

Heart on his sleeve

By [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Spirited Men: Story, Soul, and Substance

Brian Doyle
Cowley



The Wet Engine: Exploring the Mad Wild Miracle of the Heart

Brian Doyle
Paraclete

At a time when so much spiritual writing is earnest, edifying and all-too-purposeful, these books by Brian Doyle will buttonhole and charm you. The editor of *Portland* magazine and author of terrific essays collected recently in *Leaping*, Doyle is a garrulous companion. Reading one word-soaked chapter after another is like going on a pub crawl.

“We are all storytellers, after all,” he writes. “That, and the headlong pursuit of love, which is the holiest thing of all, and the greatest gift, and the most eloquent proof of God, is what makes us human beings, capable of greatness.” Parse that sentence—to be human is to be capable of greatness—and you have Brian Doyle.

So *Spirited Men*, although never solemn, takes seriously its human subjects: artists whose personal lives prove to be as compelling as their works. Though Doyle's subjects are men, he does not offer lessons in male spirituality. No one here finds an inner hunter. These are appreciations foremost, in story form, of creative men and their enduring relationships—such as saxophonist Paul Desmond's musical affinity for Dave Brubeck and Van Morrison's partnership with organist Georgie Fame.

Two of the most moving stories suggest the inspirational powers of marriage. We meet the poet William Blake on trial for sedition, in a freezing courtroom, the case against him daunting. But Blake and his remarkable wife, Catherine, have survived worse than this, and their love story leads Doyle to a tour-de-force meditation on immortality. Plutarch, who aspired to write “not histories, but lives,” comes off as a three-dimensional man himself because Doyle imagines how he and his wife may have faced the death of their only daughter.

Even the stories about more solitary men suggest a relationship beyond flesh and bone. Samuel Taylor Coleridge thought it was impossible for a poet not to believe in God. That may be. Doyle's men—and some of them are rogues—do sense that they have been divinely inspired. The Australian songwriter Paul Kelly puts it this way when he talks of songwriting as “serious fun”:

You never know how it's going to happen. It's coming from you but it's happening to you as well. It's similar to religious feelings. A religious impulse or awareness is about feeling connected to something larger than yourself. That's what happens when you manage to catch a song—you feel blessed.

As Doyle introduces us to the private lives of creative men, we get the outline of his own life. We gather that he has been shaped by the literature of boyhood. He devotes a chapter to what an older friend has taught him about being an editor and a man, and he freely shares his opinions about each artist's works, going through *oeuvres* as if he were counting the rosary.

Having told a lot about himself through his enthusiasms in *Spirited Men*, Doyle gets even more personal with *The Wet Engine*, the story of how his son Liam, born with a three-chambered heart, underwent lifesaving surgery. Paraclete Press (the name is Spirited) has taken on this little project, a book with large type that runs only 160 small pages, and has produced something organic—indeed, sized like a vital organ

and fairly pulsing with life.

Doyle works on several levels, reciting histories of medicine and the heart as metaphor, and telling about his feelings for Liam. He comes up with dazzling information, such as how the pope may name a cardinal *imo pectore*, in his heart, for the cardinal's own protection. He guides us into the wondrous hearts of hummingbirds and blue whales. Most affectingly, he introduces us to a living saint who works as a heart surgeon three months of the year in the U.S. and pours the earnings into a children's hospital in his native Armenia, where he works the other nine months.

Doyle can leave the reader exhilarated—and fatigued. Ever since Frank McCourt hit the charts with his book-length ballads *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, some readers have expected a lilting accent from Irish writers. Doyle, though born in New York City, writes with a brogue. He is also given to breathlessly reporting, like a child, this and this and that and that and something else! It's a shame that his prose keeps calling attention to itself, because in simpler moments he achieves an eloquence close to poetry. A short passage reveals why the above-mentioned Latin phrase has been so significant to him:

In the innermost recesses of my old heart is a girl I call Emma, who was never born and never revealed her gender and never received her name except in my heart. *Imo pectore*. She was conceived ten years ago, a child of me and my wife and the mystery that flicks lives into being, and she lived inside my wife.

The child's heart beat: but she was growing in the wrong place inside her extraordinary mother, south of safe.

There's little suspense to *The Wet Engine*—from the first page, we know that Liam's surgery will succeed—but nonetheless its several stories are utterly engaging. Doyle has a special gift, a voice that makes you feel you know him personally. He writes about many different subjects, and yet the constant, delightful subject is Brian Doyle, a spirited man with a mad, wild heart on his sleeve.