

The Soul Box

Giovanni Raccuglia

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Exquisite technical detail by a knowledgeable author sets up this startling medical thriller.

What if we had the technology to keep our brains alive after our other organs had expired? Would we do it? Should we? Those are the unusual questions author and doctor Giovanni Raccuglia poses in his startling fiction debut, *The Soul Box*. Within the familiar framework of a medical thriller, Raccuglia considers the philosophical, technological, and ethical issues behind the idea that the human mind, what some call the soul, might be able to continue well beyond the demise of the body.

On the surface, *The Soul Box* is an intriguing, if implausible, thriller. Dr. Vero Arcangelo is a brilliant physician with the ambition to try a radical, experimental cancer treatment on colleague Peter Kelly, a psychiatrist with a brain tumor. The procedure requires segregating blood circulation to the head from the usual flow of blood through the body, creating two independent life-support systems. The delicate procedure hits a snag, and a snap decision by Arcangelo's assistant—combined with Kelly's disturbed personality and complex hospital politics—sets off a chain reaction of horrors, each more astonishing than the last.

These big moments, however, come somewhat late in the game. Instead of immersing readers immediately in the suspense promised by the book's menacing cover—surgeon and scalpel at the ready—much of the first half of the book is spent discussing medical procedures and philosophical themes. Obviously knowledgeable, Raccuglia ably explains the technology at the heart of the novel: artificial circulation that can deliver targeted medication solely to the diseased part of the body. The philosophical questions behind the decision to use this technology are addressed in similarly sophisticated terms. But while the discussion of a “widespread cancer [that] has infiltrated the right temporal lobe” and the debate between materialist and libertarian philosophies are fascinating in their own right, they don't necessarily create tension or compel readers to turn the page to find out what happens next.

What happens next is indeed shocking, and the final chapters read quickly. Paradoxically, readers may find themselves wanting more description here, where the ethical and medical issues get really sticky. The climax is fairly far-fetched, which would not be a problem in a pure thriller or horror novel. Coming on the cusp of several chapters of rational discourse and perfectly believable technical descriptions, however, the final moments stand out as fantasy.

The Soul Box tries to be two things at once, with mixed success. On one hand, it's a thriller, but on the other, it's a series of informative medical school rounds. The tantalizing premise and exquisite technical detail, however, don't always gel into a compelling, suspenseful story. Philosophy and ethics students will find much food for thought and fodder for debate in these pages.

SHEILA M. TRASK (January 23, 2014)

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