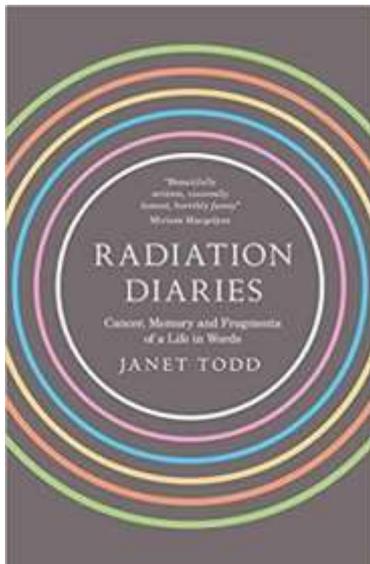


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BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Radiation diaries. Cancer, memory and fragments of a life in words (2018)

Todd J.

London: Fentum Press, 2018.

208pp.

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Average star rating 4.0 (out of 5)

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This is an interesting read for anyone who has had radiotherapy. Janet Todd writes about her experience in diary form. She has had three cancer diagnoses and includes the experience of her father who is terminally ill. Janet is an internationally renowned scholar who has published biographies and critical work on many authors, including Jane Austen and the Shelley Circle. She uses her in-depth knowledge of the classics throughout her book and whilst it is easy enough to understand, if a reader has no knowledge of the literature mentioned, small sections can be off-putting. However, I ignored that and continued, enjoying every page.

Janet draws on memories from her life to pull her through. This makes for extremely interesting reading. Her feelings were my feelings, her humorous moments were mine. I could relate to the red skirt and its use after treatment as cleaning cloths only; my red skirt was a pair of baggy training trousers and a loose pink tee-shirt. Janet is not only battling with her own problems but that of her father who, in his 100th year, is terminally ill. This again opens a further area of interesting and reflective reading.

The book itself has shelf appeal. There is a good design on the cover representative of radiotherapy, the paper is excellent quality, and the typeface and font size are easy to read. The general layout is straightforward, with no illustrations. The tone of the author is immediately likeable, and down to earth. The author uses language that is appropriate, and I did not have a problem with any technical words.

I have appreciated reading this book post radiotherapy treatment. It is a masterpiece, beautifully written, humorous and from the heart. Some readers might struggle with the literary references – my English literature education ended at “O” level stage and I did struggle – but these do not take up the whole of the book by any means and it is my own education that is at fault. I found it to be of general interest and it offered emotional support in that I could relate to the author. It had its funny moments and made me smile. I also consistently lost my way around the hospital building. I also felt lonely under the machine and wondered what on earth I was doing there. I also scoured the internet into the early hours trying to establish my longevity. These are just a couple of examples that led me to the conclusion that we all probably feel the same and do the same sort of things, but Janet Todd has put it into words for us.

Breast cancer patient (66-75) (May 2019)

A funny, insightful book. The author details her cancer experience with great honesty. The humour is quite dark but that's what makes it a great book. She also gives you snippets of her childhood and life which makes her seem more human. There are many quotations from literature in the book, which may annoy some, but look past these and focus on the story. A very well written book that I highly recommend.

Womb cancer survivor (56-65) (May 2019)

Janet Todd is president of a Cambridge college, a scholar and writer, with a focus on biographies and literary writings on women writers in over 30 books. Here, she turns the focus on herself, writing about daily radiotherapy, in the form of 32 diary entries – all written simply and without self-pity. She is enduring radiotherapy for a third bout of cancer, all in the pelvic area, and submits herself to the necessary rituals, describing the processes, including what happens when the machine breaks down (i.e. waiting for another machine) and experiences of being with others waiting for their therapy too. She is placed on a low-fibre diet – mostly 'white bread and stale Victoria sponge cake' – which she eats in a resigned fashion. If she attempts to eat other foods, she spends a lot of time shut away in her toilet. The reader is spared the details, but one can imagine... While she is dealing with treatment, there are other important things going on – not just her elderly father's illness, but the birth of her grandchild. Life does not stop while you have your own crisis to manage, it is clear.

During therapy, there is the surreal sense of being alone with a machine, and little human contact, only an awareness that nearby, others are suffering silently and passively, by themselves, known only by their designations – prostate, breast, bowel. What brings this book to life is that during radiotherapy, she spends time drawing strength from her vast knowledge of English literature, using literary references as distractions and a focus for her thoughts. Her mind takes her back to childhood in Wales, Bermuda and Ceylon when literature functioned as solace and escape, to her past in sixties Ghana, and America at the beginning of the rights movements.

It is a standard size paperback. The layout is clear. The author does not attempt to describe medical terminology or procedures. She has her own expertise – English Literature – and this sustains her through the troubling times that she experiences during treatment. There is not much in terms of medical information; it is more related to feelings and statistics for survival. The author completes internet searches on such matters, and investigates the subject of death, almost with an academic interest. The reader will learn about what is involved in the process of radiotherapy, but more than that, how this affects other aspects of daily living, and thoughts of survival. I found it hugely interesting and insightful and wish for Janet's wellbeing in every respect.

As a reader, I developed affection for her – her fragility, humility and gentle humour as she describes her routine during this time. It involves getting lost many times in hospital corridors, wearing what she calls her 'uniform' to her radiotherapy sessions – a "rumpled, uneven Laura Ashley skirt, long socks and blue cotton knickers" and visiting her 99-year old father, an inpatient in 'hospital-land', with advanced skin cancer. 'Her' radiotherapy machine is often breaking down, and this involves having therapy from various other machines. This means a lot of waiting, during which she attempts to concentrate on reading "White Fang" as a distraction.

I like just about everything about it! If you know little about English literature, the references may not resonate, but Janet writes beautifully, and you can't help but like her. Some may not enjoy her reminiscences about childhood and earlier years, but they are relevant because of what is happening at the time of writing. I recommend it for people about to have radiotherapy. Janet describes the rituals well and explores thoughts of strangeness when left alone with the machine that moves around her.

Friend, Former carer, former health professional working with people with head and neck cancer (66-75) (December 2018)



This is a candid insight into the thoughts and fears of living with several diagnoses and the ups and downs of everyday life, something that you can relate to. It is easy to understand. I like the cover and layout and understood it better once I got used to the tone. Admittedly it took me time to warm to the author, but I like her honesty; there are moments you recognise, like getting lost in the labyrinth of hospital corridors. If I dislike anything it is the time it took me to start understanding the routine of the book; initially it felt jumbled but once I started concentrating, all became clear!

It certainly relates to an unquiet life and this is the message of how you feel when life gives us a nudge to say there is a bump that we need to ride through as best we can and arrive stronger. Also, the quotes are brilliant.

I was diagnosed with pre-cancerous breast cancer (56-65) (September 2019)

It's important for health professionals to understand the impact of the treatment, its side effects and the emotional roller coaster that patients must endure. This gives a good insight into the trauma and will be especially useful for radiologists treating cancer patients. It's also important for family and friends to understand the impact of radiotherapy, especially the restrictions on diet.

It is easy to understand; there are no technical terms and it is in a logical order, taking you on the author's month-long treatment journey. It is a small book with an attractive cover and good typeface. I like the subtitle, it does what it says on the tin.

I like how the author uses her writing skills to describe her thoughts and feelings as she endured radiotherapy and its side effects. She describes the agony of lying on a hard surface, the indignity of being naked from the waist down, the constant pain and bowel problems that almost kept her prisoner in her home. Her coping mechanism was to lose herself in the books she read, which took her back to the many journeys she endured as a child and in her professional life. It is, however, tedious at times.

I might recommend it. It is very useful for healthcare professionals and possibly the family and friends of someone going through similar treatment

Breast cancer 2011 (66-75) (February 2019)



A good book for people with a strong interest in English literature, but it's not a light read. The writing style is unique but might not be to the liking of many due to the rather heavy use of the language that is normally only seen in English literature. It is not particularly difficult to understand but has lots of metaphors and literature-related content. I may recommend it, it will depend on the reader.

Health professional and friend of cancer patient (Under 25) (April 2019)

This is quite a different book to include in a cancer information library in that it draws on the author's wide knowledge of literature to supplement her experience of radiotherapy following recurrent womb cancer. It also draws on her life as a child abroad, including boarding school, and the health problems of her 100-year-old father. It is most useful for the emotional, coping aspects of treatment. Some people might turn to reading, or indeed to their favourite hobby. Because it is a book with many literary quotes, it might be a welcome diversion from cancer for some readers.

The author handles the topic as she goes through the treatment, so it is logical. The parts about cancer are easy to understand but not all readers will identify with the allusions to literary texts. I do like some of these, but it becomes quite hard work as the book progresses and you need to be widely read. The author is a bit dismissive of medics at times but does emphasise in her postscript how grateful she is to the NHS and that her criticisms were mainly about inevitable delays in appointments.

I was quite surprised when I started reading as I expected more information on radiotherapy, but perhaps there is only so much you can say about a treatment that is the same day in and day out. There is information about the radiotherapy process, and the author describes her thoughts and feelings as she lies on the couch. To combat her boredom, she reminisces about her life, her childhood abroad, her family and her boarding school experience. Parallel to her own experience, she describes the illness of her father who is almost 100 years old.

The author, a Cambridge English literature graduate and university professor, has a deep knowledge of literature. Whilst this makes for interesting reading and a break from the reality of radiotherapy and its often-unpleasant side effects, it might appeal only to those who have a wide knowledge of English Literature. There are a few too many allusions to literature for me. However, it is well written and witty and does have appeal. I recommend it as a diversion from treatment whilst giving some knowledge of radiotherapy to a limited audience who will appreciate a literary work. The treatment appears to have worked so it could be useful in giving hope to those with recurrences. It is also a general interest book for someone who enjoys literature.

Almost seven-year survivor of womb cancer (66-75) (February 2019)

I must admit that I was not looking forward to reading this book as I have read many cancer diaries, but this is different; it is the musings of the author when undergoing radiotherapy and very readable. It is very easy to understand as the author does not use medical terminology, it's not that sort of book.

The author's musings provide an insight into her childhood and relationship with her parents. Running alongside this is her current relationship with her elderly father as his health deteriorates. It's difficult to say how useful it will be for anyone living with or surviving cancer, but it is an interesting read with a different slant on treatment.

Living with cancer (myelodysplastic syndrome) (46-55) (November 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.

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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