



# Possessing Genius: The Bizarre Odyssey of Einstein's Brain

By Carolyn Abraham

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## **Possessing Genius: The Bizarre Odyssey of Einstein's Brain** By Carolyn Abraham

April 18, 1955, was an auspicious day for Thomas Stoltz Harvey. As chief pathologist at Princeton Hospital, he had been called to do an autopsy on a corpse seven hours old. It was a routine procedure with one significant difference: This was the cadaver of Albert Einstein.

Harvey saw, in Einstein's corpse, a chance to do something "noble," to contribute in some way to the annals of science. So before he stitched the body shut, Thomas Harvey removed the brain of the twentieth century's greatest intellectual hero. He took it without permission, but struck a deal with Einstein's family to keep it, becoming the custodian of this remarkable relic—preserving it for posterity and the scientists he deemed worthy to study it. He promised to guard the brain from souvenir hunters and publicity seekers and vowed that any information about it would appear only in serious scientific journals. He had no idea that the power of Einstein's celebrity would engulf the rest of his life.

*Possessing Genius* tells the story of a man obsessed by his conviction that a collection of brain tissue might some day solve the mystery of genius. Painstakingly researched, it includes never-before-published correspondence between Harvey and the executor of Einstein's estate that sheds new light on how the brain fell into one man's hands. It dramatically evokes the shift from scientists' morbid curiosity about an amazing specimen to the serious questions and hypotheses inspired by the existence of the organ, including the widely touted work on Einstein's brain by Canadian neuropsychologist Sandra Witelson.

*Possessing Genius* won the Canadian Science Writers' Association's 2001 Science in Society Book Award and has been nominated for the 2002 Governor General's Award for Nonfiction.

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

With clarity, insight, and thoroughness, Abraham, a reporter for Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, tactfully sets the record straight regarding the people and events surrounding the notorious removal of Albert Einstein's brain after his 1955 autopsy and its history over the next 40 years. While she pays particular attention to Thomas Harvey, the pathologist who removed Einstein's brain and preserved it in a Tupperware container, Abraham does not overlook numerous other significant participants in this odd tale (e.g., Otto Nathan, one of Einstein's executors), nor does she exclude the significant scientists and doctors to whom Harvey offered pieces of the brain for research over the years. Included as well are pertinent details about Einstein and, more importantly, information about brain research as it evolved over the 40 years that Harvey was the brain's caretaker. Unlike Michael Paterniti's *Driving Mr. Albert* (LJ 7/00), a superficial travel piece with its author and Harvey motoring cross-country with several pieces of Einstein's brain in the luggage, Abraham's carefully reported account reveals the real who, what, when, why, and where of an event that has become almost mythological. Her 23-page "Sources" section documents the research. An enjoyable read, this is highly recommended for all collections. Michael D. Cramer, Raleigh, NC  
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From [Booklist](#)

Like a holy relic, boosted by the modern obsession with celebrity, the brain that overthrew Newton provokes a frisson in those who have seen it. Until 1996, its guardian was one Thomas Harvey, the pathologist who removed it from Einstein's body in 1955. In the 41 years Harvey had it, he religiously topped off the preservatives in the jars in which it bobbed, jars that sat on shelves in his basement or jostled in his car trunk as he moved about the country. (One such trek was the subject of Michael Paterniti's irreverent *Driving Mr. Albert* [2000]). With a wider ambition than recounting one weird road trip, Abraham teases apart the strands of the whole bizarre, convoluted, ghoulish story of what happened to Einstein's brain. She turns in a fine narrative replete with Harvey's vague claims to the brain, his peregrinations, his parceling out of pieces of the brain to neuroscientists, and the results, such as they are, of their search for physiological evidence of Einstein's genius. Abraham's account covers all the angles--scientific, ethical, and humorous. *Gilbert Taylor*  
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About the Author

**Carolyn Abraham** is the medical reporter for *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto. The winner of two national awards from the Canadian Newspaper Association, she won the Hollobon Science in Society Award for her articles on the business of genetics. She lives in Toronto with her husband.

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