

## My Heart Can't Even Believe It: A Story of Science, Love, and Down Syndrome

**Amy Silverman**

Woodbine House (Apr 15, 2016)

Softcover \$21.95 (282pp)

978-1-60613-274-6

*Silverman avoids the mantle of a warrior mom; she exposes vulnerability, ugly emotion, and beauty in equal measure.*

*My Heart Can't Even Believe It: A Story of Science, Love, and Down Syndrome* is journalist Amy Silverman's candid exploration of her daughter Sophie's journey from birth to middle school. Honest in its irreverence, humor, fear, and resolve, this search for answers—and acceptance—is part investigation and part family memoir. Silverman movingly portrays how it's often our children who raise us.

Silverman pieces together a self-portrait of coming to terms with her daughter's diagnosis by doing what she knows best as a news writer: asking hard questions. From postpartum disbelief to self-reckoning, the fraught use of the word "retarded" to advocacy in Arizona's educational system, challenges are lucidly drawn in an arresting voice that openly admits discomfort. Interviews and encounters with Stanford researchers, a linguist, a geneticist, an art house film organizer, supporters of the Special Olympics, and others reveal facets of Down syndrome, including some of its history, public perceptions of disability, and beyond.

More than the insight gained, it's the author's response that stands out. There's little philosophizing or attempt to find spiritual meaning in the situation. Silverman also, for a time, eschews the idea of local support groups. She finds that a popular encouragement in the special needs parenting community—Emily Perl Kingsley's 1987 "Welcome to Holland" essay—is sentimental. And yet, there's little sense of regret. The work offers a refreshingly human, intelligent perspective that navigates pain at its own pace, that doesn't paint daily life in terms of heroics. Silverman avoids the mantle of a warrior mom; she exposes vulnerability, ugly emotion, and beauty in equal measure. Sophie's victories, whether in the classroom or on stage, at home or on a family vacation, become moments to appreciate for being expressions of a full life.

Even when the future seems fragile, life must be lived daily. The familiar message gains particular potency in this context. Silverman finds, for instance, the frightening statistic that many with Down syndrome will also experience early onset Alzheimer's. In one eye-opening section, a visit to the home of a woman with Down syndrome—and a conversation with her sibling, a longtime caregiver—provides a dark perspective of the task that could await Sophie's older sibling.

Despite the facts uncovered, *My Heart Can't Even Believe It* brings the story of an unexpected birth back to the essentials any parent can draw from—the hope for joy.

KAREN RIGBY (August 12, 2016)

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