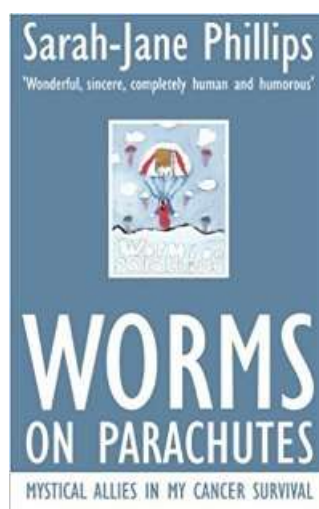


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# BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



**Worms on parachutes. Mystical allies in my cancer survival (2013)**

Phillips SJ.  
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform,  
2013.  
246pp.  
ISBN 9781482058116.

**Average star rating 4.6 (out of 5)**

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This is an easy read, a touching story, particularly relevant for anyone considering surgery as part of their treatment for breast cancer. It is most useful for the impact on family, and on the patient, especially if surgery is an option. It is easy to understand with very clear, simple and appropriate language and arranged in short chapters in a logical sequence. The intriguing title is explained in the book.

I like how factual and honest and direct Sarah-Jane is; she doesn't pull any punches, describing clearly the physical and emotional impact of cancer and its treatment on her life.

The final stage of Sarah-Jane's journey to overcome the physical and emotional trauma of breast cancer was to run a marathon. Her description of the difficult preparation for and running the London marathon is truly inspiring to those with or affected by cancer or even anyone considering their first marathon. Many people living with cancer will also be inspired by Sarah-Jane's regime of diet and exercise (to be as strong as she could be for major surgical operations) to consider doing the same for themselves. I recommend it to those considering surgery and especially anyone feeling that they will not be strong enough to cope with treatment.

#### **My wife has secondary breast cancer (56-65) (October 2019)**

This is a fantastic book for anyone touched by cancer. Sarah-Jane gives an honest and open account of her cancer journey; I found it uplifting and inspirational and it could certainly help patients and carers alike.

It's a lovely book, easy to understand and identify with. The font is quite large, perfect for me, and the chapters are nice and short and manageable for my short attention span. It held my interest and I didn't want to put it down. I love the way Sarah-Jane writes and her honest approach to the challenges and struggles.

I really loved reading this book and feel it has helped me with understanding some of my feelings around my cancer diagnosis and treatment. I also I feel it has helped me come to terms with the ongoing position that a cancer diagnosis brings. Highly recommend this fantastic book!

#### **Breast cancer patient (46-55) (September 2019)**

I found this book very easy to read and relate to; I felt the same as the author and it was emotional both times I read it. The story format is excellent as you can follow the author's experience through treatment, including the preventative surgery that she had. It explains the different types of reconstruction and what to expect and includes an unsuccessful reconstruction, so it is interesting for those having reconstruction and anyone living with, or caring for someone with, breast cancer.

It appealed to me as it is someone's personal story and I was keen to find out what the title meant. I could totally relate to how she felt numb and seemed to be looking down on herself. I didn't want to stop reading and enjoyed it the second time as much as the first. I also luckily had something to look forward to after chemo, as we went away for a night to Devon/Cornwall. This helped me get through it and helped my husband too – it was hard for him as well. So, again relatable.

I enjoyed this book the most out of the four I have reviewed as it is a story of the author's experience but still has useful information for anyone with breast cancer. I have not had reconstruction but still loved this book and could relate to it; anyone who has been through the breast cancer journey will love it and get emotional.

#### **Living with breast cancer (46-55) (August 2019)**

What an inspirational lady. This book was great from start to finish – I really enjoyed reading it. It tells the story of one woman's experience of breast cancer and she wrote it very well. The title is misleading but once you start reading, you realise that it is the name that the author gave her cancer cells. Even though it is a very tough subject to talk about, the author does it with humour and honesty. The book is just the right length and I read the whole thing in a couple of days and could not put it down. I felt close to the author and emphasised with everything that she was going through. An amazing book that I would gladly recommend. Well done to the author.

#### **Living with secondary breast cancer (46-55) (June 2019)**

If you want to understand something of what it's like to go through this journey, this is the book for you. It is a no-holds-barred, honest account of one woman's journey.

The author deliberately avoids complex words and explains that is because she didn't understand most of the words (and was much less able to spell them) herself! The title is interesting but I'm not going to write a spoiler – it is explained later in the book.

I read this inspirational book in one sitting and have already recommended it. It will be helpful for understanding the mental aspects of the journey. There is no right or wrong way, but honesty is essential.

#### **Breast cancer survivor (46-55) (March 2019)**

I like the warts-and-all honesty of this book. It did hit home and make me cry but reading about the reality of treatment, side effects and the huge decisions that must be made was very helpful to me as a surviving breast cancer patient. Sarah-Jane mentions things that we are rarely told about. I love how she tried to put a little light-heartedness into the book, enough to make the reader smile, albeit through tears. The tone is honest and down to earth; you're aware of how scared she was of what was happening. Having cancer for a second time is every survivor's fear but this book gives humanity and faith that it just might be alright... with help from those worms on parachutes!

### **Breast cancer patient (56-65) (July 2018)**

This is an autobiographical account of one woman's journey through two types of cancer and treatment, how these challenges affected her life, and how she retained some control of the things that were most important to her. It is most useful for women considering reconstructive surgery. The attention-grabbing title refers to a post-operative dream that Sarah-Jane describes. Otherwise, it is a down-to-earth account of her experiences. As a teenager, she had Hodgkin lymphoma and endures chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Unfortunately, the treatment that saved her triggers breast cancer in later life, when she is married with two young daughters.

The book is fast-paced and does not contain irrelevant detail. Sarah-Jane is a determined young woman who faces her challenges with stoicism. She prioritises the welfare of her daughters throughout her treatment. Luckily, she has a loving husband and parents who take her children on holiday to Spain while she is in hospital. Unusually, Sarah-Jane resists reading explanatory leaflets and books about her condition, stating that she does not want to know bad news. Instead, she places her trust in her medical team. She judges those who she sees at the two hospitals she visits on their behaviour towards her. Intuition leads her to choose a surgeon who saves her life (and for whose department she later fundraises). Her treatment and surgery are particularly problematic. She opts for reconstructive surgery but does not fully explore her reasons or thought processes. She maintains control of her life by embarking on a rigorous exercise and healthy-eating regime prior to surgery. Although she does not recommend it for others, it is clearly a regime that she subscribes to, and benefits from. At the end of the book, she is free of cancer and has also fundraised thousands of pounds for a cancer charity and run the London Marathon. She names her new puppy after her surgeon.

Her story is told chronologically. It is very easy to understand, with no unexplained medical jargon. The author writes in a clear and interesting way. It could have been edited better; there are a few punctuation and grammatical errors. It is a standard-size paperback. There is a picture on the front of ... worms on parachutes. This may puzzle potential readers. The subtitle: 'Mystical allies in my cancer survival' is also rather surreal, considering that the content of the book is very down to earth and practical. There is a small face-shot of the author on the back cover. I would like more pictures; physical appearance is very important to Sarah-Jane and more photos would have brought the text to life even more.

I enjoyed reading this book. I like the fact that the author writes clearly about the challenges she faced. It moves at a fast pace, with no irrelevant detail. She inspires readers by keeping control over her life; this demonstrates the power of taking control at a time when people feel they have no control. I would have liked more analysis on the author's part regarding her decisions. For example, why did she decide to go for reconstructive surgery? She wrote that she looked on the internet for pictures, but the reasoning behind her decision is not fully explored. It was as if her decisions were 'black and white'. I was worried that she decided not to read leaflets or information about her condition. Also, she did not wish to hear any bad news. Instead, she put her complete trust in the medical team, whom she appeared to judge by their social skills as much as their medical pedigree. Fortunately, everything went very well.

This book demonstrates personal strength and determination when faced with very serious challenges. Most readers will agree that Sarah-Jane is strong-minded and disciplined. Even when ill, just before surgery, she cleaned the house and made sure there were frozen home-made meals for her family. In many ways, this helped her to keep control over some of her life, if not over the medical aspects. She also prepared for further surgery with a strict diet and daily exercise. This may well be inspiring and helpful. However, her cancer was triggered by treatment for Hodgkin lymphoma as a teenager and many readers may feel distanced by this element. Also, some surgery is unsuccessful, so I would think carefully before recommending this book.

**Friend, carer, former health professional (head and neck cancer) (56-65) (July 2017)**



This is most useful for women with breast cancer that has not spread beyond the breast or axillary lymph nodes. It will be of particular interest to those considering or recovering from reconstruction, or anyone who wants to understand the realities of living with cancer. The author's experience is rare in that her cancer may have been caused by radiotherapy for Hodgkin lymphoma at age 16. However, her story is ultimately one of strength and inspiration and is likely to offer hope and reassurance, particularly to those experiencing complications after reconstruction or a recurrence.

The title is initially perplexing but makes sense once you have read the book. The text is readable, and the layout is good, with lots of short chapters. It is self-published with a rather plain cover and repetitive in one or two places, but a perfect length – neither too long nor too short. There is a small photo of the author on the back, but I would have liked to have seen some photos of the author and her family inside. The tone is engaging – chatty, honest and down-to-earth. The author begins with brief details of her childhood then provides an account of her cancer diagnoses and treatments, with breast cancer and reconstruction surgery being the focus. It is very readable, easy to understand and flows well. The author uses some technical terms to describe her diagnoses and treatments but provides clear explanations in the text. I struggled to pronounce some of the African names at the start, but the rest of the book was fine! I noticed a few spelling and grammatical errors, but they did not detract too much from my overall enjoyment of the book.

The author writes openly about the many challenges she faced, particularly following reconstruction, yet she manages to maintain an engaging and at times humorous tone. She comes across as very determined and her zest for life shines through. Her aim was to inspire others faced with a similar traumatic setback and I feel like she has achieved this. It provides a valuable, first-hand insight into the realities of cancer, without the doom and gloom and offers hope and reassurance but may frighten those who do not want to think too much about possible complications of reconstruction.

### **A relative of someone with breast and lung cancer (26-35) (August 2019)**

I found this an interesting read as the story is more than just about cancer treatment, but also covers fear of surgery, positivity about survival, breast reconstructions (and failures) and never giving up. As with many cancer stories, there is a lot about treatment and how awful it was, but somehow this was different – a measured approach that also dealt with fear in a very honest way, fears that I could relate to, such as never waking from an anaesthetic (I have never had an operation). What also makes this story different though, is the fact that the author's breast was caused by treatment for another cancer and that the author describes the impact that this had on a lifetime.

The story is written in a way that makes it easy to read and left me wanting more. I wanted to find out what happened next and what on earth the title meant. And I did find out, but I'm not going to say. It's for me to know and you to find out...

### **Living with cancer (myelodysplastic syndrome) (46-55) (August 2017)**



Sarah-Jane is a courageous and warm human being who has survived some very difficult and taxing health issues with grace and fortitude. Her book looks as if it is going to be interesting with its mystical title but, sadly, it fails to deliver anything fresh or new. It is an honest story of courage, written by a feisty woman but there are many of these nowadays. I could only recommend it as an inspiring read but not for anyone with a recent diagnosis, only for those well along the cancer pathway.

The book progresses logically in chronological order and is very simply written – there is no glossary or index. There are no inaccuracies as such but there are so many missed opportunities to explain more fully various rarely discussed aspects of triple-negative breast cancer. It appears to be self-published (using Createspace) and seems to have been unedited. The irritating bad grammar and punctuation could easily have been corrected with some proofreading. I feel that writing the book has been more about catharsis for the author than offering help to other cancer patients.

It is hard to be objectively critical of someone who has courageously gone through awful health problems and emerged with humour, optimism and grace. However, trying to keep in mind how I would have felt reading this book soon after diagnosis, I must conclude that I would have regretted reading it. Whilst my experience did not

exactly follow Sarah-Jane's path, I too was told that my breast cancer was triple negative. Very little seems to be written about this type of breast cancer – why is that? This was a missed opportunity for some discussion on breast cancers with triple-negative status (cancers whose cells do not have receptors for the hormones oestrogen and progesterone, and HER2 protein). Sarah-Jane does say that at the time she could not face up to the idea or consequences of a triple-negative diagnosis and that it is the very worst kind of breast cancer to have. This is not helpful for the reader who may be left feeling worried and confused by these statements, which are not further addressed. I am very pleased to say that my triple-negative breast cancer diagnosis was made 12 years ago, and that I have been 'no evidence of disease' since, so there is hope!

**Breast cancer patient (66-75) (November 2017)**

# 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](http://macmillan.org.uk)**

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