

Reading Group Guide

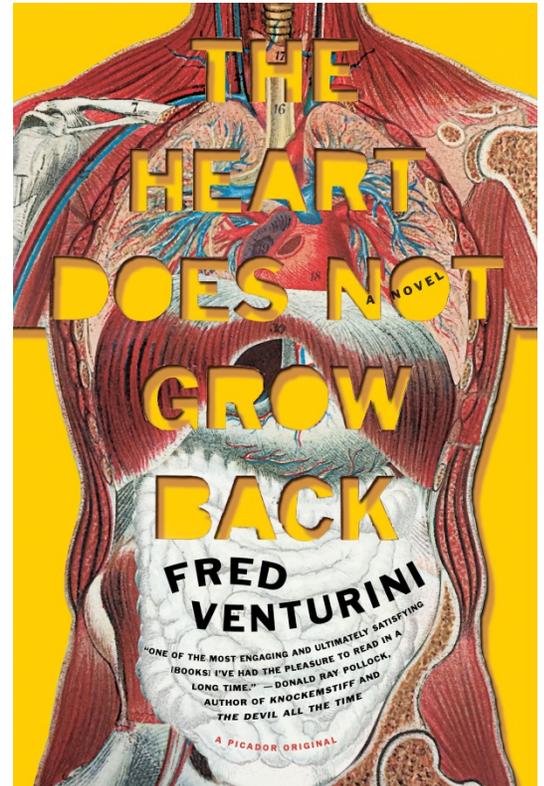
The Heart Does Not Grow Back

By Fred Venturini

ABOUT THE BOOK

Dale Sampson is used to being a nonperson at his small-town Midwestern high school, picking up the scraps of his charismatic lothario of a best friend, Mack. He comforts himself with the certainty that his stellar academic record and brains will bring him the adulation that has evaded him in high school. But when an unthinkable catastrophe tears away the one girl he ever had a chance with, his life takes a bizarre turn as he discovers an inexplicable power: He can regenerate his organs and limbs.

When a chance encounter brings him face to face with a girl from his past, he decides that he must use his gift to save her from a violent husband and dismal future. His quest takes him to the glitz and greed of Hollywood, and into the crosshairs of shadowy forces bent on using and abusing his gift. Can Dale use his power to redeem himself and those he loves, or will the one thing that finally makes him special be his demise? *The Heart Does Not Grow Back* is a darkly comic, starkly original take on the superhero tale, introducing an exceptional new literary voice in Fred Venturini.



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Dale Sampson experiences multiple traumas in his young life, on both a physical and emotional level. Discuss how some of these events might have influenced his behavior after discovering his superpower.
- 2) Dale struggles with how to use his superpower. He feels like his choices are limited to submitting to medical study, or figuring out a way to take control of his power himself. He eventually settles on reality television. If you were in Dale's position, what would have done with this specific power?
- 3) Raeanna poses as a damsel in distress to manipulate Dale into saving her flawed husband, in order to give her child a chance to know his or her father. She confesses to Dale that when they were younger, there were many times he thought he was falling for Regina when it was actually her. Was she telling the truth, or was this simply part of her manipulation?
- 4) Healing is one of the major themes of this novel. The author has said that healing is a superpower that everyone has, so with that in mind, what is the most catastrophic thing you have healed from, either physically or mentally? What is something in your life that has never fully healed?

- 5) The early portion of the novel takes place in high school. Why was this setting important to the story, and how did Dale's social experience in high school compare to your own?
- 6) The source of Dale's powers is never explained. Did you feel like a more detailed explanation was needed, or did you appreciate the ambiguity? If you were tasked to explain the origin of Dale's powers, what story would you construct to explain them?
- 7) The entire novel is told through Dale's eyes, in first person. How did this influence how you perceived the events detailed within? Did you trust Dale as the narrator of the story?
- 8) Many of the characters in the novel make bad decisions and sometimes make things worse in trying to make things better. Which characters do you consider unlikeable, and why? Are likeable characters important for your enjoyment of a story?
- 9) The novel has some of the classic elements of a superhero origin story. Dale evolves from a normal kid to one burdened by a superpower and its attendant responsibilities. However, there is no supervillain in the story. Who is the biggest villain in the story, and do you see any supervillains emerging from the events of the novel?
- 10) At the end, Dale sees his reflection in the darkened glass of his apartment window. He is in the act of taking off his bandages, but it is not clear whether or not his gift has returned. Do you think his injured hand has regenerated yet again, or not? Will Dale's life be better or worse if his superpowers have not returned?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fred Venturini was born in Patoka, Illinois. His short fiction has been published in the *Booked Anthology*, *Noir at the Bar 2*, and *Surreal South '13*. His story "Gasoline" is featured in Chuck Palahniuk's *Burnt Tongues* collection. He lives in Southern Illinois with his wife and daughter.



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