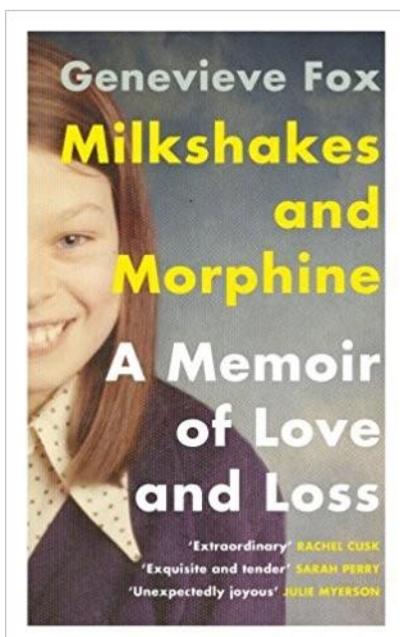


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BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Milkshakes and morphine. A memoir of love and loss (2018)

Fox G.

London: Square Peg (imprint of Vintage), 2018.

384pp.

ISBN 9781910931714.

£14.99.

Average star rating 3.9 (out of 5)

Macmillan Cancer Support
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ

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This was a particularly poignant book for me even though my experience is currently as the husband of someone with secondary breast cancer. The mix of sardonic humour, despair and resilience makes it a compelling read and at the end I was encouraged rather than depressed. Whilst the physical aspects of Genevieve's experience are detailed and shocking it is her descriptions of the emotional impact that really impress. This is particularly impactful as she lost her mother to cancer and is now herself a mother facing the possibility of a similar trauma.

The book has an appealing look and feel and is easy to understand; medical terms are explained well in the text. The author's style combines her good vocabulary and powers of explanation with raw transmission of shocks that describe her experience of throat cancer. The graphic descriptions of treatment – dryness of mouth, difficulties using a PEG, dealing with loss of appetite – are shocking and memorable but the tone is one of resilience and humour despite pain, as well as occasional despair.

I like the author's directness, the description of emotional strain for a mother and wife, the colourful friendships, the support (or not) of friends and relatives, and the frank descriptions of symptoms, worries and fears. The author digresses a few times from cancer or its treatment, and this is initially confusing, but I realised it is part of the style, structure and intent of the book and demonstrates her view of the world.

I definitely recommend it. It is most useful for the physical aspects of treatment side-effects, the emotional and psychological impact of cancer, the uncertainty, anxiety and depression it causes, and the strain that cancer and its treatment places on family and close relationships. It is particularly useful for children of parents with throat cancer and mothers with throat cancer but will also be useful for mothers with other types of cancer and their children and I have loaned it to one of our adult children in the hope that it will help them understand how their mother is feeling. I have also mentioned it to a male friend who is having treatment for throat cancer. One opening to a chapter particularly resonates with me and I quote it often. It is when the author writes that from now on she will be living on planet cancer and there is no return even if she is told the cancer is cured. This captures the feeling we have had and helps to deal with the new world and reality.

My wife has secondary breast cancer (56-65) (February 2019)

The main thing that sticks out about this book is how the author deals with the day-to-day aspects of being treated for throat cancer. She is very honest and accurate about the impact of treatment on her appetite, taste and ability to eat anything of substance. Her descriptions of dry mouth and throat burning sensations typical of this type of cancer treatment are dealt with well, as is how to cope with being a mother and having cancer. She deals with this honestly and with the fear and embarrassment of dealing with the unknown. Finally, she clearly demonstrates the psychological impact of losing someone to cancer in one's past; when she became ill herself, she reminisced about her mother's diagnosis and eventual death.

It is a nice size hardback with a descriptive rather than abstract cover. The author's tone is wonderfully easy to read. It is written so well that it might be a work of fiction rather than autobiographical. As a memoir of someone diagnosed with and treated for throat cancer, it is written in the order in which events unfolded and interspersed with flashbacks to the author's difficult and interesting childhood and her mother's illness. The author explains technical details in a very real way; she has had to learn these unfamiliar words and phrases herself. The humour with which she describes some technical points is uplifting; for example, she uses nicknames to refer to certain aspects of cancer and its treatment. I particularly appreciate this aspect; it makes the book real and human; it is relatable, and many people would think the same.

This book is very factual given that it is autobiographical. It is good to hear certain details first hand from a throat cancer patient. It makes it more relatable than reading a textbook. The book has emotional support and practical tips as well as information about what goes through the mind of a throat cancer patient. Some of these thoughts and fears can never be vocalised so we can learn to appreciate them a little better from this book. Some parts of the back story are difficult to get through and split the cancer story up too much; it might have been dealt with in a more fluid fashion.

Thanks to Genevieve for sharing her story with us and the humour and humility she put into her book. I have asked my mum if she would like to read it. I think that she would be able to relate to it well and perhaps find some comfort in reading someone else's story.

My mum has been treated for throat cancer (26-35) (January 2019)

This is a fascinating insight into how our past can come into play when we are facing a cancer diagnosis – a reminder that cancer doesn't drop into our lives at a convenient time when we have dealt with unfinished business, whatever that is.

The author's experience of diagnosis is very close to mine and I could relate to many aspects of what she went through. Her description of her obsession with searching the internet for answers after finding a lump and waiting for an appointment is brilliant; she describes how she became "a cyberchondriac" as she looked at websites and found herself "ignoring the benign stuff and focussing on death" (p. 4). I can so relate to that! Seeing it in print is a refreshingly honest and typical of her style; it provides insight for readers who don't have cancer about how the anxieties and treatment may affect someone they are caring for, as a loved one or a professional.

The book flows well although some sections on her childhood experiences distract from the focus on throat cancer. The language is appropriate, not over-medicalised and not too simplistic. The photograph on the cover is intriguing; it suggests a current picture of the person with cancer but is a photo of the author years before diagnosis. This sets the scene for the roller coaster ahead, when you read that the author's mother died of head and neck cancer when the author was only nine. I can well imagine how terrified she was to find out that she was following in her mother's footsteps and that the outcome may be the same. The tone makes it an enjoyable read; the style is thoughtful, and it is interesting to share so much of her inner journey, not just through treatment, but the realisation of how much her experiences of losing her mother to cancer is affecting her approach to her own children.

The author gives a touching and eloquent account of how the news of her mother's death was conveyed to her (as a nine-year old child), and its impact; it is interesting to read her observation that her father's earlier death didn't have as much impact because she still had her mother and "the world felt essentially still whole"(p. 22). She reflects "now mother had gone too and [the world] had a puncture in it" (p. 22). I can totally relate to her comment on that, "with cancer, you learn early to be careful what you say to people, mindful that it is selfish to be relentlessly truthful" (p. 25). I found this very thought-provoking and it gave me insight into how and why I have often edited the information I've shared with family and friends. It also makes me appreciate the tremendous value of peer support from online groups such as the Tonsil Cancer Facebook group – this has been a lifeline for me, somewhere to keep it real without having to give lengthy explanations or get platitudes back.

How the author felt when she was told of her cancer (p. 31) is very similar to my experience; it was validating to read this, especially her comment (p. 32), "On leaving the consultant's room, I move planets. I am on Planet Cancer now. We see things differently here." Beautifully put. I like her brutal honesty about the bleakness of diagnosis, "we don't look forward to anything because it is another day that takes us away from our known reality" (p. 38). This sums up how hard it can be at times to live with cancer and see your previous life slipping away from you one cell at a time.

Although it is a serious subject, the author's touches of humour made me laugh out loud. They sum up the roller coaster that is cancer; she describes (p. 40) how she started crying on reading a poem in a bookshop, "the poem, suddenly, is all about *me*, my life, my death. At this stage of the cancer game, I could make a barcode speak to me. Oncologists should add another side effect to the list: raging egotism". I like how she describes the positives that can come from meeting another survivor (an oncology nurse) and what a boost it is to speak with others, "...made me see how detachment and loneliness gets under your skin, it's what you take with you when you slope off for your nap, what you contend with when you are sitting with friends and not talking, and what a lifeline it is to talk to people who know what you are going through, not just during the treatment, but now, in this far more nebulous, hard-to-navigate recovery period" (p. 346). She includes a poem by one of her children (p. 370), a beautiful insight into his perspective and fears and a moving reminder of how cancer affects not just the person diagnosed but also loved ones. I love the concept of mood boards: one for her life in America, one for her life in the UK (p. 8). It struck me as a useful self-help tool to compare my life before diagnosis and treatment, and now, five years later.

The sections where the author tells of losing her mother, the orphanhood that this brought to her and her siblings, and how this was handled, are touching and tragic. I can imagine that writing the book was cathartic and helped her to understand herself much better, especially her reluctance to be open with her own children, in terms of the side effects of cancer and the possibility of not surviving. The sections about her difficult relationship with her guardian are overlong, but this is a minor point. It skews the focus away from the impact of cancer and its treatment – which was what I was primarily interested in – but I can understand why she wanted to include it, as a process of self-analysis and understanding, hopefully processing emotions avoided at the time. This process of self-discovery may be typical of anyone facing a life-threatening condition and may help readers without cancer understand how far-reaching the ripples of a cancer diagnosis can be. It just felt a bit overlong at times.

Stage 4 tonsil cancer survivor (56-65) (November 2018)

Although obviously relevant to anyone who has a connection with head and neck cancer, this book encompasses so much that is pertinent to life in general. If you love karaoke or holidaying in the US, went to boarding school, or just simply have teenage boys, it will resonate. It describes the trauma of diagnosis, chemoradiotherapy and the endless challenges of recovery. Through all this, the author is cheerful, positive and self-deprecating; the hardships she describes are never depressing or morbid.

Her cancer journey (a word she hates) is told chronologically, as is the account of her childhood, but the two are woven together to tell the greater story. There are excellent explanations of technical and medical words – the author makes it clear these were new to her as well. The language seems entirely appropriate for her audience. I don't like the cover, but the layout is good, although I would love a few photos of the author as a child and with her family. However, in her position I think I would have done it the same way.

I love that the author counteracts the serious issue of a life-threatening and life-changing cancer, with humour and self-depreciation. She laughs at herself and others to take away the pain and suffering of her situation. There is very slightly too much in the childhood chapters. I applauded her stamina and determination to get on as though nothing was happening, I laughed at her denial of so many things, I sympathised with her overwhelming fear of leaving her boys and I celebrated the outcome. This book made me consider my own cancer journey and how I could have learnt from the author's amazing spirit and tenacity. I found it inspiring and uplifting.

A five-star book. I recommend it unreservedly to anyone who has had head and neck cancer, and to those with other cancers. I looked forward to reading it every night.

Throat cancer patient, treated 2017 with chemoradiotherapy (46-55) (November 2018)

This wonderful insight into what goes through your mind on your cancer journey will help others to understand what you are going through. I relate to a lot of the content. It is well written and easy to read; once I started it I found it quite difficult to put down.

An extremely engaging book, open and honest, with a positive attitude. Although we are all different and react differently to cancer and its treatment, I could relate to so many things. It shows how similar our reactions to diagnosis can be; in my case, I reacted very like Genevieve – I took it head on.

Head and neck cancer x 2. Squamous cell carcinoma; base of tongue and parotid gland cancer; Mucoepidermoid carcinoma (56-65) (September 2018)

I really enjoyed this book, compelling reading. The author describes medical events from diagnosis through to conclusion, and the methods that she tried to help with the physical and emotional side-effects of surgery and other treatments. It could help a throat cancer patient or carer to understand the ups and downs of the entire process of cancer and possibly aid their decision making following diagnosis.

It is easy to understand and well written. Some of the more technical medical terms could have been described in more detail and the family history is a little difficult to follow at times. The layout is well set out with no need for illustrations. I would like a larger font, although this would make the book thicker. The cover and title set the overall mood. The tone is factual when discussing medical issues and emotional with respect to herself, family and various characters encountered throughout.

I really enjoyed how the author links her own orphan status and memories of her childhood and her parents' deaths to the pain, feelings and emotional upheavals she experienced. The empathy she can feel and describe, with her sons and husband during her diagnosis and treatment is remarkable. At times, she was unable to do what she felt she ought, as in telling her two boys about her diagnosis straight away.

The book has an overall positive feel to it without omitting the intense sorrows felt by the author. It is very useful for giving hope and inspiration to others on their cancer journey, for seeing a positive side whilst still dealing with enormous changes in one's own life and emotions and those of one's family.

Surviving breast cancer patient, (56-65) (August 2018)



Where the author writes about her cancer she gives very clear information with little relative emotion. The details of hospital visits, treatments and caring plan are direct, and anyone will be able to discern essential information, even though it is expressed within the framework of an autobiography. The specific areas of most use are those of finding the lump and acting quickly, being assertive in this move, understanding diagnosis and coping with the tests and treatments that follow. There is a stress on the need for understanding and patience whilst maintaining the feeling of hope.

It is pleasing to look at, the print is easy to read, and the book is not too long. The author deals with the subject in a logical order, as far as the progression from diagnosis, through treatment plan, to beyond is concerned. The language is generally easy to understand. The only term I found difficult, was PEG, probably because it is not in my experience. From the book, I was able to understand why a PEG was necessary but not easy to understand how it worked.

I like that information is not fudged and how the author brings out emotions and the inclusiveness of her family. It is not just the patient who suffers; carers, family and friends are also part of the trauma. It is important for everyone to understand, take responsibility and not shy away from contact, conversation and care. I like how she brings out how the mind works, only hearing what it wants to hear. This emphasises the need for not only a close friend or partner to be present at diagnosis but also to share with a professional who can put the situation into perspective calmly. This was our experience. I understand why the author wanted to talk about her childhood, but I found how she jumped back and forth rather confusing at times. Certainly, it adds another dimension but, for me, it is secondary to the journey through cancer.

The use of alternative therapies is interesting (p. 333) and had we read this earlier we would have sought such a practitioner. I am not convinced about the emotional side as far as her childhood is concerned and the impact of her mother's illness. The author describes her feelings towards her mother had she known the intensity of the illness and how she would have responded (p. 306). What is the right for one is not necessarily what another wants. My husband and I were very close but sometimes he wanted to be alone. He carried a guilt that he was holding his family back from what they needed to do, and this demanded careful handling.

My husband had oesophageal cancer and died four months after diagnosis (66-75) (November 2018)

Although Fox focuses on her cancer, her book also explores dealing with a life-changing condition, not only how it affects the patient but also their family and those close to them. It is useful for the challenges of coming to terms with a diagnosis and revealing the diagnosis to family.

The bright cover is eye catching and lets the reader know that the book concerns a young woman; this makes it more accessible to younger readers and cancer patients. The typeface and the thick, yellow paper make the book easy to read. Fox explains medical terms simply and comprehensively. Those with no scientific background will have no trouble understanding anything; it is accessible to all.

I like that Fox addresses the difficulties, not only of diagnosis but also treatment; she shows how difficult and dark life got (and how it felt) while she was in hospital for her chemo-radiotherapy. Her use of humour is an excellent way of balancing the dark realism of her writing. There is little I dislike. It can't be read in a few sittings, at times, I had to leave it for lengthy periods before continuing, but that may make it even more powerful. The time shifts may be challenging for those who are not avid readers, but this also works in Fox's favour; it allows us to see how her childhood not only shaped her as a person but also how it affected her in her diagnosis and illness.

I recommend it to anyone with a cancer experience, but it will be most useful to those struggling emotionally with diagnosis. Fox does describe her treatment and prognosis and explain technical terms but her description of living with cancer, especially given her circumstances (so young, with a young family, and losing her mother when she was a child), makes it an excellent example of how life can continue after diagnosis.

Immediate family member of breast cancer patient (Under 25) (October 2018)



The author talks about her experiences before, during, and after her cancer and treatment; this may be helpful for patients going through a similar treatment regime. However, it is important to note that not every throat cancer patient will have the same treatment regime as the author, so it may be suitable only for a small proportion of throat cancer patients. Many throat cancer patients I see are working class men who will not relate to the author. I don't not think a healthcare professional will gain much from this book, other than potentially the insight of how a patient feels.

The topics are in chronological order, but I found the book quite disjointed. Patients may find it difficult to keep up with the author flicking between her cancer diagnosis and treatment and her childhood. The discussion about her youth has little relevance to her cancer and treatment regimes. The language is quite formal, and the author is obviously from a middle-class background. Many of our head and neck patients are from a working-class background and may not be able to relate to the author and her reasonably extravagant lifestyle and seeming lack of financial concerns.

I like the information about treatment and the attempt at humour and light-hearted jokes about treatment to try to make it less daunting. However, it is lengthy with much of the content not relating to cancer. The cover, while giving us an insight that she will refer to her youth a lot in the book, does not draw me in. Some of the book is quite flat with not much in terms of helping a cancer patient with their treatment.

This book has limited use for our throat and head and neck cancer patients as the author comes from a very different background. She talks a lot about her early life and although she lost her parents at a young age it seems that she has been lucky and lives a comfortable life. Many of our patients are male, smokers, with alcohol issues, who would never pick up this book and would not relate to her experiences. They may not gain much from this book than they already know and are told by doctors. It will also not offer much in the way of emotional support. I recommend it only to a middle class, female head and neck cancer patient having similar treatment.

Specialist review radiographer. I see patients with all types of cancer that is treated by radiotherapy (26-35) (January 2019)

Although this is aimed at throat cancer patients, the information about treatment is useful for carers, family, and friends. Genevieve's descriptions of how she had such difficulty eating prepare the reader for the unpleasant side effects of radiotherapy.

It is easy to understand, and Genevieve uses appropriate language. The title is very apt. I like the clear type, very easy on the eye. It is very funny in places; I like the light-hearted way Genevieve has tried to make a distressing time bearable. However, the references to her childhood, whilst sometimes funny, are drawn out at times.

I might recommend it; it will depend if the patient wants to know the unpleasant side-effects before treatment. Many prefer to remain in the dark and deal with things in their own way. Although Genevieve's story is funny at times and uplifting, it is very sad. Whilst she tried to make light of a difficult situation, she clearly missed her mother. The constant references to her orphan upbringing rather detract from the present and how her family and friends coped with the situation.

A survivor of uterine cancer in 2001 (66-75) (October 2018)

Overall, this is a good read. It gives a good idea of what to expect and will help someone about to embark on treatment. It is handled in a matter-of-fact and frank way, describing the stages of treatment and the possible side effects very well. It is quite long, and the hardback is heavy, but the font is a decent size.

There is a lot of humour, which often made me laugh, and I like how treatment is explained. I could really relate to a lot of what the author was feeling and think I would feel the same. I liked reading about her childhood and how it shaped who she is today, although I sometimes got a little lost and I'm not sure how relevant certain parts are. Despite this, it is quite funny at times and I recommend it to others.

Carer (36-45) (September 2018)

Anyone could read this book, but I don't think it is particularly useful for living or coping with cancer. It is easy to read and looks good, but I don't like that it seems to be a novel. It portrays a cancer connection but doesn't really deliver in this area. It would pass the time, if a cancer patient can concentrate long enough to read it. I couldn't, despite being an avid reader.

Living with AML (56-65) (July 2018)

This book tracks the life of the author, Genevieve Fox, from her diagnosis of head and neck cancer through to her successful treatment involving chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I would not describe it as useful in general terms; the author describes her pain and discomfort a lot and does not include positive suggestions.

The hardback is of a pleasing quality. The font size and text layout are clear. The cover picture, presumably the author, gives a slightly wrong impression of the nature of this book. The title is odd but was suggested by the author's young son, so that is

understandable. The author is a freelance writer by profession, and her book reflects this with a clear writing style. She communicates in a warm and friendly way. It is easy to understand, and I like her engaging style. However, she takes an 'all about me' stance, rather than thinking of how her experiences and discoveries of what was helpful could benefit others. (Sorry – that sounds mean!)

She describes chemotherapy and radiotherapy, after which she is very ill and weak. She is unable to eat orally and liquified food is administered via a PEG. Speaking becomes difficult, and her mouth is painful. She masters these difficulties in several ways, including morphine at various times of day. She highlights her pain, discomfort and weakness at some length, and for that reason, I would not recommend this book to others with a similar diagnosis; their treatment may not have such an effect. She does not go into detail about appointments and help from medical professionals. She describes several appointments with healers, and her response, which is compassionate to the needs of these people and provides dark humour. In mastering the medical challenges, she misses an opportunity to distil her experiences and what she learns into some helpful general comments and positive suggestions for readers undergoing similar treatment. She dedicates several chapters to her childhood and I found these uninteresting; their relevance to the main theme rests on the fact that she has had an unusual life, with several challenges, not least being the death of her mother from cancer. Readers can skip these chapters if they are not of interest.

This book highlights the unpleasant effects of radiotherapy and the resultant weakness and discomfort for the author. While this may often happen, I do not think it helpful to consider these problems in the absence of more positive help and information. I would not recommend it to those with a similar diagnosis.

Former speech and language therapist (head and neck cancer). Friend (66-75) (June 2018)

The author has an excellent writing style and the book flows well; it is easy to read and understand but I do not believe it is suitable for all. It may assist a health care professional or those eager to explore the treatment they may receive, but the chapters about treatment may cause alarm or make the reader anxious.

It may have been cathartic for the author to write but I am unsure if this book will help anyone recently diagnosed. The content is detailed and interesting, but I wonder why there is so much emphasis on the author's childhood. I suspect the chapter covering and detailing tests and treatment has the potential to frighten some individuals who have anxieties or concerns about this. It is candid, honest and detailed, and some people appreciate that, but I am concerned about those who do not.

Former carer of breast cancer patient (56-65) (April 2018)

I had difficulty with this book. I don't like the author's juxtaposition of her childhood experiences with her adult cancer life. I found the constant jumping between them annoying and unnecessary (the author obviously thought otherwise). It is interesting to read both parts and to see correlations, but two separate books would be better.

It is a good-looking book with a cover that is not obviously a 'cancer' book. It is easy to understand as the language is direct and unconvoluted, but the style is direct and almost angry at times (a reflection of the author's feelings I suspect). There is humour and an acerbic wit with a play on words that is clever, but not my style.

I felt no warmth from the author and that is something that I need. Or maybe there is nothing for me to attach myself to; there is no familiarity and I don't think that it has to do with not having had this form of cancer.

It is great however, that this cancer has been written about and brought to the fore. Maybe it will be helpful for those with this type of cancer or for a carer, to understand how the patient could be feeling, but I can't recommend it. I found it dull, confusing and just not very enjoyable or engaging.

Living with cancer (myelodysplastic syndrome) (46-55) (March 2018)

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.

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