

The Sanctuary of Illness: A Memoir of Heart Disease

Thomas Larson

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This memoir discusses—straight from the heart—the truth of how relationships can suffer when dealing with health concerns.

In *The Sanctuary of Illness*, Thomas Larson tells his story of surviving a series of heart attacks, confronting the family history and life choices that put him at risk, and making methodical, difficult changes to save his life. The book also examines how one person's illness has a profound effect on others; in Larson's case, this is primarily his partner, Suzanna.

The book is divided into four parts that show Larson's progression from sickness to healing. Though the parts don't have titles beyond their numeric order, each has an opening quotation that encapsulates the theme of the section. These quotations are remarkably well chosen, giving readers a sense of each part of the book beyond what a simple title could. Within each part, short vignettes are balanced with dialogue, action, and introspection, and they run right after the other without page breaks. Each vignette has a short phrase in bold print that marks the start of the passage. This simplicity makes the book quick to read and gives it earnestness; it's almost like reading a journal, though the book's style is far more polished and lacks the self-centeredness inherent in many journals and memoirs.

The title is based on a quote from Robert R. Rynearson that serves as the book's epigraph: "As long as humans feel threatened and helpless, they will seek the sanctuary that illness provides." This poignant insight highlights the book's main themes about the power of illness and its pervasiveness within the human condition, and the ability of humans to eschew the helplessness that gives sickness power beyond its medical manifestations.

The book is marked by brevity, concision, and pithiness. Larson boldly and humbly shares the highs and lows he and Suzanna faced, and these experiences will strike a deeply emotional chord with the reader. Larson's deepest insight is not the danger of heart disease, the perils of bad habits, the healthy choices to overcome illness, or anything similarly focused on the medical—though these are all key elements of the book—but the most powerful learning Larson shares with readers is how relationships suffer when people allow themselves to succumb to illness, and how relationships flourish alongside the deliberate choice to pursue health.

While many readers who've experienced serious illness (their own or a loved one's) will relate to, learn from, and be encouraged by Larson's experience, he doesn't dilute the power of the book by making it half memoir, half self-help. *The Sanctuary of Illness* will appeal to readers who want to pursue the fullness of health, both for their bodies and for their relationships.

MELISSA WUSKE (Spring 2014)

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