Healing Reads: The Year's Five Best Books

Health and medicine books tend to be long on advice and how-to, and short on compelling narrative and literary merit.

But several new books this year proved to be welcome exceptions, from a lyrical history of the human heart to an absorbing tale of one of the country's toughest inner-city hospitals. Here are my top-five picks.

Your Medical Mind: How to Decide What Is Right for You

by Jerome Groopman and Pamela Hartzband

This book by physicians who happen to be married uses compelling patient stories to show how people make treatment decisions when evidence and advice is often-conflicting.

The authors suggest strategies for calculating one's own priorities. They advocate shared medical decision-making, in which doctor and patient review information about the risks and benefits of any given treatment and then customize care according to the patient's values and preferences.

The best choice, of course, may differ from patient to patient. Someone who worries about a heart attack may decide to take a statin for high cholesterol, while another who is concerned about side effects of the medication may opt to improve diet and exercise and forego the drug.

The most important thing, the doctors conclude, is to understand your own approach to health before entering a doctor's office or a hospital so you can chose the right treatment for the right reasons.