

A Review of

Letters for Lizzie

A Story of Love, Friendship and a Battle for Life

By James O'Donnell

Reviewed by Jim Gleason, heart recipient



As patient, family, or friend affected by the challenge of a transplant, do you feel alone, that your life is on a roller coaster, that you are the first one to ever face the life events around you? Reading this book, **Letters for Lizzie**, may help you put life in perspective. Readers may feel their own challenges less severe after reading Jim's life facing a family move with a drastic cut in pay, his young wife's death sentence with cancer, then her need for a heart transplant from treatments that stayed her cancer.

But that is only the surface story. Theirs is much deeper with roots in Jim's own rediscovered faith in a loving God who seems to be facing their family with trials that bring the biblical story of Job to mind. Their faith and those trials result in a roller coaster ride that speaks to the strength of human endurance and resiliency that should come as inspiration in sharing their hope, frustration, optimism, smiles, tears and fears.

Letters' format is interesting as their story is told through thirteen of Jim's letters, each prefaced with his "looking backs" describing their life situations when writing that letter. The letters are family news updates to their many friends "back East" along with an ongoing appeal for supportive prayer. Through them, you share Jim's emotions and innermost conflicts as he deals with the trials. Leading a life of goodness he expected God's support, not such health trials with his beloved Lizzie, mother of their three boys, aged 6 to 18, who are each going through their own growth challenges. Those of us who have gone through the transplant challenge are often heard to say that we feel our supporters actually go through the harder part of it, and when you hear Lizzie's attitude, you get that feeling here too. I found myself wanting to hear more from Lizzie in this story, to get the fuller picture of their life's experience together through all this. While she does write in one of the later letters, that contribution was all too brief for me.

I enjoyed reading **Letters**, hitting home as it did with my own personal heart transplant and cancer survivor experiences. This short book (about two hours to read its 203 pages) is well written and offers surprisingly clear explanations of medical procedures they experienced. Through photos on the final pages you even get to "see" the family you have grown to know so intimately.

But let me offer you with a caution. After Lizzie's successful but challenging heart transplant, Jim gives us a summary from eight years later. In that we see the reality that some face, sailing choppy waters despite their new organ. His family is still intact, Lizzie is alive and cancer free, but more medical challenges had to be overcome. Theirs is real life. My own experience is that for most, post transplant life is more positive. If you are lying in a hospital bed awaiting your life saving transplant, such reality may not be what you need just now. Maybe your loved ones could read just the letters to you, saving that final chapter until later when you know your own outcomes and can put this into perspective. Focus instead on the four hard learned survival factors Jim shares on page 57, or better yet, recall the surgeon's comment as he read in Lizzie's charts something he had never seen recorded before: "...the patient's smiling!" From the Introduction: "May

these letters give you hope amidst your darkest fear. May you find strength in connecting with others who will love you at your worst hour; and may you, in the strange darkness that life can send, find the outstretched hand of the most powerful Unseen.” These may be your key lessons to take away from this reading.

(note: 732 total words on this page - 93 words in this note, the bio and the titles = 639 words in the review article itself)

Brief bio:

Jim Gleason works in IT telephony engineering management for Unisys Corporation, in Blue Bell, PA. He received his heart transplant in Oct. '94 and is an accomplished public speaker and author of his own book, **A Gift from the Heart**.