

An Arrow Through the Heart: One Woman's Story of Life, Love, and Surviving a Near-Fatal Heart Attack

By Deborah Daw Heffernan

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In the words of Mehmet Oz, MD: “*An Arrow Through the Heart* is an epiphany for women who mistakenly believe that they are immune from the ravages of heart disease. Using her heart as a magnifying glass, Deborah Daw Heffernan provides readers with a window into their souls.”

This groundbreaking memoir was first mentioned on Oprah Winfrey’s life-saving 2002 show announcing cardiovascular disease as a leading cause of death among *young* women. That tragic fact is still true. With both depth and humor, Deborah Daw Heffernan recounts her first year of recovery from the massive heart attack that ambushed her in a gentle yoga class—during the prime of her life and despite her impeccable health history.

Ranging from high-stakes action in the OR at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston to quietly unfolding seasons on a lake in Maine, *An Arrow Through the Heart* is a moving and informative story of what it takes to find one’s own path to true healing. Ultimately, Heffernan combines allopathic and complementary medicine to create a sensible recovery strategy for our times. She touchingly describes her husband’s devotion and the toll that her cardiovascular disease takes on him, as well as how he, too, grew from the experience. Weaving their story with the lives of family and friends, Heffernan demonstrates how illness can be transformative for all involved.

Not only an empowering companion for cardiac patients, this medical classic is a guide to recovery from catastrophic change of any kind. Above all, it is a powerful testament to the unexpected joy that can come from leading a life of acknowledged impermanence. Updates include cardiovascular data for today’s reader, links to the author’s website and other resources, a new section on SCAD (spontaneous coronary artery dissection), and— spoiler alert—a heart transplant in 2006. All author’s proceeds are donated to cardiac causes.

Deborah Daw Heffernan is a graduate of Georgetown and Harvard Universities. She has worked as a teacher in Switzerland, an associate dean at Boston University, and a freelance writer. For fourteen years she was vice president of a leading Boston-based corporate training/consulting firm—until a near-fatal heart attack changed her life forever. She lives with her husband, Jack, on a small lake in Maine.

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An Arrow Through the Heart: One Woman's Story of Life, Love, and Surviving a Near-Fatal Heart Attack By Deborah Daw Heffernan Bibliography

- Rank: #1217279 in Books
- Published on: 2015-04-21

- Released on: 2015-04-21
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .67" w x 5.51" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 300 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Healthy 44-year-old Deborah Daw Heffernan--a nonsmoker with low cholesterol and low blood pressure, who ate her vegetables to boot--lay down one day on the floor of her yoga class and felt her heart explode. Her heart attack--followed by a failed angioplasty, a double bypass, and eight days of unconsciousness--nearly killed her. During her recovery, she found plenty of books about heart disease and women, but no first-person stories--even though cardiovascular disease is the number-one killer of *both* men and women. *An Arrow Through the Heart* is the intensely personal account of her experience of surviving a heart attack, and how it changed everything.

Graphic details bring to life for the reader what happened to Heffernan. Her sisters enter her hospital room and see "a thrashing torture victim staked to the bed." Her swollen throat makes her look like "an inflated giraffe." She describes her postoperative depression, her lessons about love, her acceptance of impermanence, all in a well-written narrative of her heart attack that is woven through with snippets about her family and past. --*Joan Price*

From Publishers Weekly

Despite her apparent good health, in May 1997, Heffernan suffered a massive heart attack during a yoga class. Proximity to a Cambridge, Mass., hospital and the swift response of rescue workers saved her initially. Emergency double bypass surgery and the subsequent implantation of a defibrillator has allowed her to survive for the past five years. Surprisingly, Heffernan was relatively young (44), physically fit and a nonsmoker with low cholesterol who adhered to a nutritious diet when her heart failed her. In this insightful and openly emotional account, Heffernan details her illness and the life changes that occurred afterward. Happily married since 1989 to Jack, 13 years older with five grown children, Heffernan saw her relationship with her husband grow even stronger as he became her caregiver during a lengthy convalescence. Heffernan gave up her high-pressure job as a corporate training executive, and she and Jack moved permanently from Cambridge to their peaceful Maine vacation home. The author's enforced period of inactivity forged links with Jack's children, who had formerly been distant from their father's new wife, and she became closer to her sisters. Although her heart has been severely damaged and a transplant may eventually be needed, Heffernan nicely describes how she has found peace of mind and a new pleasure in daily living because of this unexpected brush with death.

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From Library Journal

At the age of 44, Heffernan suffered a massive heart attack that resulted in cardiomyopathy and ventricular tachycardia, with only half her heart still functional. Only her quick recognition of her symptoms, prompt medical treatment, and the availability of specialized medical services and personnel saved her life. This engrossing account of her initial battle for survival shows the depths of human emotion and strength in times of crisis, for both the victim and her family. The struggle to make rational medical decisions, overcoming ICU- and medication-induced psychosis, the vital role of family support, and the emotional roller coaster of both patient and family are touchingly documented. The following year of convalescence, moving from beliefs of health to acceptance of disability, is emotively portrayed. Heffernan's fight to regain some quality of life for herself and her family will resonate with all persons dealing with chronic illness and inspire them to find their own blessings in life. A moving story in the face of sudden catastrophe; recommended for all health collections. Janet M. Schneider, James A. Haley Veterans' Hosp., Tampa, FL

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Donna Wood:

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