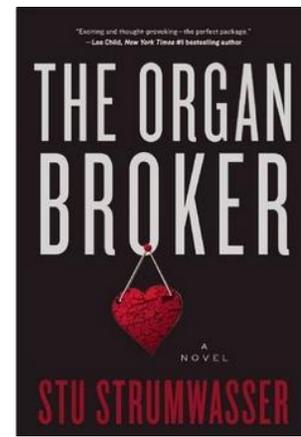


A Review of
The Organ Broker
... a novel
Stu Strumwasser (2015)

Reviewed by Steve Okonek, liver recipient

“Like it always does, making any form of goods or services illegal instantly creates a black market for it. Such is the case with the organ transplant industry.” This is the underlying premise that fuels Strumwasser’s first gripping novel, a finalist for the Hammet Prize for excellence in crime writing.



New York Jack, a man who turns to the lucrative organ trade after putting himself through law school by dealing cocaine, tells the novel. Sometimes posing as a United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) employee, he has no shortage of U.S. clients. He makes more money per deal than the transplant surgeon, arranging overseas sales in rough towns with great hospitals like Johannesburg and Recife.

The transplants, nearly always kidneys, involve corrupt doctors, countries with unregulated networks, and back alleys full of impoverished villagers. Jack calls himself a “reverse Robin Hood, stealing from the poor and giving to the rich.” Negotiating is easy, as the concept of saying “no” is illogical. No deal means death. The typical exchange involves a wealthy and determined Westerner, withering away on dialysis, paying about \$150,000 to receive a donated kidney from a poor woman living in a tin shanty. She receives about \$1,500 out of it, which her neighbors see as having won the lottery. Convolutional economics or not, these transplant tourism directors like Jack believe they are saving lives. Everyone’s happy, at least in Jack’s twisted but very affluent eyes.

What holds the story together is the doubt Jack harbors as he plays golf with chiefs of transplant departments around the globe willing to do almost anything to finance new hospital wings or their extravagant lifestyles. The wheeling and dealing suddenly hit very close to home as Jack needs to procure a heart for an acquaintance whose HIV positive status precludes his being on a U.S. transplant wait list. Here, I guarantee you won’t be able to put the book down.

How realistic is “The Organ Broker?” Just type, “I need a kidney” in your search engine, and sift through the millions of hits that pop up. We’ve had an individual speak at one of our meetings who obtained a liver in China after cancer kept him off the wait lists here. This was long before the national organ wait list hit 100,000, and today it is far larger. Going overseas for health care is hardly unusual. Several of my friends get inexpensive, and they claim better, dental care in Mexico as part of a vacation. Will the TSA detect that you’re returning from Mumbai with an additional kidney? Should it care? Strumwasser cites all his research into this black market, saying looking the other way is natural in many parts of the world when it comes to health care. Where is the line between a simple business deal where both parties clearly and freely understand the exchange, versus human trafficking?

He pulls no punches with UNOS, both in the story as well as in his non-fiction preface and later when encouraging organ donation. He sees a fiscal cliff approaching between UNOS and what he believes will effectively be a naturally occurring global allocation of organs. The National Organ Transplant Act (NOTA) of 1981, which forbids any form of tangible compensation in the United States involving transplantable organs, prompts his comment, “There’s no organ shortage in the world – only in the United States.” As so often is the case, great fiction provokes a ton of questions regarding the questions we face in real life. “The Organ Broker” touches many of these in a suspenseful ride.

Note: *The Organ Broker* is available in all five formats at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)