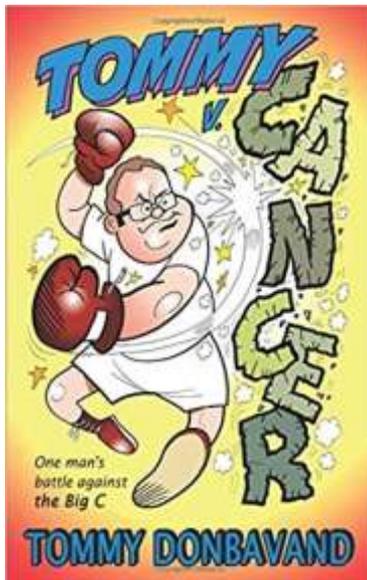


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BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Tommy v cancer: one man's battle against the big C (2017)

Donbavand T.

Independently published, 2017.

324pp.

ISBN 9781521903681

Average star rating 4.4 (out of 5)

<http://www.tommyvcancer.com/>

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As a survivor of stage 4 throat cancer, with no natural voice, I found this a difficult and emotional read in places. It brought back painful memories, but I am glad I read it. It is useful for living with the after effects as well as during treatment.

Living with the effects of throat and colon cancer (66-75) (September 2018)

I was drawn to this book as my father is a throat cancer patient. The book is certainly informative, and Tommy has a great gift of injecting humour into the often 'scarier' aspects of cancer and its treatment. It helped me enormously to understand the struggles my father faces daily, physically and mentally.

Tommy describes his cancer journey from the start, from how he persisted with his GP, to diagnosis and treatment. Everything is explained very well and in the simplest terms. I didn't expect to laugh out loud, but he is very direct and to the point! There are no images, but Tommy does explain things graphically at times.

I couldn't put it down; I wanted to know what happened and kept turning the pages. Tommy tells his story in such a way that you are rooting for him and his family all the way. He is honest and open and shares family stories that he needn't have, making him even more endearing and intriguing. It really resonated how 'real' his story is and how he doesn't hide his feelings towards his cancer and treatment. He talks a lot about his battle with depression and how it creeps up on him again during treatment. That was difficult to read as you can feel his raw emotion and how it affects him.

This book helped me a lot to understand my father's cancer journey. He's not a big talker and it can be difficult at times for him to express his feelings and emotions. Tommy's story mirrors everything that my dad has been through – radiotherapy for six weeks, chemotherapy sessions – and how, like my dad, he missed his last session due to pneumonia and sepsis. Sometimes I felt I was reading my dad's story, down to having a feeding tube in his stomach when he was unable to eat or swallow.

I'm still rooting for Tommy and his family, you just want him to win!

Daughter of throat cancer patient (36-45) (August 2018)

This will be useful for anyone recently diagnosed with, or undergoing treatment for, throat cancer and who wants to know exactly what to expect, especially from their treatment – it is a very honest account. It begins when the author first has symptoms, which are misdiagnosed as mumps, right through diagnosis and treatment, up until he finishes his chemo and radiotherapy and begins the remainder of his recovery.

It is easy to understand and straightforward to read. There are several mistakes, which normally would really bother me, but it was initially a blog and then transferred into a book with updates along the way. Considering what the author was going through whilst writing his blog, I think he can be forgiven the typos!

The cover design is a cartoon depiction of the author. If I saw this book in a bookshop or online, I would pick it up to see what it was all about. It's a nice length – just over 300 pages and split into manageable chapters. Despite the topic, the author writes mostly with good humour, which makes an enjoyable read.

I love this book and wouldn't hesitate to recommend it. Despite the topic and graphic content, it is written in a positive way and isn't a depressing read. The only bits I don't like are when he talks about the many books he has written. There is a fair amount of this throughout, with pages at the end detailing them all. As they are for children and teenagers, this was of no interest to me. I appreciate that this is huge part of his life, so obviously, he is going to write about it, but I could have happily done without it.

Mum had breast cancer and I am a volunteer at a cancer centre offering support to those affected by all types of cancer (36-45) (August 2018)

Tommy describes his aggressive treatment in a clear and relatable way and provides a lot of information about chemotherapy and radiotherapy that will be useful to patients and carers. He also shows the support provided by the health service before, during, and after treatment, and the effects of cancer on mental health.

The cover is artistic and entertaining and portrays exactly how Tommy is in the book. The layout is simple and easy to follow with short chapters, and the book quality and typeface is of an excellent standard. Because of the structure of the book (it is based on his blog), Tommy covers his journey from diagnosis, through treatment, into remission in a logical and easy-to-follow way. It is easy to understand throughout; Tommy uses language that is non-medical and offers clear and accurate descriptions of complex items. At no point was I unclear about the meaning of his writing.

Tommy is brutally honest about the highs and lows of his journey and not afraid to say things as they are – he does not sugar-coat any part of his or his family's experience. At times, his honesty can be a little hard to read for someone who is dealing with cancer (patient or carer), but he manages to keep his sense of humour throughout. An excellent insight to what he and his family went through in the months following his diagnosis and highly recommended to anyone affected by throat cancer; it could help them prepare for what they may experience on their own journey.

Carer and daughter of someone with throat cancer (26-35) (June 2018)

Tommy Donbavand has been through one heck of an ordeal and uses his innate skill as an author to chronicle his journey from early symptoms – misdiagnosed, incredibly – to diagnosis and subsequent, radical, treatment. Any patient or carer will find this book a great tool to help them plan for the tortuous weeks and months ahead. Family and friends supporting someone about to have treatment should also read it.

It is based on his blog, so runs chronologically, in bite-sized chapters. The print, font and layout are clean and legible. It is incredibly easy to read, and Tommy gives clear, concise interpretations of medical jargon and procedures, while managing to target a wide audience with his clever use of plain language. There might be regional differences in Gold Standard treatments, but I don't think there are any inaccuracies. Some of the repetition in the blog could have been omitted, and occasionally, I would prefer a more adult tone. The cover reflects Tommy's light touch and his writing style. It is a well-balanced, smooth-flowing story, which gives a sense, at the end, that reader and author have become friends; it reminds me a little of Bill Bryson in his heyday. I like the short chapters, backstory descriptions, and the humour and wit coupled with a no-holds-barred narrative. Tommy's tone is always self-deprecating but assured. His experience as a writer of young people's fiction shines through.

There may be little emotional support for readers, but this diary of radical treatment for inoperable cancer is an invaluable guide for families. Health professionals might use it to adjust or develop their techniques and approaches to working with head and neck cancer patients. If Tommy's treatment is the UK Gold Standard for this cancer, it will be very useful; even after that it will remain an epic story of one man's struggle to stay alive and support his family in the face of immense adversity. It is very brave attempt to show how a good medical team, supportive family, and great strength of character can face down cancer, albeit temporarily in Tommy's case. For he now awaits treatment for lung cancer. With energy drained and resources dwindling, Tommy is facing his toughest test yet. Will he survive this time around? I certainly hope so – I want him to write the sequel, I want to review "Tommy v. cancer: round 2" in the very near future. And I have emailed him to tell him that!

Cancer of the tongue, neck dissection and full laryngectomy (56-65) (May 2018)

This is a truly remarkable piece of writing. It's not a literary masterpiece, but that's what's truly great about it – it's an open and honest account from someone in the throes of cancer. It comes from the heart and shows the depth of progression from a downward and an upward spiral. Tommy takes you on an emotional journey and you find yourself rooting for him and his family, wishing for a full recovery.

It is most useful for the brutal honesty of the pain caused by cancer and its treatment, along with the emotional rollercoaster of dealing with daily life. It makes us feel part of the journey and allows us to understand and recognise fully the harshness and the physical and emotional ups and downs of cancer. Anyone living with cancer, or who knows someone in its midst, can learn a lot about what to expect and the kind of emotional support required.

It is very easy to understand. The diary format makes it very personable. The author considers the impact on others as well as himself. The subject matter is clearly very

harsh and emotionally heart wrenching. The book is aesthetically appealing and the short, sharp entries make it easy to read and follow. The book feels as it should, one person's account of how cancer has affected him and those around him, and the fact that it looks and feels that way means the author has achieved his goal.

I wish I had read it whilst my father was alive, to have had a better understanding of what it was like for him – the results, treatment, and the everyday battles. Living with someone in that situation means that I recognised some aspects, but this brought it to life and considered aspects of the illness that I didn't fully comprehend at the time. It has made me recognise just how brave my father was. He never complained, he just carried on and kept the pain and anguish private. If I had read this book during this time, I would have been more empathetic to his everyday struggles.

Daughter of patient who died from throat cancer (46-55) (April 2018)

This is a very useful book for all aspects of living with this type of cancer for anyone with an interest in it. It is a truthful account of what it is like from day one. Tommy describes in detail how he is feeling, how it affects everyone around him, and how he and his family cope. I can relate to everything he has written, and I like the humour.

Tommy describes each stage of the side effects very well, but without being too terrifying. This type of cancer has a unique effect on the body, a lot of things happen to you that you don't expect. Tommy tells his story with a positive voice and it is a very easy read. The font is a good size and the chapters are written in small chunks.

It is a good read for anyone who wishes to know what it is like to have throat cancer and deal with treatment to this part of the body. It is a very real and truthful account, Tommy describes his life at the time very well. It is just the kind of book I was looking for when I was diagnosed. I would have found it informative and been more prepared for the nasty surprises my treatment gave me.

Tongue and neck cancer patient who is now clear of the cancer due to operation and treatment (46-55) (February 2018)

Fantastic information for anyone going through diagnosis and treatment and its after effects. Tommy deals with everything logically and truthfully, sometimes painfully so (there is usually a warning when things are about to get very graphic and detailed).

The cover draws you in and is an apt representation of the style of the book. It is as light-hearted a description of a very painful journey as it is possible to write. Many paragraphs have the reader laughing out loud, followed by intensely painful feelings of sadness. The typeface is ok; I didn't really notice it because the story Tommy is telling is so brilliantly written. I love his wit and humility, and his very personal style.

I applaud Tommy for his candid, heartfelt, and humorous, style of writing about a very difficult subject. His intense feelings of hope and sorrow were pretty much always because he felt that he was letting his family down, he never felt sorry for himself. I recommend it for anyone with throat cancer if they don't mind reading about quite a

rough ride, and they are the type of person that wants the truth about their condition. Not everyone with throat cancer will have a similar journey and the author does explain in some detail his prognosis and painful treatment, which some cancer patients may not wish to know. I needed to know everything, but not everyone does.

Living life after endometrial cancer (56-65) (December 2017)

I took one look at the cover and recoiled. Not my cup of tea at all. But that changed as soon as I began to read. What an amazing book! Tommy records his cancer from the beginning to his current state. The short sections make it easy to put down and pick up, but I wanted to carry on because it is so well written, warm, honest and engaging. The language is chatty and readable with no long medical terms.

Tommy hides nothing about his cancer, how ill he was and the effect on his family, especially his children. The cancer material is interspersed with warm and lovingly told miniatures of his family – wife, children, siblings, parents – as well as his friend. The bond that unites them is so strong and so obvious that it is a pleasure to read.

So, what have I learned from this? Not to judge a book by its cover because what's inside can explain all and reveal much more. A very frank and eye-opening story that could be useful for anyone affected by a cancer experience of any nature.

Living with cancer (myelodysplastic syndrome) (October 2017)

This is a very useful insight into a cancer experience, a very upfront and honest account of treatment and side effects, including the emotional effects. Some may find this more useful than others; at times, it is an emotionally difficult read.

It is a collection of blog posts written at the time and charts Tommy's experience from start to finish in chronological order. As such, many of the blog posts are very much written "in the moment" and therefore really reflect the reality of living with cancer. It is very easy to understand, and I believe the language is appropriate. There is a slightly cartoonish style to it at times, mostly because of the front cover, which I didn't particularly like, and Tommy's writing style is not something I would normally pick up to read. However, this did not deter me from enjoying it and after the first few chapters none of that mattered because I became very invested in his journey.

I might recommend it. I really appreciate Tommy's honesty and I think he addresses some issues that others may tend to shy away from. He leaves no stone unturned and truly seems to "say it as it is". His writing style and openness enable the reader to feel they really share in his experiences and consequently feel every high and every low. However, it's not for everyone due to the difficult themes addressed and it is a very frank and honest look at the experiences of someone affected by throat cancer. Additionally, Tommy did suffer from several side effects of treatment that not everyone will necessarily experience. I would therefore exercise caution in recommending this book as I think it may cause some readers to worry excessively.

Macmillan Professional (18-25) (October 2017)



This book would be helpful for patients to understand treatment and management of symptoms and may help carers understand what the patient is going through. It is most useful for day-to-day care, especially during treatment. It is in a fairly good order, although the author does slip on and off topic, and it is easy to understand; he explains terminology throughout. Overall, it is an appealing book, although sometimes it takes on a light-hearted look.

I like the overall content and explanations; it does cover the main aspects of living with throat cancer. However, at times it felt like the author was using it as a platform for his other books. I will probably recommend it, based on the patient's personality.

Living with throat cancer and multiple myeloma (56-65) (November 2018)

This is great for someone who has finished treatment for throat cancer, and for those who cared for, or are currently caring for, a throat cancer patient. However, I wouldn't recommend it for anyone before or during treatment. I have lived through a similar cancer and treatment schedule, and found this a real, warts-and-all page turner.

It is very easy to understand. There are some spelling and grammatical errors (e.g. "know" instead of "now", "Kirsty didn't used like me using the word..."). I accept that much was written at the height of treatment, but they should have been picked up by a proof reader. Remove these errors and it would be a five-star book. The cover suggests a light-hearted look at cancer, which in parts it is, but some parts are graphic and dark (the author promises honesty), and the cover doesn't fit with this.

At the right time, this is great. I found it a page turner but that may be because I am now in remission or because it helped me reflect on my treatment, which I had not done in detail until now. Whatever the reason, I loved it. It had me crying with laughter one minute and with sadness the next. However, had I read it before or during treatment, it would have scared me. My journey was not as troublesome or painful, so it would have caused unnecessary worry. Anyone reading it before or during treatment should keep in mind that it is one man's journey – no two people have the same experience. Tommy promised to be completely honest and he has been true to his word. What this book does do is give the reader an insight into the many, and frequent, mood swings that a patient can experience. It highlights the constant worries about the future, what effect your illness is having on your loved ones, if you are winning this fight and, above all else, will it come back?

I recommend it for throat cancer patients after treatment. It is also useful for people who are caring, or have cared, for a throat cancer patient, to help them understand what the patient is going through, why they have such mood changes and why they are constantly tired. Strap yourself in and prepare for a rollercoaster ride of emotions.

Evictor of HPV soft pallet and throat cancer (46-55) (February 2018)

This book has evolved from an original blog by Tommy Donbavand, a successful children's author. Tommy puts his writing skills to effective use in this account of his treatment for stage four throat cancer. He has a light and humorous style and I think that readers will like him – and his family – as the story unfolds. He describes his treatment in detail, including nourishment via a PEG and concurrent chemotherapy and radiotherapy. His treatment seems brutal, but appropriate considering the extreme nature of his condition. He is warned by his consultant that it will make him feel very poorly, and that is certainly the case. Despite this, he keeps a sense of humour and attempts to drive himself to appointments until he feels too ill to do so. He devotes some chapters to describing members of his family, and one chapter is written by his friend, Barry. I found these less interesting but acknowledge that it was important for Tommy to write a tribute to people who mean a lot to him. Thankfully, the story ends on a very positive note, but the journey is undoubtedly gruelling.

It is very easy to understand. Tommy does not write in a childish way but does allow his sense of humour to show, even at the most challenging times. I didn't notice any inaccuracies except that he wrote "vocal chords" instead of "vocal cords". The front cover shows a cartoon figure with boxing gloves on, swinging a punch. The artwork is presumably done by the author's colleague – Tommy writes for the Beano comic, and this cartoon resembles that artwork. I was disappointed that there is no photograph of the author. Somehow, a photo brings an author even more to life.

Tommy's writing skills are much in evidence. He writes with a sense of humour, even when his own life is in a dark place. This is to his credit. I disliked two minor things: (i) that Tommy (and his sister) took great offence when someone on an online forum questioned his use of the word "battle" when applied to cancer. This is a subject that people with cancer often discuss, and the person who questioned him did so respectfully and did not make any personal comments. He certainly did not deserve to be called a "troll"; (ii) I was saddened that the author did not want to know what sort of cancer he had, despite researching all sorts of relevant things and writing a book for others where this subject was a central feature. He eventually had to ask the medical professionals as he was obliged to fill in a form that required this information.

It is a truthful account, but because the author experienced a great deal of pain and discomfort and spent much time in bed, I am unsure as to how useful it will be to someone about to start treatment, especially as everyone's treatment is unique.

Friend. Carer. Former health professional (56-65) (September 2017)



The personal insight of the author into his experience of living through a cancer diagnosis and treatment is helpful and informative. The impact on professional life and how that can make you feel is well covered and explained. Living with the physical impact of radiotherapy on the ability to talk and function previously is illustrated well by the author's descriptions of how this affected his occupation, which was based on delivering workshops in schools.

The timeline between the cancer diagnosis and the date of the book publication is fairly clear, although the inclusion of parts of the author's daily blog (written when the events described were happening), and subsequent reflections on changes since then made it a difficult read. It was hard to make sense of what his thoughts were at the time of writing the book versus writing the blog. The book feels like a commentary on the blog and website rather than being a standalone work.

The book is clear and has plenty of warnings about potentially distressing content about the author's depression, although what he wrote didn't strike me as needing such warnings. The illustration on the cover doesn't resonate with me. I think it is designed to appeal to his existing fan base rather than potential new readers.

It comes across as a genuine attempt by one man to explain his perspective of cancer and try to provide an income stream in the face of debilitating changes to his body that affected his ability to resume his former career. However, the mixing of extracts from the blog with more recent comments and updates is confusing and irritating. I dislike the sloppiness of not making it clear what is a blog post and what is an update or comment from the time the book is written. It would be clearer if the blog extracts were in boxes, for example. I also dislike the promotion of the author's fundraising page (pp. 45-46); this doesn't add anything of value to the book.

Living with stage 4 tonsil cancer (56-65) (June 2019)



I found it difficult to establish who would be the suitable target audience for this book. When writing for others it is necessary to focus on who would find it informative and/or interesting or be able to relate and associate, especially when diagnosed and setting off on that long, tedious, frightening journey of cancer treatment. Think about the aims and motives for writing and what message the writer is trying to get across. This blog account would be for someone who would be able to accept the progress of the illness and treatment with little emotion or may wish to hide that emotion by a kind of machoism. Can we really do that? So, in my opinion, this is not useful.

It covers all aspects of living with cancer: the patient, his emotions and the effects on his working, personal and social life; the feelings of his family, especially his son who also copes with a different life challenge; and the practicalities of transport, running the household, shopping, and meeting appointments. He shows how supportive his friends and extended family are, to the point of taking over the blog when he was unable to do it. Tommy was obviously hit very hard by his diagnosis, who isn't? He goes through the various emotions but doesn't seem able to handle them even with the support of a loving family and the expertise of health professionals. By his own admission, his depressive state has continued and the 'fighting' goes on.

The account does seem to be in a logical order. I don't think there are any factual inaccuracies as such in the process and treatment. However, parking at the hospital became a real issue at one point and I question why he was not issued with a blue badge. The NHS suffers a fairly scathing report, with emphasis on clerical errors,

examples of bad practice, and waiting times for example. My experience of a hospital treating a stage 4 patient is that they did their best, were understanding, and went beyond the call of duty. There were times when we had to help ourselves and not expect everything handed to us on a plate as I feel Tommy did.

Not really being able to ascertain the intended audience I cannot comment on the appropriateness of the language. I can only say that it would not be the ideal book for me. Tommy says he wanted to be open and honest and hold nothing back. I found it raw, brash, bold and insensitive. At times, the content is glib and thoughtless. On a positive note, procedures and treatments are explained simply and this is shown in how the process is explained to his son.

The layout and typeface are good and easy to read from that point of view. The cover illustration gives an indication of the type of content, with its bold colours and a cartoon-style illustration of the author. I must take issue with the tone of the author in my experience of caring for someone with cancer and having friends with cancer. Living with any kind of cancer is living with the unknown but, as with anything unknown, there is always hope. There is no hope in this 'blog'. It is very negative in thought and attitude. It became apparent that if anything could go wrong it would. Because the book is based on his blog, the author is describing his immediate thoughts and without further analysis has portrayed them as terrifying, maybe more than necessary.

I found this book very frustrating to read, I could not identify with the experience of my husband and I, so found it difficult to adjust. The book does not flow, and Tommy's emotions bounce around all over the place. This is surely not healthy to expect other cancer patients or their carers to interpret and analyse. I could not identify with Tommy's response to his emotions or how he handled them. There is nothing I particularly like.

I dislike the negative responses, thoughts and attitude of a man who felt he was a victim. It is hard to hard to live with cancer and to cope with all that goes with it, but help is out there to understand the disease, the treatment, the process, and to help with daily living and relationships. I dislike how on one occasion an online argument erupted in effect 'telling' people how to cope rather than allowing space for this to happen according to the individual.

I did not find this book useful at all and I think many readers would become more frightened than they may already be. There should be a health warning with it. I would certainly not recommend it unless they are a larger-than-life character with gloves on and ready to brush over the emotional responses, with the brashness and what some may feel is humour. Be aware, NOTHING is hidden and in some cases the mind has run riot. Remember everyone is different. There may be a small audience who could cope with this book, but seven years on I find it difficult.

Caring for someone with oesophageal cancer (66-75) (April 2019)

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.

We're here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we're right there with you.

For information, support or just someone to talk to, call 0808 808 00 00 or visit macmillan.org.uk

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