



The Art of Hearing Heartbeats

Jan-Philipp Sendker, Kevin Wiliarty (translator)

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A poignant and inspirational love story set in Burma, *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats* spans the decades between the 1950s and the present. When a successful New York lawyer suddenly disappears without a trace, neither his wife nor his daughter Julia has any idea where he might be...until they find a love letter he wrote many years ago, to a Burmese woman they have never heard of. Intent on solving the mystery and coming to terms with her father's past, Julia decides to travel to the village where the woman lived. There she uncovers a tale of unimaginable hardship, resilience, and passion that will reaffirm the reader's belief in the power of love to move mountains.

The Art of Hearing Heartbeats Details

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Kate says

God, this could have been SO good! I wish Sendker's writing abilities matched his imagination, because this would have been an awesome book. As it was, it was okay. There is a beautiful love story in the center of the book, but it comes to an extremely trite conclusion. Throughout the novel, he relies on some extremely hackneyed devices that, with just a little effort, could have melted away into masterful writing. First device: relying on long (and I mean REALLY loonnnggg) monologue soliloquy to give backstory--he has Julia's mother gas on and on about her husband. And she speaks, not in her own voice, but in the voice of the narrator, as if the narrator is saying "See Reader? This here's the BACKSTORY, and the only way I can figure out how to communicate it is by having Julia's mother basically just blather on about the whole thing in monologue." After the mother relates this, she pretty much disappears from the novel, because the only reason she was in the book in the first place was to act as freakin' Greek Chorus. Stupid. Good writers are supposed to create the plot through action and not explain it, so he fails here. Really annoying. Second device: throughout the entire novel, he voices questions that the characters are thinking, one after the other. Reminded me of old-fashioned announcer voice-overs of "cliffhanger" moments at the end of a daily 1950's soap opera. "Did Sam turn left because he loved Lucinda? Did Sam turn right because he wanted to ignore Abigail? Or is Sam simply directionally challenged? Tune in tomorrow to find out on 'As the World Turns'!!!" (organ music swells and fades. Cut to Brillo Pad commercial). Third, the evil uncle's name was U Saw, and he's the guy who gives main character Tin Win (whom I kept wanting to call "Win Tin" as in "Win Tin Tin!") his sight back. Get it? U SAW helps Win Tin Tin SEE!!! nyuck! nyuck! nyuck! Fourth, Sendker forgets that he has another character relating the central story, which involves bits that there's no way he could have known. Finally, Sendker's ending was Sooooooo melodramatic and sappy! The love story in the middle was lovely, but, I'm sorry, it should have ended better. So, there you have it. The Art of Hearing Heartbeats gets a two from me.

Genia Lukin says

This is the story of a young boy who, born under an unlucky star, goes through great trials and tribulations with his star-crossed love, becomes blind during childhood and, after a period of maladjustment, gains zen superpowers and becomes a celebrity lawyer.

If it sounds like I may be mistakenly writing a review for a Daredevil comic, that's not an accident. Because this appalling book, if summarised for, say, Twitter, would be exactly that. Sadly, this story, while being about Daredevil, isn't nearly as cool. It would be tremendously improved if the protagonist started running around beating people up with amazing martial arts moves using his cane. Sadly, that's not what it does. Instead, it explains how blind people, in order to gain competence and freedom in their lives, must through the rejection of fear and anger (because disabled people must not feel human emotions, or they cease to function) gain superpowers, and why it will make them inspiring. Buckle in and let's go for a ride.

I may choose to be lenient, and blame its choppy, awkward, writing, and the horrifically overwrought dialogue in the first-person narrator parts, on the translator, rather than the author, but the rest of it is definitively the author's fault. So let's begin at the beginning, and take a closer look.

This is the story of young Tin Win, whom, the astrologer prophesies, will bring much suffering to his family. We never see him do this, perhaps because his father dies in an accident, and his mother ditches him. That very week, while he is sitting for days on end squatting and waiting for her, the vision loss begins to settle in. Rather on the coincidental side, I suppose, but tolerable so far.

Then Tin Win goes entirely blind. And, after a great deal of doing nothing and bumping into things, becomes inspiring through the power of zen and calm, which allows him, after the proper revolutionary enlightenment, to hear everything, and I do mean everything, including, for example, birds growing in the egg, and people's heartbeats (that also serves him as a lie detector later on in life - Daredevil says hi again). Being, myself, visually impaired from birth, I can tell you that disability is not inspirational, it ain't magical, and it sure as heck doesn't give you superpowers.

Then Tin Win meets Mi Mi, who is also disabled and cannot walk, and who is also inspirational and magical, possessed of the most wonderful voice that is rumoured to preserve and prolong life, and a completely unnatural dignity and dirt-repelling charms, while she crawls (in a dignified way, f course) on all fours on the floor.

Thanks, author! First you give us the blind guy who can't do anything with himself and never gains confidence until he gains superpowers and becomes able to "see" the world by radar, then you give us the girl who, instead of illustrating for us the genuine troubles and trials of a person who cannot walk, and who can't get a wheelchair, and remain dignified despite that, magically avoids all these very real issues.

Then the unfortunate implications get even worse, as Tin Win Becomes mobile and independent carrying Mi Mi on his back - not, in any way, recalling that parable about the blind man and the lame man who have to get out of the forest, oh no - and having her see and interpret the world for him, aptly demonstrating to us how a blind person needs to have "eyes" in order to make sense of his surroundings and see for him. When, later on in the book, they are (inevitably) separated, Tin Win, even with his awesome superpowers, completely loses his ability to do much of anything, because all these years of being blind obviously didn't teach him to test his environment in a cautious and independent manner.

In fact, the two are so much in love that, whenever they are separated for any period of time, Tin Win becomes terminally ill. Because this is precisely the kind of romantic attachment that one should wish to promote, and carries with it no connotations whatsoever of sick obsession, but rather is indicative of an exceptional ability to love, and is a culmination of zen teachings. From now on, every time my husband is out of the house without my knowledge, I have the perfect excuse to play dead. I'm just so much in love, you know!

Tin Win's evil uncle restores his sight by removing his cataracts, an act which may or may not in and of itself be evil, and decides to keep him around as a good luck charm, for which purpose he purloins Tin Win's letters to Mi Mi, and vise versa. For years.

And for *years* Tin Win, who is supposed to be quite brilliant, and possess an almost eidetic memory, as well as be a *living lie detector*, never thinks to ask himself whether his uncle may have been tampering with his mail! Not once! He just accepts the lack of response knowing that his Mi Mi loves him. Holy hell. Then, when the uncle sends him to America, instead of trying to run away, or contact her behind his back, he just goes, never seeing her again for fifty years. If that is not a contrived plot device intended to lend the story its proper dramatic tone, I honestly don't know what is - get a damn envelope and mail it without your uncle's knowledge boy!

In America he marries (for some reason), has children, only in order to, without ever telling them a word about his past, disappear thirty years later to find the love of his life. how this makes sense is utterly beyond me, but I'll give the moral implications involved a pass for now, because otherwise I'll run out of room.

Finally, to top off this comedy of the absurd, Tin Win arrives in Burma (it's called Myanmar now, by the way) and finds Mi Mi, in order to spend a night of amazing passion and all that other good stuff, right in time. That night, with no rhyme or reason, they both die in each other's arms.

That's it. In this case, the less said, the more illustrated, and so I leave you. If you want a good portrayal of a disabled protagonist, seriously, read Lois McMaster Bujold. It's a better story, too. In space.

Carol says

This is a love story and a fairy tale with Buddhist undertones. I loved this book.

A New York lawyer inexplicably disappears. His daughter Julia, also a lawyer, goes searching for him in Burma based on an old letter he had written which her mom gave her as part of his belongings.

Julia meets a man who has been waiting for her to come, a man who had met her father 4 years ago and has a story to tell her.

The story is about two who met when young, a young boy who was blind and a young girl who was unable to walk. She became his eyes and he became her feet. The freedom and joy of living they encountered with each other was to last a lifetime. The story of the boy and the story of the relationship fills most of the book. In an attempt to follow the advice of astrologers and do a good deed for a family member in great distress, the boy's uncle U Saw brings the boy from his village to the city to offer him medical care and send him to school. The boy excels in school and is then sent to the United States for further education.

I won't offer too much info other than to say the two do eventually get back together.

There were many fabulous quotes in the book and following are some of my favorites:

"a person's greatest treasure is the wisdom in his own heart"

"the true essence of things is invisible to the eyes"

"life is a gift of riddles where suffering and happiness are inextricably intertwined"

"he did not merely read books but traveled with them, that they took him to other countries and unfamiliar continents, and that with their help he was always getting to know new people..."

This book was published in 2002 in German and has become well loved in both Germany and Switzerland. I hope the same happens in the U.S. This book is truly a classic.

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Nicole R says

I have been a little stingy with awarding "5 stars" this year, and this book is an example of why. I want my full "5 stars" to portray to others I read something exquisitely written, wholly engaging, and so profoundly touching. *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats* was all of those adjectives....and so much more.

Julia is in her late 20's and living in New York, has always had a loving father even if his and her mother's

marriage was not perfect, and she believes her fast-paced life in the field of law is following in his footsteps. Then one day, her father just leaves, not to be heard from for the next four years. Julia is at a loss as to what could make him abandon her and she heads to Burma, her father's homeland, in search of answers. Who was this man she thought she knew? Why has he never spoke of the first 20 years of his life in a small Burmese town? Why does he have secret love letters to a woman named Mi Mi hidden with his belongings? Does he still love her?

In Kalaw, Julia meets U Ba, a man who seems much older than his years. He uncannily knows about Julia and proceeds to tell her the unknown beginnings of her father's life. His traumatic childhood that had so much heartache, his relationship with Mi Mi that made him finally feel alive, and a sense of family duty that led him down a path so different from the one he envisioned. It soon becomes clear that perhaps he wasn't abandoning his family in America so much as finally following his heart by coming home.

First and foremost, Sendker is a beautiful writer. The words flow effortlessly off the page to paint a picture that you not only see, but can hear as well. Tin Win and Mi Mi have one of the most amazing love stories I have ever heard. It was not rushed or selfish and it has no end. While fictional with just a *touch* of magical realism, it embodied everything I associate with true soul mates who are destined to be together. And while I fully expected to be a sobbing mess by the end of the book, I closed it dry-eyed and with a smile on my face.

U Ba telling the story to Julia resulted in an interesting cultural comparison between the slower, family-oriented life of the people of Burma and the fast-paced, career-centric life of the typical New Yorker. She could not understand why he chose to live in Burma and he could not understand why she thought he had a choice. Aside from the main story of Tin Win and Mi Mi, I thoroughly enjoyed the juxtaposition of the cultures and how it made me truly think about what is important in my life.

I usually like to give a critique of each book I read, but there was honestly not one thing about this book I would change. I can't imagine making it better. It may not be the perfect book for everyone, but for me, Mr. Sendker seems to have heard my heart and made me fall in love.

Natalie says

This is the first review I have written and whilst I could give a plot summary, I feel no need as many others have done a brilliant job of this. I write factual and complex assessments as a part of my job, so feel no desire to analyze this book. I read primarily for enjoyment and relaxation and occasionally enjoy a challenging read. I chose this novel hoping that it would be perfect holiday read, something to savour and delight in, and I was not disappointed. *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats* was an absolute joy to read.

Translated (I thought) beautifully from German, it was a love story written with wonderfully descriptive language and an almost lyrical quality. I found myself lost in the small village in Burma, thoroughly engaged in the poignant story being told. I was happy to accept this book for what it is...I know that many readers have identified a number of perceived flaws...but I enjoyed each and every page, and found myself not wanting this beautiful story to end. I finished *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats* in a flood of tears, emotionally connected to the main protagonists.

Poignant, thoroughly enjoyable, thought provoking and overwhelmingly joyful. I loved this book!

Trish says

The heart of this novel is set in Burma, pre-WWII. The author Sendker was correspondent in America and Asia for *Stern*, the weekly German news magazine, for some years. This is his first novel. Sendker was successful and very clever in his choice of subject. In making the setting a mountain province of Burma, a country not much opened to the outside and stuck in a pre-WWII lifestyle, things had not changed significantly since the 1950s and if they had, very few English-speaking eyewitnesses would be able to refute it.

In addition, Sendker gave his main character a disability, blindness, which gave Sendker the latitude to describe through the voice of another person what the main character was meant to be seeing. Not only does this help us, but it helps the author, in that readers are a little like blind men: the author must describe everyday things giving focus to sounds, smells, colors. If the reader has any experience in a Southeast Asian country, the descriptions trigger unforgettable memories.

But Sendker did more than just excel in describing what any reader could see. He delved into the psyche of the Burmese and showed us folk tales, beliefs, habits, and ways of living. A novel is always suspect in what it reveals, but in this case we can understand as outsiders understand, a way into a South Asia culture that is so remote and so different from modern-day Western culture.

All this and I haven't mentioned the novel is a love story. But not an ordinary love story—it tells of a love that any of us would be happy to call our own. Some reviewers may call this a fairy tale, but I would merely say it was an especially daring and insightful attempt to create a plausible story that works on many levels. And so it does.

Special kudos go to Other Press, for republishing this story at this time of the opening of Myanmar to the outside world (2012, originally published 2002), and to Blackstone Audio for making a very good audio version of the title with American-accented Cassandra Campbell. I have to admit the Americans in the novel were so much less spiritual, likeable, and accepting than the Burmese that one can see the stark contrast in our approaches to the world. Let's hope these differences do not keep us apart. We'd all do better if we had just a little more influence on one another.

Jennifer says

As I was reading this book I was fully engaged and enjoying the story, the Burmese setting, the fairy tale quality to the narration....but as soon as I finished and started to reflect on it, the whole thing imploded like a house of cards. As much as I really wanted to like this book, it hit several of my hot buttons:

I have a real problem with books that are about unrealistic love - the "our love is better/stronger/more meaningful than anyone else's love" kind of love. If Tin Win was so in love with Mi Mi why would he get married to someone in the US rather than return to Burma for her?? His original departure is explained but there is nothing to really support the fact that he completely gave up and created this other US life. And if we romanticize this Burmese love, what does that say about the lie he's been living with his American family? It's actually quite dodgy if you give it much thought....

I'm also not crazy about characters who tell stories about things that they couldn't possibly know. Tin Win's story is told to Julia by U Ba, an old man that approaches her in a Burmese cafe. He doesn't just know facts, he knows emotions, inner thoughts, struggles, joys, intimate details of her father's relationships etc. I know I used the word fairy tale earlier so I tried to use that to justify this storytelling device...but I think that the book would have worked better for me if we heard this story either from Julia's father directly or from an omniscient narrator because then I wouldn't have to stop myself from thinking "He couldn't possibly know that!!!"

The ending is a little too neat for me but I will let this slide since that is how fairy tales tend to be. And they all lived happily ever after. In reality Julia is going to need lots of therapy for her abandonment issues, but maybe that is the sequel?

Gary the Bookworm says

This sweet, sentimental tale of two disabled Burmese villagers who find each other as children and forge a love so overpowering that it sustains them despite lives lived apart has been compared to a fairy tale. For me it was more like the world's longest fortune cookie. It's not that I didn't get caught up in their ardor-I'm a sucker for love stories- but the simplistic dichotomy it sets up between the life-affirming wisdom of the East and the mercantile obsessions of the West left me cold. I take aphorisms about life and love seriously, but I prefer some General Tso's chicken first. It's an easy read and you'd have to be a heartless plutocrat not to shed a couple of tears, but over all it's as insubstantial as the vapor rising from a cup of wonton soup. Its most lasting impression on me is how to conjure up some positive thoughts about it to share with my book club.

Walker says

I am somewhat outraged by this book. It is marketed as an inspirational love story, and I would like to say that I strongly disagree. The premise is that Julia's father has disappeared, and she travels to Burma, where he is from, to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. Let me mention that Julia's parents are still married when he disappears. When Julia gets to Burma, she meets a man who tells a long and somewhat uneventful story of her father's life before he came to the U.S. He was in love with a woman named Mi Mi, who he was wrongly separated from because of a meddlesome uncle. It turns out her father has traveled back to Burma to be with Mi Mi. After Julia comes to terms with this so-called romantic story, she wants to see her father. But, oh wait, it turns out he and Mi Mi are both dead now.

But here is what bothered me: what about his family in the U.S.? What about his wife who he committed to be with forever? Are we supposed to overlook the fact that he did a pretty horrible thing by disappearing on his family, who thought he loved them? All because he had this "love story to move mountains" with a woman he knew forty years ago? Why couldn't he just tell his family why he needed to travel to Burma and have the decency to come clean?

UGH!!

Julie says

Essentially a fairy tale so sweet that at times I had to lick the syrup from my fingertips before turning the page. Tin Win and Mi Mi were beautifully rendered, though I felt their story was hampered by the clumsy structure of the book. Julia, the daughter searching for her father, was altogether frustrating as a narrator. The author frequently resorted to long-winded lists of unanswerable questions, such as, "What do we know about our parents, and what do they know about us? And if we don't even know the individuals who have accompanied us since birth--we not them and they not us--then what do we know about anyone at all? Don't I have to imagine, from that perspective, that anyone is capable of anything, even the most heinous crime? On what or whom, on which truths, can one ultimately depend? Are there individuals I can trust unconditionally? Can there ever be such a person?"

Certainly these are questions worth pondering, but I'd prefer to draw them out from the writing myself rather than being handed a pop quiz within a paragraph.

The wild swing between Julia's uncertainties and U Ba's nearly omniscient narration gave rough edges to what was otherwise an artfully imagined story. I do wonder how much was lost in translation.

I did particularly like this thought that was spoken by U Ba, encapsulating the theme of the novel: "We see only what we already know. We project our own capacities--for good as well as evil--onto the other person. Then we acknowledge as love primarily the things that correspond to our own image thereof. We wish to be loved as we ourselves would love. Any other way makes us uncomfortable. We respond with doubt and suspicion. We misinterpret the signs. We do not understand the language. We accuse. We assert that the other person does not love us. But perhaps he merely loves us in some idiosyncratic way that we fail to recognize."

Mimi says

This book is a perfect example of what I consider "book club bait." A compelling blurb, major publisher's backing, glowing reviews, eloquent prose, family drama, journey of self-discovery, troubled self-sacrificing protagonist who just wants to do "the right thing."

Book clubs fall for these things *all the time*. While I'd like to think my book club is above the baiting (because we're pretty good at weeding them out), once in a while a book like this one comes along and catches us off guard for whatever reason, and we don't realize what we'd gotten ourselves into until we're half way through the self-sacrificing, self-discovery journey.

That's not to say this book is "not good." It's well-written, and the author has a great handle on turning phrases to make them stick with you long after you're done reading. It's just not right for me. The story did not and still does not sit right with me. (view spoiler) I've been through one too many of these eloquent, poignant, world-travelling, "deep" self-discovery journeys already, both fictional and nonfictional, and am so very tired of these tropes.

Petra says

I really enjoyed listening to this story. The story of Tin Min and Mi Mi is really touching. Their lives unfold in a manner that each would have changed, if they could, yet they stayed true to each other. Their love never faltered and they were bound together always.

A few reviews mention a fairy tale feeling. That's true. I hadn't thought of that while listening; there are sensitive people who do hear and feel differently than most, their senses are tuned differently. I took Tin Min and Mi Mi at this level. But.....the story has a fairy tale aura around it because of that different way of hearing and seeing and being.

I'm doing something I don't usually do....I'm requesting the second book right away. I hope it holds the mystique and wonder of this book.

Liz Crowe says

I think I've mentioned that for me "reading" has become a luxury the likes of which I sometimes even avoid. Not sure why really, except maybe anger at myself for spending so much time on bad books--badly written, lazily edited, simply or more likely horrifically plotted--I've gotten to where I just don't want to bother anymore simply not to run the risk of feeling like it was time wasted.

As a writer myself, I see the puppet strings, the skeletal framework, and at times feel the sweat and tears that have been poured into every line. And that just wears me out.

Then, when I listen to my mother and read a book she insists that I simply must, I am never disappointed. The last book I raved about here: What Alice Forgot, was such a book.

So is the Art of Hearing Heartbeats. Never has so much been said in so few lines. So much tenderness, sweet sexual awakening, and sheer joy expressed with an incredible economy of actual words -- it makes me want to sit and stare at the walls and roll the story around in my head over and over again.

A tender coming of age tale, wrapped up in a modern woman's journey to find out the truth about her mysterious, exotic and ultimately unreachable father, this book will mesmerize you with its many poetic turns of phrase. But in the end you will feel like a better person for having experienced a love story that spans ages, continents, cultures and families.

I am sorry I had to finish it. But feel like a better human, and hopefully a better writer, for having done it in one sitting.

Alice says

There was a day when I would have deeply loved this book. It is a modern-day fairy tale and a solid work of

literary art. The story follows Julia, a lawyer from New York looking for clues as to her father's sudden (not accidental) disappearance. When her mother gives her a love letter her father had once written to someone -- someone named Mi Mi -- a long time ago, Julia decides to follow the address all the way to her father's hometown in Myanmar. There she encounters U Ba, who tells her the story about her father Tin Win and his long-separated lover Mi Mi. The story moves slowly enough to capture every picturesque detail of the town with its market and dirt roads, the monastery where Tin Win was educated and where he first encounters Mi Mi and her heartbeat, the trees and lakes around which Tin Win felt most comfortable, and most of all, the blind young Tin Win and Mi Mi the love of his life, the girl with underdeveloped feet. You watch them weave themselves together in a way that transcends the distance and time that they are apart.

It is beautifully, evocatively written (even in its translated English version) with a fantastic ending, and a good lot of people have given it full stars. I don't begrudge anyone this at all; it is a great book. The only thing is that I have little empathy for fairy tales lately -- sourpuss, I know. Nevertheless, I can see that those who love fairy tale love stories and exotic locations will definitely find this book a gem.

Christina says

The Art of Hearing Heartbeats is unlike any other story I have read. The tale carries the reader through the life of a family man living in New York to his roots in Burma. It is told in such a way that I was perhaps more anxious than the character listening to the story about him to discover how it would unfold!

I could not decide on which 'shelf' to place this book. Yes, it is fiction. But it reads as like a very good non-fiction or biography book would. Better, yet, I personally found gems of inspiration in the book - beautiful takeaways for daily life. Were I able to select more than one category, I certainly would!

After reading this book, I posited those gems in my heart and one by one I am sharing them with others, hoping the 'truth' I felt might be shared.

Even if my sharing it is not well received, still yet have I grown, for just this morning I was out in my garden pulling weeds, and I realized that I was detecting more than just the usual (the sweat dripping down my body, the irritating insects dive-bombing my head, my knees and abdomen aching from bending) - I was actually hearing things that I otherwise had not noticed!

The Art of Hearing Heartbeats might be unattainable to me, but perhaps I can be more attune to the world around me, if I just quiet myself a little.
