

Heartbeat: How I Grew from Victim to Survivor

Michael Dymant

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Heartbeat is a breezy medical memoir full of honesty, hope, and, most of all, heart.

Michael Dymant's memoir *Heartbeat* is a lighthearted inside look at the brutal realities of major heart surgery and recovery.

In March 2015, Dymant underwent an emergency fifteen-hour surgery to repair an aortic aneurysm. By that summer, with the prospect of another surgery looming, he had to face his fears—of his perceived lack of recovery, of hospitalization, and of the future—with help from his therapist and his wife and through the healing power of writing.

Designed to give insights to those undergoing or performing surgeries, the book's story and final chapter accomplishes its goals through narrative openness about what coping mechanisms did and did not work in Dymant's experience. Toward its end, it is explicit about the lessons Dymant learned, in particular regarding the importance of a support network and of maintaining a positive attitude and an open mind.

Its language casual and accessible, the text is frank about the physical and emotional consequences of major surgery. Medical terminology is kept to a minimum; the focus is on Dymant's reactions to the medical procedures he undergoes and the effects they have on his life.

Notions of victimhood don't come in until the book's last pages, which address past traumatic events to which Dymant felt he was a victim. They are reconsidered from a post-surgery position that preferences the value of positive thinking. They are a gratuitous but brief addendum to the book's central story.

Using a font that makes them look handwritten, journal entries are included; they are a distinguishing personal touch, though they are hard to read. There are only a few such entries, and they are clustered within a single chapter, but they are a source of critical insight into Dymant's mindset during the time between his two surgeries.

Humor suffuses the narrative. Even descriptions of Dymant's darkest days, from post-operative boredom to looking like "a Smurf balloon at the Thanksgiving Day Parade" thanks to his surgery, inspire simultaneous laughs and horror. Dymant's determined optimism is further related through his banter with friendlier nurses and the fact that he is self-aware enough to seek professional psychiatric help when he needs it.

Dymant is blunt about the care—and lack thereof—he received from various medical personnel throughout his ordeal. The good, the bad, and the ugly are highlighted with equal passion, from the simple joy of being offered lemon ice after having his breathing tube removed to the irritation of having a doctor who talks about Dymant as if he isn't in the room.

Although it is short, the memoir covers all of the territory it sets out to. Unlike other medical memoirs, it focuses exclusively on the human aspects of its challenges. No medical knowledge is required to appreciate Dymant's story of physical and mental recovery.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (July 17, 2019)

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