



# Discussion Questions

*The Open Heart Club* by Gabriel Brownstein, Published by PublicAffairs

1. Brownstein writes that nearly all the pioneers of cardiac surgery were women. Why do you think this is true? What might the consequences of a gender split like this be?
2. A major theme of the book is the idea of dual citizenship in what Susan Sontag described as “the kingdom of the sick” and “the kingdom of the well.” Who do you think belongs to each kingdom, and what might it mean to be a member of both?
3. In Part One, Chapter 4, Brownstein writes that his mother never mentioned his congenital heart defect to her friends because she felt it was taboo. What effect do you think this silence had on his mother, and how does silence about health problems impact our cultural understanding of them? Are there medical taboos in our contemporary world that we’d be better off lifting?
4. Numerous stories in this book illustrate that heart surgery is a fierce and painful business: organs placed into handbags, patients getting repeated electric shocks, people dying on operating tables. Did this surprise you? Did you expect it to be more controlled? Were there stories that stuck with you especially?
5. On p. 280, Brownstein notes that adult congenital cardiology was not an established field as recently as 1995; in many ways, the field is still in its infancy. Why do you think it has taken so long to develop? Do other, more established disciplines suggest what might be possible in the coming years?
6. Has this book changed the way you feel about health care generally? How so?

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## Additional Reading

*Illness as a Metaphor* by Susan Sontag

