

The Hollow Heart

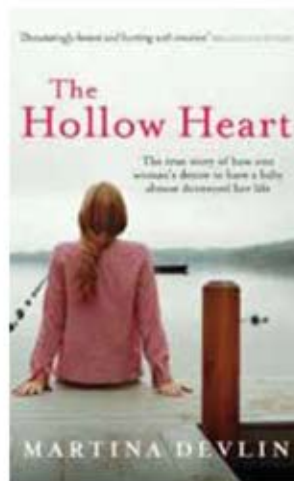
By Martina Devlin

Martina Devlin's book is her own deeply personal journey through not only her infertility diagnosis, three traumatic cycles of IVF and the loss of her 'maybe babies', but also the loss of her marriage, the end of her dreams of becoming a mother and trying to come to terms with that in her own way.

The Hollow Heart begins with Martina resting in bed after her third round of IVF in a year, willing her recently returned embryos to 'cling to life', and reflecting on the journey that she has undertaken. After the initial discovery that her fallopian tubes are blocked and damaged from an unknown bug, she is unsure if she will be able to receive treatment as in Northern Ireland fertility clinics were a rarity. However, they finally get a referral and they embark on the first of their three cycles.

Martina lays bare in this book every raw emotion that she felt throughout her cycles of treatment, describing how she gradually became singularly obsessive in her pursuit of motherhood. Experiencing all the feelings of helplessness, anger, loneliness that all childless couples feel, but worst of all was that word... failure. It becomes the non-mentionable word, 'even if you think it, for God's sake, don't say it'. The aftermath of each failure was a reality that neither Martina nor her husband were expecting. Looking back she can see that she acted irrationally, leaving it very difficult for her husband to communicate with her. Ultimately it leaves the marriage broken beyond repair, causing the couple to separate.

Martina's despair at her losses gradually begin to fade as she starts putting her life back together again, having gone back to writing to earn her living, but a car accident resulting in a broken sternum, again puts her back on bed rest. At this point the pain killers that she has been prescribed very quickly become a crutch, however, a return visit to the fertility clinic to offer thanks to the staff proves to be a watershed moment. On telling the nurse that she had not been lucky, the nurse says 'you did your best', which although not overly comforting, seems to help in the sense that her pain has



finally been acknowledged.

She begins to move on again and she realises that her 'babies' are to be her nieces, nephews and children of friends, and their mothers are incredibly generous allowing her to share their children. Whilst initially her contact with newborns is painful, she soon begins to find 'unadulterated pleasure' to hold someone's baby. Her youngest niece makes her

consider the possibilities of another round of IVF, but with that comes the uncertainty and her own inability to even think about failure. She decides that there really is no going back.

Martina found that although she had a physical cause of her infertility, emotionally she could still not understand it. She felt as if there had to be a meaning attached to it until she read this: 'Love the life you have, not the life you think you should have', and this became her new mantra.

Her aim in telling her story is to reach out and help those who are experiencing the difficulties that infertility brings. The most important message in this book comes in the epilogue and really sums up the way that Martina ultimately felt about her journey:

'To those of you without children who feel empty or sad, blighted or victimised, ground down or hopeless, I want to say this: your grief is legitimate, but don't let it colonize your life. Acknowledge your loss and then focus on what you have, not what you lack.'

Alison Onash
MTL Administration

Editor's note: this book is available to read through the MTL Lending Library.