

By Heart: A mother's story of children and learning at home

Kathleen Melin

Clover Valley Press (October 2008)

What reviewers have to say . . .

Editorial Reviews

“. . . this book is about more than mothering and home schooling; it's about the kind of life a couple chooses for their family. Kathleen and her husband embrace rural living—wood burning stoves and maple syrup collecting and all. This collection of essays explores how one family navigates the choices they make, choices that are sometimes outside what society considers “normal” and “expected.”

Her prose is also lovely

Kate Hopper, *Mother Words*

One of the joys of my life is discovering good books. When I find a good book that is also about homeschooling, it's like hitting the jackpot. I was thrilled to find *By Heart*.

Melin is gracious in her writing – exposing places of doubt, loneliness, hurt or misunderstanding – but somehow bringing compassion and forgiveness to each issue. We learn to gently turn away from the instinctual emotions that may rise up, seeing in each circumstance a larger context.

Kate Tsubata, *Washington Times*

Then there's *By Heart*, Kathleen Melin's poignant and literary memoir, which embraces the questions about home schooling and family life even when there aren't clear answers. Many of her chapters are like musical pieces that are unafraid to end authentically with an unresolved chord.

Jeanne Faulconer, *Home Education Magazine*

This is a home education book with a difference. It is not a “how to” book nor is it a chronological story of one family's home education years. Instead, it is arranged into chapters on various aspects of home education which reveal the author's sensitivity and thought about the things that years of home education cause us to ponder – parenting, life, relationships, and the nature of learning itself. At the same time, it is grounded in real experiences.

It is **wry, wise, gentle, tender, and honest**. Melin doesn't shy away from admitting home education hasn't been all smooth sailing but she invites us to share her home education lifestyle including things she'd no doubt do differently if she could start over again.

Living in Alaska, her lifestyle is very different from mine but for one winter's afternoon, I curled up on the couch and felt I have found a home ed friend on the other side of the world – I was glad I didn't have to ski to the shops like she does.

Kathleen has kindly allowed me to reproduce one of my favourite chapter *On Reading* in this issue. It is just a taster of the delights on offer in this book which I **highly recommend**.

Sue Wight, *Otherways Magazine*, Australia

How does a child transition from public to home schooling? *By Heart: A mother's story of children and learning at home* is the story of Kathleen Melin and her children, whom she decided to remove from public school to teach herself. Describing the environment of a home school house and how it differs from the everyday home, Melin speaks on education and parenting, and comes forth with much wisdom. *By Heart: A mother's story of children and learning at home* is recommended to educators and parents alike.

Midwest Books Review

By Heart shares one family's surprising passage from public school to home-based learning – a journey that takes readers from Bethel, Alaska, to a Wisconsin farm, all the while exploring an educational choice that continues to grow at a phenomenal rate.

This book will appeal to the growing population of homeschoolers throughout the United States as well as to readers interested in autobiography and memoir.

By Heart stands out as a literary memoir created by a compelling storyteller.

Review Direct – Jenkins Group

By Heart: A Mother's Story of Children and Learning at Home is a unique memoir of a mother's adjustments to homeschooling. Unique in perspective and laced with dynamic personal experience, *By Heart* asks questions that are absent from other books addressing the decision to homeschool. It is the story of one family's journey through home schooling, their reasons for making the decision, and what they struggle with and learn along the way.

This book is written for educators. It is applicable to homeschool families but doesn't segregate

itself to one audience alone. There are many reasons people choose to educate their children. These reasons are not always founded in religious beliefs or a conviction that there is only one correct way to educate. Readers will be challenged to think outside the box. On either side of the homeschool vs. public school debate lingers a group of "in-between" families that seek to belong somewhere. They school at home, but they lack a political, religious, or cultural drive to do so. They do what they do because it works for their family, plain and simple. Readers of this book, regardless of their reasons for making the choice to homeschool, will find a commonality in the author's words.

I really got a lot out of reading this book. I loved the second chapter, in which the author shares how she overcomes her struggle of imitating a school in a home environment. With the big brown clock dictating every moment of their education, the day drags and her stress builds. The author is brilliant and honest as she shares the details of her struggle. The book also tackles the feelings of a non-Christian family trying to belong in a primarily Christian movement. I was challenged as I read her perspective of her local homeschool support group, and I understood where Christian home educators could stand to be a bit friendlier and less aggressive. Chapter seven was also fantastic! This very touching chapter addressed the flexibility of learning and the unexpected surprises we get when we wrongly assume that our children have "checked out" of their lessons. The chapter is poignant and very well written.

I respected the author's approach at not isolating anyone. While I didn't always agree with her philosophy on life, I could respect her perspective because I felt she was trying to be fair. The downside of this book is that many of the people who need this book most may never pick it up. I fear that hard-core public school advocates may snub it for its "Learning at Home" approach. I also fear that the sensitive, hard-core, Christian homeschoolers may put the book down if they feel mocked by the author's personal views. The truth is we would all benefit from understanding other perspectives, regardless of whether we agree with them.

I strongly recommend *By Heart: A Mother's Story of Children and Learning at Home*. I hope that readers of this book will be inspired to spark a new conversation in the homeschool community and make changes for the better.

■
Heather Randall, *The Old Schoolhouse*® Magazine

Testimonials/Advance Praise

“I wasn’t homeschooled; none of my people were homeschooled; my wife wasn’t homeschooled; none of her people were homeschooled. School taught us that rearing children on our own would be a bother, and so our daughter and son missed out, too. Looking through the window that *By Heart* opens, I’m struck by how much all of us lost. This book is a work of genius. Unique.”

John Taylor Gatto, author

Dumbing Us Down

Weapons of Mass Instruction

The Underground History of American Education

“More than an account of someone trying to escape the frustrations of a rural school system, Kathleen Melin’s compelling story gives us the complicated, difficult truth behind the romance we’ve all tried on for at least a few seconds – of doing it ourselves; of teaching our own children at home As with our lives, there’s no necessarily happy ending, but a multisided handful of directions her thoughtful account considers. It’s a story anyone who has, or who ever had, children will profit from reading.”

Barry Silesky, author

John Gardner: Literary Outlaw

This Disease

Editor, *ACM (Another Chicago Magazine)*

“I’m a proponent of Waldorf schools, in large part because they strive to create a home-like atmosphere for the children – students have the same class teacher from first through eighth grade, they work at an unhurried pace, the curriculum is profoundly connected to Nature, and everything is done with beauty, rhythm, and love. This sounds a lot like home schooling, doesn’t it? Why is it that home schooling is the exception rather than the norm? Kathleen Melin tells the story of her journey to home-schooling with compelling honesty and instructive insight. You will learn much from her experience.”

Eric Utne, founder *Utne Reader* and

Cosmo Doogood’s Urban Almanac

Amazon Customer Reviews

Sharon R. -

What a beautifully written story filled with truth and honesty and grace. Kathleen Melin weaves the tale of her journey through early motherhood with her search for a kinder, more meaningful education for her children. She brings us into her world with such compelling and powerful images. I love this book. I confess that as a public school teacher, I felt reluctance to read this story, but I am so glad that I did. Here is a woman whose language is both simple and stunning, who tells of this undeniable urge to educate her children in a humane, creative way while also showing us her strong connection with the natural world. It is a story of both the great joys of this choice to home school as well as the staggering amount of work and self-doubt and family tension caused by the choice. I love the scenes in nature--the Alaskan wilderness, the Wisconsin woods and fields, the sugar moths in the maple syrup cans, as well as the beauty of the hand-built sauna, the almost heartbreakingly beautiful scene of her sitting in a wooden rocker holding first one, then a second child, while the oldest child hangs over her shoulder yearning to be small enough again to sit on his mother's lap. This is more than a book about why home-schooling is a viable choice for learning. Much more. Kathleen's voice is effervescent and compelling, like the best of mythic fairy tales, and she also gives us a well-reasoned, well-documented argument that supports her choice for her family. What a lovely, loving story told by a master story-teller.

By **Emma Johanna**

Kathleen Melin's *By Heart* is so compellingly told, sweet, and satisfyingly soulful, that laying it down, once finished, compares to taking leave of an old friend from whom one looks forward to hearing again, soon.

Melin draws in loving detail an intimate portrait of the early years of the closely knit family created by her and her husband "Cy". Together, they chose to live the rural life in Alaska and then Wisconsin, where they put new life into the homestead that once belonged to Melin's great-grandparents. In a magical moment of her story, dawn finds Kathleen tending bright coals, over which steams and bubbles the sweet tree sap that she has hauled in buckets from the farm's old maple grove during the night. Vividly, we imagine deliciously pine scented cold air with just a whiff of smoke and maple syrup. Three young children spill from the house and gleefully run around the fire in brightly colored jackets while we smile, sharing in happiness described so well.

Kathleen has opened her heart, and feels like an old friend.

What might it be like to make the decision to home school, and devote time and energy and lost income to an endeavor not guaranteed to go smoothly? Kathleen and Cy grow quickly

disappointed with the rural Alaskan school which their young firstborn has lost all interest in attending, and so do we, seeing things through their eyes. When they try to educate him and his younger siblings on their own, we cheer for them, hoping for the best. We want to believe things will work out - we just wish the schools were better.

The motivated parents organize their lives around daily lessons, and the result is at first pure adventure. The struggle to balance jobs with the arrangement proves its potential undoing. A math lesson is neither well prepared nor comprehended, and leaves both a parent and a child upset. Self-esteem is at stake. New choices may be made. Things will work out, and Kathleen will write a book that is thoughtful and insightful about their journey. Her observations of a family living a life far from ordinary will be truly delightful, bringing to mind Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon*.

Grateful to have been invited along for part of the journey, we take our leave of *By Heart*, and wish the author and her family the best, from the heart.

Write more and soon please, Kathleen Melin.

By Elizabeth Franck

I really enjoyed this book. It kind of has a Walton's feel to it. Very homey and family oriented. The author states some good facts about homeschooling which helped solidify my decision to make the jump and pull my DD out of school. Wish there were more books like this one.

By Penny in TX

I had this book on my Amazon wish list for two years after first learning of the title via **Home Education Magazine** but frankly was leery of yet another well-intentioned, but not very well-written homeschooling memoir. A gift card and an inexpensive used copy finally prompted an order and now I have only two regrets: 1) that I didn't order the book sooner, and 2) that the book isn't longer than its slender 140 pages. Chapter Five, "Folk Art" practically brought tears to my eyes, it captures so effectively, in such human terms, the issues surrounding the pedagogue/ideologue "split" in homeschooling circles. Melin's clear prose and thoughtful, non-doctrinaire approach to many key homeschooling touchpoints are a welcome addition to the literature, and her book will stand alongside Guterson's **Family Matters** and Wallace's **Better Than School** as must-reads in the genre.

By Midwest Book Review

How does a child transition from public to home schooling? "By Heart: A Mother's Story of Children and Learning at Home" is the story of Kathleen Melin and her children, whom she decided to remove from public school to teach herself. Describing the environment of a home schooled house and how it differs from the everyday home, Melin speaks on education and parenting, and comes forth with much wisdom. "By Heart: A Mother's Story of Children and Learning at Home" is recommended to educators and parents alike.

By Mary Rehwald

What a book! There is not a shallow or unnecessary word in this astounding and poetic memoir of Kathleen Melin's and her husband's journeys through the homeschooling of their three children in rural Wisconsin. Don't think of this book as a "how-to" book (though every story is underscored by incredible insight and a great list of references at the end) but rather as a collection of twelve really well-crafted stories by a thoughtful and loving storyteller. Although the jacket description refers to the author's skills in coordinating a home school group for many years, the reader will not be burdened with the organizational issues. Rather she (or he) will be able to listen to the most intimate dialogues between parents, between boys and their fathers, between progressive and conservative mothers. Kathleen Melin expresses her faith in democracy and schooling at home simply through her wise choice of dialogues - we get to read the dialogue and decide for ourselves as the reader what to think. I like reading books like this that completely respect the reader. Numerous times deep tears welled up in me from her simple accounts of, for example, letting her children take a long time in their writing assignments. I particularly liked her respect for providing time for them during the day to be by themselves and reflect.

In short Kathleen's writing is the best I've come across this past year, and this will be my Christmas present to my friends who have children that may be home schooled as well as to those who don't, simply because I was able to feel the writer's intimacy in my own bones of sorrow, longing, and happiness. And here I thought I might give "The Story of Edgar Sawtelle" to my friends for Christmas this year. I won't. Melin's book is more real, and contains even more surprises in its twelve chapters that are shaped around a different perspective on her life at home during these twelve years of raising and teaching her kids. She relishes specificity - frost icicles, winter shadows, the damp smell of a room where her son has been crying into a pillow, temperature on her hands, - what I would call a "juicy" story that is completely believable written by someone you would love to come to know well. For me the sign of that fact that I might be reading a great writer comes from the number of sudden insights I get from the stories told - insights that so quickly revealed my own private life and prejudiced to myself, and the sounds and feel of the cold winter nights up here. This is the flow of Mary Oliver and Pablo Neruda mixed with Balzac and Tolstoy.

Mary Rehwald, storyteller

Reader Reviews

Your book. What an immensely beautiful read. Surprising in its depth and multiple layers. It stirred great childhood memories and echos of my own life struggles – (they are universal!) – the complicated split of work-a-day roles, the delicate acceptance of growing apart, the everyday struggles and simple joys, and yes the River, though damned, still flows, the fire still burns, and those ever on the verge of change, Absolutely beautiful! Thanks for sharing your “heart” and, as Emerson would say: “letting it bleed out on the page.”

The writing at times seemed magically to pop out of the page: “lollipop trees” - “the long benediction that ends with morning” – “begins as hours, ends as days” and “the mind is a thirsty place”. The paragraphs and flow were right on. I was especially drawn in to the life and death tumble down to the Rivers icy edge – and the end scene in the rocking chair You have a wonderfully natural and authentic writing style.

I must say that when I first moved here I did have a brief encounter with Kodiak and Lark. They both radiated a special-ness and so, from this perspective, your Motherhood was wonderfully successful!

Remembrance stirred:

I recalled my first day of school – my mother walking me the two blocks – we arrived a bit late – the classroom was filled with kindergarten kids – I stood hesitant in the doorway – then I saw the piano, let go of my Mother’s hand and raced to it – pounding the keys –never looked back. . . made me wonder how my Mother must have felt -- left standing in the doorway watching her youngest run off oblivious . . . (many others . . .). . .

Touched by the delicate nature and deep understanding in describing the balance and coming together over religious approaches and differences. Your story really helps to bridge the gap so needed if we are to be successful in building community and science does de-mystify and Spirit is ever present

I read your book on Thanksgiving and recalled all those years of watching my Mother (or past wife) working diligently and long in the kitchen preparing the meal --- long hours – only to have it devoured in one sitting. Recognize the great dedication, concentration and honesty poured into this book. I appreciate every page --- like a good meal it leaves me wanting more. I hope you have more stories to share and write.

Ed E.

I started reading *By Heart* and could not stop. I truly enjoyed it. . . . I appreciate that you talked about the good and bad of homeschooling. I believe there is also lots of good and bad in the structured system.

Paulette A.

I have to say with complete clarity that I loved your book! I found myself stealing time to read it, early morning being my favorite time. I did more than read; I relished it! . . . What I love so much about your book is the clarity from the heart. Your style of writing puts the reader directly into the picture. There are no wasted words.

Carolyn G.

Thanks for your interesting book! An African proverb says: It takes a village to raise a child.” You should get the Nobel Prize next time.

Anna Lisa H.

Thank you so much for allowing me a peaceful and reflective journey through your beautiful memoir *By Heart*. Every word so well chosen and placed. Every thought capturing your spirit and passion. . . . your message and struggles resonate so deep within me. I can’t imagine a more perfect read over a long and lazy Mother’s Day weekend. . . . What a beautiful piece you have created. I am all the richer for having spent a few hours with *By Heart* and, of course, for knowing you.

Lindy Y.

I will often read a book a part at a time, and I certainly could have done this with the various chapters. But once I picked it up, I could not put it down until finished. I was struck by the combination of honesty and humor.

Lowell B.

I felt encouraged by your book to be a good teacher – although I’m not always sure what that is, either. “Encourage, not discourage” has been my “motto.”

Dave F.

I don’t know where to begin to appreciate your candid writing about the tensions and dilemmas of your decision. From the early chapters about the bus ride in the dark Alaska interior through the institutional feeling of a small Alaska school through your second child’s outright rejection of school. The whole religious vs. secular, pedagogue/ideologue debate. The co-parenting, this is our life not just school. The flawed notion that schooling is good socialization, the lack of questioning how/why we institutionalize our children. I’m so grateful for your gift.

Michelle C.