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Bypass: A Memoir

Joseph A. Amato
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Cloaked in mystery and wonder when first performed three decades ago, the coronary bypass has become a routine medical procedure-yet it still amounts to a chillingly close encounter with death. Surgeons slice and hack their way through the patient's skin and breastbone, literally stop the heart and pack it in ice while grafting leg veins to circumvent clogged blood vessels. A sobering prospect for anyone, but for Amato-an athletic, politically active, deep-thinking history professor in his mid-fifties-it inspires a personal journey of reflection and remembrance.

Headstrong and accustomed to being in control, Amato initially spurns his doctor's advice to undergo a bypass, opting instead for a regimen of exercise, prayer and dietary change that he hopes will reverse his potentially fatal arterial blockages. Its failure is but one of his humbling experiences as surgery draws nearer. Drawing little comfort from assurances that his prospects are excellent for surviving the operation and resuming his busy life, he travels from Minnesota to his boyhood home of Detroit, where he visits the graves of his father and grandparents and bids "provisional farewells" to people and places he has long known. Despite his misgivings, the surgery goes without a hitch, and Amato emerges physically and spiritually healthier, with a keener sense of what matters most in life.

Bypass is simultaneously a straightforward account of a medical procedure as seen through one patient's eyes and, as the subtitle makes clear, a personal memoir. Amato writes at length of his parents and grandparents, of childhood peccadilloes, of his passion for golf, courting his wife, helping establish the history program at a new college on the Minnesota prairie. Of particular interest is his deep religious faith, and how the prospect of dying young forces this proud intellectual to surrender his fate to the God of his peasant ancestors.

To read this book is to become intimately acquainted with Amato, warts and all. One marvels at the breadth of his knowledge and the richness of his life's experiences; shares his fear of the unknown and his zest for life; and frowns at his impatience and bouts of self-centeredness. Yet one comes away with a sense that, ever the student, he has learned his lessons well and passed his toughest test. Outwardly, he concludes, bypass left a scar on his chest. "Inwardly, it set death's skull on the desk of my mind. It told me time was preciously scarce, and I must work hard. There is only so much time to achieve one's heart's desires."

JOHN FLESHER (December 16, 1999)

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