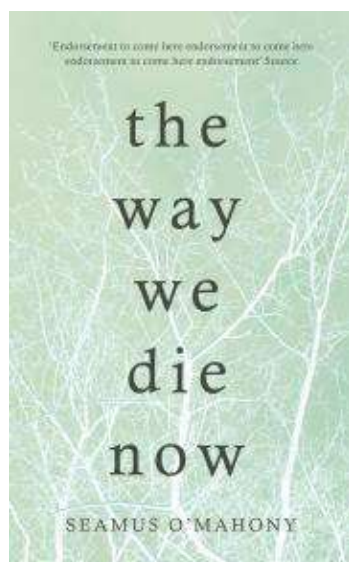


**MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT**

BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



The way we die now (2016)

O'Mahony S.

Head of Zeus, 2016.

320pp.

ISBN 9781784974268.

£14.99.

Average star rating 3.6 (out of 5)

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This book takes a 'real' look at cancer and palliative aspects of care. The author takes a very plain and realistic approach to the subject.

I might recommend it; it will depend on the reader's perspective on life. It is a rather refreshing book – some authors shy away from being so honest and upfront – but the author's target swings more towards a professional audience.

Volunteer/student (26-35) (February 2017)

This book will be most useful for any doctor, nurse, social worker, or carer who has to care for a patient not only those with cancer but also frail elderly people who are acutely ill and need hospital admission. It is about how people die in the acute hospital setting, often in noisy wards, which can be chaotic, and with little privacy.

It is realistic, sometimes despairing but always compassionate. The author is a consultant in bowel and liver medicine (gastroenterology) as well as admitting acutely ill patients when on call. He rightly praises what palliative medicine can achieve in symptom control but is forthright in criticising over-treatment when the outlook is poor. He brings to the argument wide reading and deep understanding. There are many references to doctors' own experiences of dying as well as patients' experiences. There are many judicious quotes from the literature and a very generous bibliography but frustratingly there is no index. The book itself is beautifully produced and a green ribbon bookmark is a nice touch.

I am not sure how useful a patient will find this book, but I think it should be widely read so that people can understand the day-to-day difficulties of providing dignified end of life care in busy general hospitals.

Retired GP (October 2016)



This book is not cancer specific but does have one chapter and many references to cancer. It describes the ways people die and the attitudes / beliefs surrounding this compared to previously. It may be useful for those who are terminally ill and can face the subject – many will not want to.

It flows reasonably well but sometimes the words are not the author's own. He often states: In the opinion of (name) who wrote about (name 2) death. There are a few uncommon words, such as thanalogist. The book is a good size with no distracting graphics on the cover. The text (font) is easy to read and there are no distracting photos or diagrams. There is a glossary followed by a comprehensive bibliography.

Most the book is good apart from the quotes and reminiscences. Near the end, the author writes about the death of Alexander the Great; this is not interesting and not relevant. If the title was 'How people die through the ages', then it would be okay. Also, I am old fashioned and don't like to watch or read anything with strong language. At the bottom of page 6 there are two swear words, one of which only has the first letter. I would prefer the author to say, "he swore at me calling me a disgusting name". As I say, this is personal – I'm not part of modern society!

I might recommend it; it would depend on their attitude and beliefs, i.e. denial or acceptance of dying. It has helped me to understand why feelings as a carer and how the 'system' works are sometimes totally misguided. I think, overall, more facts relating to the title instead of quotes from others and stories from his past would be better. Whilst some of these can be relevant I would prefer something more about what happens – the actual process and what happens afterwards.

Macmillan volunteer (56-65) (February 2017)

The author is an experienced medic and his book is well written and very well produced but I didn't find any solutions or comfort in it. I wonder if the whole book is not an extended essay deploring how increased medical technology, the expectations of patients and their relatives often misinformed by the scenes they see on TV, and the current insistence on safety, control, and lack of trust in authority, all lead towards over treatment at the end of life.

Living with breast cancer (Over 75) (February 2017)

This book is most useful for deciding when enough is enough. It would be useful for the government to read and those who are against assisted suicide. For others, it will depend on how much you really want to know about terminal diagnosis. It would have been more interesting if the examples he uses were from the UK; most are from the USA. It is easy to understand and includes a glossary but jumps backwards and forwards. The cover is appealing and masks the brutal honesty of the subject matter.

O'Mahony gives a very honest account of how people are cared for and die in hospital. He is very honest: "Perhaps if I wasn't a doctor, I might even be a supporter of assisted suicide". I might recommend it but would have to tell potential readers that it is not a book for the faint hearted and parts could upset them. Sections should be put into a much smaller book and sent to everyone involved in the care of patients and to all those against assisted suicide. Watching a loved one die from a long and slow illness where they are stripped of all dignity and have no quality of life in the last few weeks and days can stay with you for ever. I can only hope that if I am ever diagnosed with a terminal illness I have an excellent amicus mortis looking after me.

Hospice volunteer (46-55) (January 2017)



I like the look of this book and the title made me want to read it, but I found it hard to deal with the unrelentingly pessimistic tone. As someone much nearer in years to the end, rather than the beginning, of life, I was hoping it would be a more philosophical read. The main message that I came away with is that death is inevitable and that a 'good' death very unlikely! It wouldn't be suitable for anyone dealing with a terminal diagnosis, but it would be useful for health professionals.

It is beautifully produced. It is so nice to read a hardback that is well designed, with a simple, calming, unfussy jacket in a lovely textured paper. It even has a matching satin bookmark. There are many technical terms but there is a useful glossary.

These covers hold many difficult truths that may not be what everyone wishes to hear. It is a challenging book, unsentimental, brutally honest at times and therefore not for the faint-hearted. The author recounts the experiences of death and dying of some well-known people but his tone here as elsewhere in the book is frequently cynical and harshly critical. It is, perhaps, for these reasons that I found myself unable to engage with the subject. The book is certainly not meant as an entertaining read. The author does not forward many answers regarding either what constitutes a good death or how to go about ensuring one, but the discussion is interesting at times and does make one think. It forces the reader to address this most difficult and uncomfortable of subjects and, as the author says, 'this is not a book of consolation'.

Breast cancer patient (66-75) (February 2017)

Although the author makes several references to cancer and its treatment, this book is more suited to the public than to people coping with cancer. It focuses on the medicalisation of death and the need for society to accept that death is inevitable. It is wide ranging, covering topics such as celebrity deaths, case studies, public enquiries into hospital failings, philosophers' thoughts on death and dying, and the role of religion in death and dying. Taken together, the chapters weave a coherent and well-researched account of death and dying in the West in the 21st century.

It is easy to understand, but dry at times. The author explains technical terms in the text and glossary. There is also a bibliography. The cover design is neither appealing nor unappealing. It does not stand out or compel you to pick up the book. It seems that the title wording has been stretched to fill the cover. The paper quality is good, and the typeface and size make the text easy to read. There are no illustrations.

I like that the author draws on real-life case studies that he has encountered in his work as a gastroenterologist; many are interesting and thought provoking. However, he details situations in which dying patients are exposed to excessive and hopeless medical interventions and seems to cast a critical eye on those who offer or accept these interventions. He refers to the need for us all to accept that death is inevitable but makes little suggestion as to how we should come to accept death gracefully.

Relative of someone with breast and lung cancer (26-35) (October 2016)



I don't feel that this book has been useful to me in terms of living with cancer. I'm not sensitive about cancer or mortality but someone who is may find it too much. There are lots of examples of how different people have died and many are not a pleasant thought. The book tries to demystify death but in doing so could scare more people as to the true nature of the final days. Understanding death in this honest way is a good thing, but not everyone will agree, and I would hesitate to recommend it.

I usually read books quickly, even those with such a difficult subject matter or that I'm not sure I'm interested in but are written well. I was interested initially in what this book might say but it took me a long time to finish it. This is not due to the subject matter but rather how the book has been constructed. I found it difficult to follow and lacking in any real logic. Although the chapters are headed, and you find the reason for the chapter heading within the chapter, it still isn't a logical order. The chapters are messy and repetitive. There are many short case studies of how people died or wanted to cope with death. The author drifts from one point to another clumsily, with little obvious reason for the connections between different cases.

I did not spot factual inaccuracies. However, the book is very much a long-stated opinion of a doctor. Granted, it is an educated opinion as he has worked in and around chronic illness and death. However, it is all opinion. The evidence behind the opinion appears to be a wealth of case studies of historical figures and patients. Case studies can be useful, and I can see how you would be able to form an opinion based on them. However, it is an opinion of the author himself and his interpretation of the different cases.

I found it easy to understand in some ways, but not in others. The main reason I found it difficult to understand comes back to the lack of flow or logic. The author refers throughout to the concept of the 'tame death' as if that is a key theme, but there is a lack of flow to this theme. He introduces it well, but then merely dips into it on occasion trying to suggest if it is relevant to cases or not. But this makes the book

more confused as I had to keep looking back to the initial comments on the 'tame death' to see why he was using the term. I didn't always agree with him.

My initial impression of the book is that the design has a 'classic' style, some may call it old fashioned. The quality of the book is pleasing. The use of the shade of green is reminiscent of hospitals and hospices.

I like the idea of the book and some of the content is worth a read. It dispels some perceptions about death that I find useful to know and understand. I don't think I ever thought that death was as dignified as we see in films, but I was surprised about the statistics of the location of people when they die. In a way, I am glad I read the book because of the case examples and the way that it has tried to give some sense of reality about what it is like to die in the modern age. However, I found it quite bleak. In raising the issue of death and stating the many ways in which it is awful, the author has not really provided any conclusion other than "It is as difficult to advise someone how to die as it is to advise them how to live". This conclusion comes very suddenly. It's the last sentence but I don't feel that the author has prepared us properly for it. Whilst all his cases and commentary do indeed point us to this conclusion, he has not handled our arrival at this conclusion well.

There is a great degree of generalisation, e.g. he seems to be suggesting that all cases of assisted suicide are deluded. He has referred to a couple of medical conditions in support of his case, but he has failed to consider that there may well be other conditions that differ from these and may provide a different perspective. He also assumes in coming to his opinions that everyone would have the same view of the world and how they want to die. This may be an educated guess based on the patients he has seen but it cannot be extrapolated to the entire population.

His style leads us to assume that he is going to offer a nugget of advice to try to limit this bleakness. However, he doesn't. That would be ok if the style of the book was leading us that way. Unfortunately, the arrogant style is suggestive of someone who knows how to do these things well, someone who has seen how it happens badly and can clearly see ways to try to avoid those things. He alludes to this in the chapter where he talks about his experience of the PEG feeding tube: he refers to looking at each case and often recommending that the PEG feeding tube was not going to be a helpful solution. Throughout the book, he refers to people's perceptions of death and the need to have any treatment option available no matter what, or to try to control death. Unfortunately, he then seems to lose his ability to offer a similar suggestion in these cases as he does with the PEG tubes, such as looking at each case and saying, "is this really the best thing for this person at this point in time?". I think this is what he is trying to say, but he lacks clarity in doing so if that is the case.

I really wanted to like this book and say that I'd recommend it to others to try to help to demystify the process of dying but I feel a little frustrated by it. A discussion about death is incredibly important and as a society we have created a veil around death that has created mystery and has not prepared us for death very well. A book that tells us about the reality of death and the final stages of illness could have been incredibly useful. Unfortunately, the author's treatment of the material is not to my taste and I found his style arrogant and illogical. I can't recommend it generally but if I knew the potential reader, then I might recommend it with a caveat.

After completing my review, I looked online to find out what others thought. The book's high rating surprised me until I read the detailed reviews. A few of the reviewers admitted that they had been given the book and one even admits that this was subject to providing a 'fair review'. In addition, most of the positive reviews were from members of the health profession. I'll be interested to see whether the positive comments continue across all reader groups or if this book's appeal is limited.

Living with ovarian cancer, 36-45 (November 2016)

This book is not suitable for those with cancer as some parts are distressing. It is a very disjointed book. There are no clear links between chapters or even within; they can be read in any order and it is very difficult to gain momentum. The glossary is scanty, and it is difficult to understand some concepts. The cover is nice and simple, the paper is good quality and the typeface is nice. There are no illustrations.

I persevered with this book for this review, but it did not engage me. I found it very difficult to follow and don't understand the true meaning underlying this information. Most of it is narratives given third hand with no clear links. It is not what I was expecting.

This book is relevant only to healthcare professionals or to someone studying death and dying. There is an abundance of references to other reading material throughout, but you would be better just to read those instead. I have read this thoroughly but have no lasting information to retain. a book that can easily be forgotten or maybe should be overlooked.

Healthcare professional (46-55) (October 2016)

Further information

Why does Macmillan Cancer Support review books?

We use reviews to help us compile a list of suggested cancer books, the [Macmillan Core Book List](#). Cancer information centres and public libraries can use this list to select appropriate and relevant books for people affected by cancer.

We add reviews to the [Directory of information materials for people affected by cancer](#) so that people affected by cancer can see what others in a similar situation think about a book. You can also see details of all the books reviewed in the [Book reviews listing](#), which also has links to all the reviews.

We recruit most of our reviewers through the [Volunteering Village](#) and the [Cancer Voices Network](#), people affected by cancer who have signed up to help Macmillan Cancer Support in a number of ways. Volunteers are a vital part of our book review process; since 2007, over 1,500 Macmillan volunteers have written more than 6,000 reviews of over 500 different books.

If you are a health professional who would like to review books for us, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

Information and support for people affected by cancer

If you are looking for support to help you live life with cancer, you may wish to contact one of [Macmillan's cancer information and support services](#). Or you can call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00** (Mon-Fri 9am–8pm). We have an interpreting service in over 200 languages. Just state, in English, the language you wish to use. If you are deaf or hard of hearing you can use textphone no 0808 808 0121 or Text Relay.

You can also email us using the [website enquiry form](#). Alternatively, [visit our website](#).

Feedback

If you have any comments, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

Being told ‘you have cancer’ can affect so much more than your health – it can also affect your family, your job, even your ability to pay the bills. But you’re still you. We get that. And, after over 100 years of helping people through cancer, we get what’s most important: that you’re treated as a person, not just a patient.

It’s why we’ll take the time to understand you and all that matters to you, so we can help you get the support you need to take care of your health, protect your personal relationships and deal with money and work worries.

We’re here to help you find your best way through from the moment of diagnosis, so you’re able to live life as fully as you can. For information, support or just someone to talk to, call 0808 808 00 00 or visit macmillan.org.uk

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