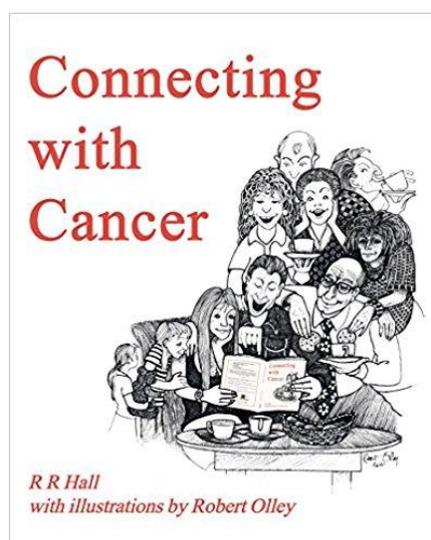


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CANCER SUPPORT**  
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# BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



**Connecting with cancer. Living with and beyond cancer (2017)**

Hall RR.  
Ely: Melrose Books, 2017.  
x, 170pp.  
ISBN 9781912026357.  
£10.99.

**Average star rating 4.1 (out of 5)**

**[BMA Medical Book Awards 2018. Highly commended. The BMA Council Chair's Choice.](#)**

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It is helpful to know that others are experiencing the same emotions as you. This book includes contributions from people diagnosed with different cancers. I found the book useful as a partner and carer, my husband found it useful as a patient. Our friends and relatives who had a read also benefited from it and health professionals could benefit from looking at things from another perspective.

The anthology style – a collection of individual stories – made it easy to read and put down. My partner and I benefited from this format as we are busy, and my partner's concentration is often poor. The candid pieces from contributors are well written and very real. I found it easy to understand and so did my partner. The layout is very good, but the cover is very plain and could be more appealing.

Although emotive, this book was cathartic for me to read. I found it useful to read things from the perspective of the patient. I identified with the emotions of the text. I absolutely recommend it to anyone affected by cancer. I thought it was fantastic.

**Wife of rectal cancer patient (36-35) (July 2018)**

This covers the experiences of people with cancer and includes contributions from carers and from the author, a medical professional. The stories cover most cancer types, so it is suitable for anyone recently diagnosed and having treatment, as well as those who can no longer benefit from treatment. It is also useful for family, friends, and health professionals. There are some fabulous recovery snippets.

It is easy to read and relate to. It is informative but not heavy; most accounts are described with humour, although some are sad. A real-life emotional journey. The author's introduction about his interest and passion is interesting. I love the layout; the chapters are easy to follow, and the illustrations are great. I love the humour.

I could not put it down. I loved it! It made me feel less alone with cancer. My heart went out to each contributor, brave and brilliant.

**Living with terminal cancer of unknown primary (56-65) (February 2018)**

I love this book and wish I had known about it while I was having treatment. Reading positive stories is inspiring and it is helpful to know that others have similar feelings. That it is written by people who have had cancer or been a carer is invaluable – you know they have been where you are.

It begins with some very positive stories, quotes, and funny anecdotes that a person with cancer will relate to; towards the end, the more sombre stories are tackled in a sensitive manner. As it is based on the words of patients, family and carers, it is easy to understand with little jargon. The index enables you to go to specific topics of interest and the descriptions at the start are a good indicator of the chapter topics. The cover is basic, but the content and layout are well done. The images are simple yet thought provoking and appropriate to the content.

Personal experience books are a great resource, especially if you don't have a local support group. It was great to read the experiences of ordinary people like me and to connect with their feelings and emotions and know that I was not alone in some of my thoughts about how others deal with you and your diagnosis, from health professionals to family and friends. I am from the north of England, so I enjoyed the brief history of Cancer Connections; I would have loved somewhere like this whilst I was going through cancer.

I read it just under two years from diagnosis and 16 months after surgery. Initially, I wished I'd read it at the start of my journey, but as it progressed I realised that I might have found some of the content too emotional; the ideal time for me to read it would have been post-surgery. I recommend it to anyone who has ever had any connection to someone with cancer in the hope that it will give a better understanding of what their loved one is going through. Elements will benefit health professionals; sometimes they don't realise that the emotional effects are just as important as the physical. I don't know if I would have come across this book if I had not reviewed it. It would be great if it could be more widely available and I will pass it on to others.

### **Bowel cancer survivor (36-45) (January 2018)**

This will be so useful for friends, relatives, carers, and health professionals new to cancer care as it gives an insight into living with cancer. It will also be useful for someone with cancer, when the time is right, as it helps set expectations about treatments and their side effects, feelings, and how it affects them and their families, for example, what to tell the children, how you may feel if it is your child who is the patient. It also gives a little information about sources of help, where money worries have become an issue if the patient is unable to work.

It starts from the shock of diagnosis and ends with death or moving on with the next stage of life. It is very easy to understand. The editor has selected stories varying in length from a short paragraph to five pages, lots of snippets of people's experiences. His experience, first as a surgeon, then as a volunteer in a support centre in a deprived part of northeast England, has given him the skills to pitch this exactly right. It is an easy read, well laid out with very appropriate illustrations with a touch of humour. The content is quite like that of a cancer support forum and is very appealing to anyone interested in the content.

This is a good book. It is easy to read, the content is well chosen, and the illustrations break up the content and are fun. A few stories annoyed me, as is inevitable. But, in no time at all, I was reading the next one. I was so impressed about how work and returning to work feature, as it is not a subject often dealt with. Returning to work is such an affirmation of normality and a good goal to set when undergoing treatment.

I recommend it, although people need to choose the right time to read it. A lot of the experiences are from men, which would be helpful for male patients. There is little that is medical in it – it tells about feelings, human interactions, experience of treatment and its outcome. It could help people with cancer feel part of a community.

### **Breast cancer patient 2004 (66-75) (November 2017)**

This is certainly useful for carers, family or friends and most certainly for someone with cancer. It makes you realise that you are not alone, your feelings are not unique. The thing that stood out was the lady in the art shop, and the owner asking if she was ok. He didn't know the outcome of their conversation until he saw her a year later – sometimes people don't know how helpful they have been.

It is very factual – no beating about the bush - it's real life, from the horse's mouth. I can relate to many aspects of this book: feelings and emotions; guilt; mourning the loss of a breast; frustration. I didn't notice any inaccuracies, but I can't vouch for other cancer types. Most people who have had cancer will know the ins and outs of technical words. For friends, family carers then this may be new ground, but the author explains the technical words very well.

The book feels good, the cover is lovely and smooth, and the colour tones used are eye catching. Inside, the illustrations are fantastic, very true to life and better than plain boring stiff-as-a-board illustrations. Humour through illustrations is easier on the eye than the Grim Reaper, coffins and lots of wailing and misery. Making light of something serious can change your mindset and enable better coping mechanisms.

The personal entries make this book work; real-life, true facts, and unedited factuality are what people in this situation need – no polishing turds, fact is fact. Cancer is rough, rougher than anything you'll have to deal with. Medical books are full of statistics, but I am not a statistic, I am me. Medical bodies care, I'm sure, but hearing about people in a similar situation can provide empathy and sympathy.

### **Breast cancer patient (36-45) (November 2017)**



This book is informative, practical, realistic and provides hope in coping strategies. It gives the perspective of many different journeys. It is useful as it shows that you are not alone. The challenges, feelings of hope and despair, the ups and downs are all experienced by everyone differently, but they are all there. It also gently encourages counselling for people who would never normally consider it as a means of help.

Above all, it shows that life goes on for the survivors and for the bereaved families of non-survivors. It's a warts-and-all account of human suffering and how strong the human spirit is.

It's very easy to read and understand. It flows logically, covering the topic from diagnosis to end of life and bereavement. It is very appealing and chunks topics up in an easily digestible form.

I like that it gives an all-round perspective of what is it like to have cancer in your orbit, be it as a patient, partner, family member, friend, or anyone aware of cancer but who may not have had a close connection to it. I don't like the beginning of the book. I don't see the point of reading the many accounts of diagnosis. If you have been through diagnosis, it will be disturbing to relive it; if not, then it is depressing, one alarming account after another. It didn't make me want to read on. However, I understand that it is the start of the journey and must be accounted for in some form.

Overall, it is extremely useful. I looked up 'Cancer Connections' to find my local one and see how I might help there. I was disappointed that it is only in Tyne and Wear and north. It is a fantastic service; people all over the country would benefit.

#### **Friend and relative to cancer patients and survivors (46-55) (November 2018)**

This is useful for people with cancer, carers, family, friends, health professionals and the public to understand how each person's story is different but also similar in terms of shared experience; only those who have been diagnosed can fully understand this. It is very easy to understand, and the tone and content are great. The cover did not catch my eye and I may have misunderstood what kind of book it is, had I not known beforehand. The story-telling style is great, and I like the fact that you can read it in short bursts. I have shared the title with others who are not usually readers.

#### **Living beyond acinic cell carcinoma (36-45) (November 2018)**

This gives a good insight into how different people feel and cope. We were lucky and had a good support network. I do know of people that distance themselves from someone with cancer as they don't know what to say; this book gives a good understanding. Each story is short to keep you engaged. There isn't any jargon, everyone should be able to understand it. I like the sketches throughout and the text is a great size.

It covers most cancers and I like that it includes the good and the bad bits and varied experiences and outcomes. However, although there is a lot about chemotherapy, there isn't much about radiotherapy. My husband had a mask that was bolted to the treatment bed to keep him still and had quite a lot of side effects with radiotherapy.

#### **Carer for my husband who had mouth cancer and is still suffering side effects. I cared for my dad and grandad when they had bowel cancer (36-45) (April 2018)**

This book echoed a lot of my own feelings during my 25-plus years' journey with cancer. It would suit someone recently. It is well laid out and easy to read and understand. I like the illustrations.

### **Non-Hodgkin lymphoma stage IV (likely Marginal Zone) (46-55) (January 2018)**

This is a collection of short accounts from people who have experienced different types of cancer. Rather than being useful for specific information about a treatment or type of cancer, it is useful for understanding people's feelings about cancer, and how these might be like your own. Many stories are uplifting or humorous, which makes it a nice read. I found it interesting, as some people had reactions like mine, but others were different. It will therefore be useful to someone newly diagnosed, to provide inspiration and to show that your feelings are normal.

The accounts are grouped into similar themes, such as "Chemotherapy" and "Family matters". This works fine, although many could probably appear in multiple sections. Each account is written by the individual concerned, so the style varies but they are all nicely written and give a sense of the person's feelings and experiences. The book is clearly laid out, in a nice size font, and the illustrations are engaging.

I like that this book offers such different, personal perspectives on cancer. Although I read it from front to back, it is also good to dip into when you feel like it; this makes it nice to have with you in hospital or in a waiting room to read one or two stories that reflect what you are experiencing at the time. It also makes it good to read if you're tired or have other side effects that make reading a struggle.

Overall, it's an enjoyable read. The author obviously spent a lot of time gathering so many accounts from so many people. It's useful to read about different experiences; it helps to show how varied the cancer experience is, that your feelings are valid, and that you're not the only one to feel like that. It would be a nice book to dip into during and after treatment, as it's an easy read that you can re-visit whenever you want.

### **Leukaemia survivor (26-35) (November 2017)**

This will be useful for someone living with cancer as it includes real stories of people with different cancers. It flows well, in a logical order and the language is easy to understand. The humour brings a light-hearted touch to a tough subject. The stories are not too long, so they are easy to read, understand and connect with.

I like how it is written, and the illustrations. It helps you understand the different types of cancers, and perspectives. I read some of the stories again as they are easy to read. It is the type of book that you can go back to time and time again.

### **I have cared for someone who has had cancer. (46-55) (November 2017)**

This book offers a vast range of experiences of people affected by cancer and will be useful for anyone wanting to gain a true understanding of the varied impacts of cancer, and its individuality. It could be read any time after diagnosis as that is when the initial impact is felt. Recognising that your feelings are normal can open doors to better communication and use of resources to manage your emotions.

There are many things to like about this book. It doesn't focus on the disease but provides very powerful insight into the impact felt by each person, the individuality of the person and their cancer, and that there is no wrong, just different. People still often think that cancer happens to other people; this book demonstrates that it does not discriminate – regardless of age, sex, culture, profession, religion – and helps us to embrace our individuality. I love the illustrations; they are amazing and reflect the tone of the difficult stories. They promote a feeling of empathy and understanding.

Each story is equally valued and given a special place under its own heading. This helps readers to fast track to relevant areas, acknowledging feelings and promoting a sense of normality. It can move an individual from giving up to considering options to help them have a quality of life regardless of prognosis, focusing on achievable goals. Keep in mind that some people still believe that cancer is a death sentence; they may go on to relate to another's experience and be left feeling inadequate if their needs take a different turn. There are lots of different forms of support and information on offer, however it cannot be used appropriately without a good conversation and a clear understanding of the needs of that individual at that time.

### **Living with the consequences of breast cancer (56-65) (November 2017)**

This excellent book, published by the north-east England cancer support charity [Cancer Connections](#), uses extracts from over 50 patient stories to illustrate the questions and concerns that many of us have, e.g. what shall we tell the kids, or the situations that they have been in, and how they have tackled them. It is of interest to anyone impacted by cancer: patients; carers; family and friends. It is also of interest to health professionals, as much of it is about dealing with emotional issues – the more health professionals understand about this the better.

Illustrated throughout by a professional, well-regarded illustrator, it is an easy and helpful read and an appealing paperback. The topics are broadly in a logical order. The first tackle questions typically raised at diagnosis, the later bereavement. It is easy to understand, written by patients going through their own cancer journey, with seemingly minimal editing. There is no glossary, but essentially it is about emotions.

The stories are quite short, no more than three pages by each patient, answering points that many will ask. I don't dislike anything but suspect that each contribution is drawn from a longer piece. I would like to have seen web links to more about their journey. The contents allow you to pinpoint the articles most relevant to you.

This is a quick, easy read that tackles questions frequently asked. Recommended.

### **Brain tumour survivor, grade 4 glioblastoma removed 2005 (56-65) (September 2017)**

This is useful for all aspects of cancer, the different types, diagnosis, prognosis, fear, and celebration. Because it is a series of narratives from people who have been affected by cancer and you can dip in and out, it is a book for anyone at any time.

It is very easy to understand but, sadly, I really dislike the illustrations and the size of the book; it's too big and not easy to transport. Despite this, I persevered and found it an encouraging, heart-warming, honest, and easy read. I like the different accounts from all sorts of people and that I could dip in and out.

The narratives give insights into different treatments and cast different opinions on the consequences of treatments, diagnoses, and life adjustments. It shows that cancer can happen to anyone and that everyone acts and reacts in different ways. It is interesting how the experiences of doctors and consultants also differ from the great to the not so great. This, I think, highlights a greater need for training on how to treat each patient as an individual and how to have a bedside manner.

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

Despite this being an easy read, it covers themes of great depth in a friendly and informal way and could be useful for anyone affected by cancer. It explores the perspectives of people who have cancer, those who care for them, and people who have lost loved ones to cancer. It is basically a collection of accounts from people whose lives have been touched – or even taken over – by cancer. I did not fully understand the name “Connecting with Cancer”, until I reached the end, where there is a description of this project, a cancer support charity in the North East of England.

It is very easy to understand. Each chapter has a theme, e.g. “Chemotherapy”, “Counselling”, “How long do you think I have?”, which adds to the clarity. It is a square shape, slightly larger than a standard paperback, with good quality paper and a clear typeface. Initially, I thought it looked outdated, but I got to like and appreciate the line drawings. They are carefully and expertly done, highly relevant to the piece that they accompany, and sensitively reflect the content. I enjoyed looking at them.

I warmed to this book the more I read it. There are positive experiences, inspirational pieces and, sadly, some negative ones too. Most of all, these are all narratives that describe people's feelings about what has happened to them, and the people they love, and in that way, the contents are very engaging. I like the fact that it takes many people's experiences and thoughts about cancer and uses these personal vignettes in themed order. The people who write about their experiences do so in a friendly way. The reader feels as if the writer is talking to him or her, specially. I could empathise with many of the writers, but others are not so easy to connect with.

I would be careful about recommending this book, as not all accounts are positive. But most are.

### **Friend. Carer. Former health professional (56-65) (July 2017)**



This book addresses the psychological aspects of cancer, caring for and supporting someone with cancer, and the social and sometimes financial impacts. One can imagine some of the material being the archetypal dialogue that goes on at the Cancer Connections Centre in Tyneside. It is an ideal introduction for anyone close to someone with cancer – a friend, loved one, even a neighbour or work colleague – or those with a general interest in the human aspects of living with an often debilitating and destructive condition. However, the reader should be prepared for some powerful and potentially upsetting accounts; for example, "Just the Two of Us" (p. 92), in which a childless woman writes to her husband describing her emotions at having her womb removed after a cervical cancer diagnosis.

Different cancers, e.g. prostate, breast, stomach, lung, are loosely grouped together, whilst topics surrounding treatment and recovery weave in and out of each story. No inaccuracies jump out, but this isn't factual; it is more personal, almost a diary. Many contributors are current or former users of Cancer Connections, so the language is entirely appropriate, the conversational tone relaxing and refreshing. There is no glossary, but there is an index to the main topics and cancers, plus a brief history of Cancer Connections that helps put things into context. Despite the serious subject, there is a surprisingly humorous element to the illustrations and some of the writing.

The somewhat light-hearted and attractive cover is inviting but the book might easily be lost on a shelf as it has a thin spine and unorthodox shape. Inside, it's cleverly punctuated, and each chapter has a thought-provoking title; for example, "Things are looking up", in which a prostate cancer patient refers to his recovering libido! (p. 85). The visuals – text and drawings – are black and white, occasionally with a splash of red letter type to contrast. The presentation is appealing, and Olley's powerful and striking illustrations are enhanced by the simple typeface. The illustrations sometimes override the impact of the text and could almost form a separate publication.

I'd recommend it more as a self-help manual. There's very little to dislike, although it should not be used if you are seeking impartial medical advice or information. The anecdotal accounts are often emotionally loaded, and most readers would be able to empathise with at least one of the entries. However, the amount of material means it cannot really delve too deeply into any one individual's story. Nevertheless, it could serve as an invaluable source of emotional comfort and support to some.

Ultimately, it is beautifully illustrated and often endearing book to dip into, revealing many candid personal accounts of cancer, by those who have survived, those who have supported others and from those that have since left us. It could stand on the shelf amongst many other books looking at cancer in an emotive and inspirational way. Perhaps one day could see a children's illustrated version? To end on a quote from a survivor (p. 46) who uses a suitable analogy to describe their cancer journey, "I parked my life in the garage and when treatment was done I got it out and now I have started driving again".

**Former carer to terminally ill mother with Grade IV glioblastoma (36-45)  
(January 2018)**

This may be useful for those looking for support outside the standard care for cancer. It may help them feel engaged with others affected by cancer or get a feeling for how cancer affects people in different ways. The idea is to choose the most appropriate accounts from the chapter headings, rather than read from cover to cover, but some accounts were more relevant to me than anticipated from the chapter headings.

The drawings are great and bring the book alive and the short chapters and story snippets mean that it will be an easy read for someone who does not have much spare time or who has low concentration or fatigue. The chapter headings mean that you can dip into a snippet that feels relevant rather than wade through different stories that don't suit your mood. The chapters that relate specifically to people who have died seem to be grouped together, which is useful but only once you have worked that out through either the chapter heading or the accompanying drawing. For example, the chapter "I'll go ahead and put the kettle on" sounds upbeat, but when you see the drawing you know that more underlies this quote.

The book draws on a range of experiences to try to relate to different people with different circumstances, e.g. different ages, gender, cancers, or prognoses. The stories are interesting to read and allow a glimpse into other people's experiences of cancer. It leaves you in no doubt that the cancer experience is multi-faceted. I found myself feeling quite lucky about my own experiences. I didn't find anything described that was close to my experience of cancer. However, there will inevitably be many different experiences that are not covered, so to suggest that one experience is missing is not a fair criticism.

The "Cancer Connections" charity is mentioned many times. The book is linked to the charity, so this is no surprise but towards the end I felt that it was becoming a bit too much like an advertisement with the inclusion of several stories about the charity helping people through cancer. Other charities have published books to raise money so this is not a criticism of that process but rather that in the reading of the book the "selling" of Cancer Connections became a bit too much.

### **Living with ovarian cancer (36-45) (July 2017)**

It is difficult to assess for whom this book is most suitable, but anyone could dip into it for a light read. It is a general book based on lots of experiences of cancer, mostly short anecdotes from individual perspectives.

I had no problem understanding the content but found the layout confusing. It is not in any order and can be read in short bursts. There are some chapter headings, but the index does not identify really what the content is. Vague haphazard entries.

I've forgotten most of the content already! The images are a nice way to break up the text, but it is difficult to interpret their meaning in context with the stories! It is difficult at first to determine the random page breaks; I was not sure that the snippets in each chapter were all related. It's not particularly positive. I like the honesty of the contributors but would like more background to support their stories.

### **Registered nurse (46-55) (October 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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