Hernando fails to recognize.

She remains, until reaching Istanbul, a fairly nebulous figure who would have benefited from greater emotional development. Notwithstanding, she begins to reveal her true nature once installed in the protection of the Sultan‘s harem. Even with this knowledge and further revelations from the Abbess, Hernando appears to remain cheerfully ignorant of his wife's impulses and desires.

Geographically, *Heart* spans a wide area, including Seville, Bologna, Padua, and Istanbul. Chalstrey paints these cities with vibrant authenticity, along with the individuals Bustamante meets in each. The "Kira", a female, non-Muslim go-between for women in the harem, is portrayed with particular depth, as is Capitán Juan Sebastian Elcano, a non-fictional character.

Heart clearly lends itself to a sequel and promises much for Bustamante's second outing. Nonetheless, a contextual note on Bustamante and/or Chalstrey's motivations for writing the novel would have provided interesting consolidation.

Intriguing, unusual, and enjoyable, *Heart* is well worth a look.

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