

THE VITALS by Tracy Sorensen

READING GROUP NOTES

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Blurb

Deep inside Tracy's body live the organs of the peritoneal cavity.

Ute, a wandering womb.

Rage, an existential spleen.

Gaster, a gleeful gorging.

Liv, a workaholic liver.

But there is also Baby, an ever-growing tumour.

Together, the organs must fight for homeostasis ... and Tracy's survival.

The Vitals is Tracy Sorensen's cancer memoir transformed by imagination into something far richer and stranger. Narrated by her internal organs, it will make you infinitely more aware of the peculiar world inside your body and discover all the hidden parts that make you human.

Author biography

Tracy Sorensen is a writer and scholar. She grew up in Carnarvon on the north coast of Western Australia and now lives in Bathurst, New South Wales, with her partner, Steve. Her first novel, *The Lucky Galah*, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2019. *The Vitals*, her second novel, is based on her experience with advanced primary peritoneal cancer, a form of ovarian cancer associated with a mutation on the BRCA1 gene on the seventeenth chromosome. She has now been cancer-free for eight years.

A Reader's Introduction to *The Vitals*

****PLEASE NOTE: THIS INTRODUCTION CONTAINS SPOILERS****

Somatom (a CT scanner) introduces us the world inside Tracy, an assemblage with two extra organs growing in her peritoneal cavity.

Gaster (the stomach) believes the world revolves around him and that all other organs evolved to suit his needs. The organs have been disconnected from Queen Bee (the brain) since the Estrangement. He lists every food he has loved and enjoyed, until the Current Situation – where he has no appetite.

Maureen (the greater omentum) believes in the spirit of Tracy more than the other organs. Even though she doesn't voice her worry, she senses a low-pressure feeling in the air.

Peri (the peritoneum) covers the rest of the organs like glad wrap. She has a touch of 'baby brain' because she's discovered she's having a baby. Maureen is excited and starts knitting for the new baby. Ute (the uterus) is sceptical.

Baby (a tumour) is Peri's baby. She grows uncontrollably, lacks organisation and is fixed to Rage (the spleen), Panno (the pancreas) and Gaster. She wants to attend Organ School to learn like a regular organ, but Peri is protective. Instead, she lets Baby quietly listen in on Organ Board meetings, where the organs give system updates and sing the Song of Homeostasis.

The organs learned everything they needed to know from the DNA teachers at Organ School. Ute and her two kelpies (the ovaries) were always distracted during Organ School. Ute would dream of being on the open road in the Australian bush – red dirt, acacia scrub and windmills. She would be sent out of the classroom for not understanding her assignment, which was to be a *vessel*.

After Birth, Ute feels useless – everyone has a job but her. So she spends her time carefree on the open road, until, unprepared, she has her first period.

Rage is having an existential crisis. He's a sensitive individualist – a 'totally fucken pointless' organ who questions why they must work for Tracy and feed the Assemblage machine. He philosophises with the other organs in his Cave of Spleen late at night. When Baby, who now presents herself as a blonde bombshell, comes along, he feels re-energised and he likes that she's not part of the machine. Rage becomes obsessed by her bold, playful ignorance and when she arrives at the Cave of Spleen it makes him question everything. Baby and Rage then create their child Bunny, feeding Bunny new red blood cells.

The more Baby takes over Rage, the sicker Rage gets. Meanwhile, Baby has also been riding in the passenger seat of Panno's car, knitting while he shoots proteenz, carbz and fatz. She forces him to level up then traps him in the back of his car with her wool. Baby now has complete control over their Organ Board meeting updates.

Bunny is sick of Mummy-Baby and Daddy-Rage fighting. Baby is scared of Bunny being discovered so when Bunny grows too big for the Cave of Spleen, Baby sends Bunny down to the Pouch of Douglas near Ute's farm. While Bunny is waiting further instruction, they eat, multiply and burrow until they break through Col's (the colon) fence.

Meanwhile, Liv (the liver) keeps hearing the kelpies bark, even though they're long gone, and keeps thinking about the number seventeen.

Col begs Liv and Kelly (the gallbladder) for help – the breach in his fence is a serious problem. Liv underplays the importance and, to Col's outrage, puts Ute's agenda item about her fibroid exhibition before Col in the Organ Board meeting. Col mentions the rabbit holes, but everyone believes the rabbits don't pose a threat and are just part of Ute's story of herself. In the next Organ Board meeting, after they've fixed Col's 'shipping' problem, Baby introduces Bunny, who is Baby's 'imaginary friend' and now has their own screen. Outside the meeting Col tells Liv he thinks Bunny is real and dangerous, and so are Maureen and Peri by association. They agree Baby needs to be stopped and start a subcommittee.

Baby has taken over the Autopilot, so Gaster needs to go through Baby for food. Folderol (the small intestine) sees blood on the floor and decides to query Gaster, who sends a secret message that Baby nibbling on him. Folderol gives the message to Col, who informs Folderol about the meeting.

At the secret subcommittee meeting, they all find out that: Rage and Panno are trapped, Baby has been feeding off Gaster, and there are seventeen rabbits in the Pouch of Douglas. Liv is beside herself, because she realizes that the warnings were real – she'd been remembering the kelpies were barking danger at a mutation on the seventeenth chromosome, which had been written on the blackboard at Organ School.

Kelly (the gallbladder) tries to rouse Liv, unsuccessfully, but Kelly and Liv now know Baby and Bunny are tumours. Kelly and Col begin the Anti-Tumour Alliance to kill Baby and try to recruit the others with beautiful invitations. Ute declines the invitation, because she thought they were for her art exhibition. Kelly grabs Panno's attention with gallstones. Panno tells Kelly that Rage is dying and they need to do a transfer of Rage's rage, with a small R, to Liv.

Kelly puts it in Liv's coffee and she's ready for war. At the Anti-Tumour Alliance meeting Gaster says they need to get Queen Bee to take the assemblage to the hospital. They need to bypass the Autopilot and dodge Baby. Ute, now a grey nomad, finally agrees to participate and drives up Gaster's eyestalk to deliver their diplomatic letter to Queen Bee. When she arrives, Queen Bee is far too busy to listen to Ute, but Ute says one word in English: cancer.

Queen Bee pops up at the next Organ Board meeting, and she reads out the diagnosis. Liv explains that Baby and Bunny are tumours. Peri doesn't believe it and leaves. Baby is shocked confused, but confesses she hears voices telling her to feed and grow. Rage appears at the Organ Board meeting, and Baby and Rage confess their love for one another.

They all attend Ute's fibroid exhibition before the day of sacrifice where Ute, Rage, Baby, Maureen and Bunny are lifted out of the cavity one by one. Panno, Gaster and Liv are trimmed, and Col is now a semicolon. Although they miss their friends, they can now sing the Song of Homeostasis.

Discussion questions

1. *The Vitals* is a work of fiction, but it is also a cancer memoir. Read the Author's Note at the end of the novel (page 285). How does this affect the way you perceive the book?
2. Look at the image of the organs of the Peritoneal Cavity on page xi. What does this image evoke? How does it inform your reading of *The Vitals*?
3. The novel is both a universal story, and a very personal one. How does the author use her own rural Australian experiences to flesh out the world, story and characters? A good example to consider is the world inside Ute, and Ute's story of herself.
4. 'We hadn't seen Queen Bee since early childhood, before the Estrangement.' (page 68) How does the relationship between Queen Bee and the organs of the Peritoneal Cavity explore the disconnection between the mind and body? What does this say about homeostasis, illness and the very human ability to forget your internal organs even exist?
5. Each personified organ is listed in the Dramatis Personae on page ix. Using what you know of the human body and the digestive tract, how does each character's personality reflect the organ, its purpose, and its literal and figurative position in the body?
6. Throughout the novel there is an image of each character, which represents the story of themselves. Discuss the images and how they shaped the way you understood each character.
7. Rage compares his relationship with Baby to that of existential philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Bouvier (page 70). Why is Rage, a spleen, the perfect character to explore existentialism and what it means to be human?
8. Kelly refers to herself as an organ of luxury and Rage believes he's redundant. Similarly, both Rage, the spleen, and Kelly, the gall bladder, refer to *The Communist Manifesto*. Firstly, what does this contrast in personality show? And why are these characters best placed to talk about individualism versus collectivism – the organs working for the common good (i.e. the homeostasis of Tracy)?
9. 'Rage, our spleen, rolls his eyes, says I'm pious. Says "Tracy" is simply a location, like the Pouch of Douglas, or Paris. "There is a lot going on in Paris, but it doesn't mean Paris itself is conscious," says Rage. "Similarly with Tracy. It describes where we live. It's an address, not a sentient being!" (page 18) Discuss this idea. What is Rage implying about souls and sentience? How are the organs' beliefs a microcosm for humanity – and their values, beliefs and religions – throughout the world?
10. 'All of us are having to adjust to the new organ. A baby doesn't just stay a baby forever. She grows up, she takes up space. And we older organs need to be graceful about it.' (page 153) Why do you think the first tumour is named Baby?

11. Why do you think the second tumour is a rabbit? What is the symbolism of the rabbit, especially in an Australian setting? Why do you think the author has chosen rabbit proof fences and colonialism to represent?
12. Gaster calls himself the 'True King of the Assemblage' (page 155) and says that 'All the other organs of the Assemblage evolved to anticipate and serve my needs' (page 4). Discuss what this means in an evolutionary sense and a societal sense.
13. Gaster has a direct link to Queen Bee through the Autopilot. How does this relate to [research](#) that the gut is the body's second brain?
14. On page 15, Gaster lists Tracy's favourite foods. What would be on your list?
15. On page 173, Folderol, with his Sisyphean task of categorisation, lists the things he's having trouble cataloguing. Why do you think these specific items trouble him? How does this paint a picture of Tracy's autobiographical life? What does it say about the nature of memory – both in the mind and body?
16. The 'wandering womb' is an ancient idea that women's medical afflictions are caused by a displaced uterus and can cause 'hysteria'. How does Ute and her journey within the peritoneal cavity explore the idea of the wandering womb?
17. How does the author build the world inside the peritoneal cavity? Does this strange world work for you, as a reader?
18. How does the author carefully balance her specialised knowledge of the human body and still allow enough clarity so that the story can shine through and not inhibit the readers' ability to understand the world?
19. Compare the DNA sequences on pages 181 and 199. Why do you think Ute's kelpies are trying to communicate by barking at the blackboard?
20. *The Vitals* is brimming with intertextual references. Which ones did you pick up, and how do they relate to the novel? How does this intertextuality enhance your understanding of *The Vitals*?
21. There are subtle ecological and climate change themes throughout *The Vitals*. How does the Song of Homeostasis relate to these themes? Discuss how this relates to the possible untimely end of the Tracy Assemblage.