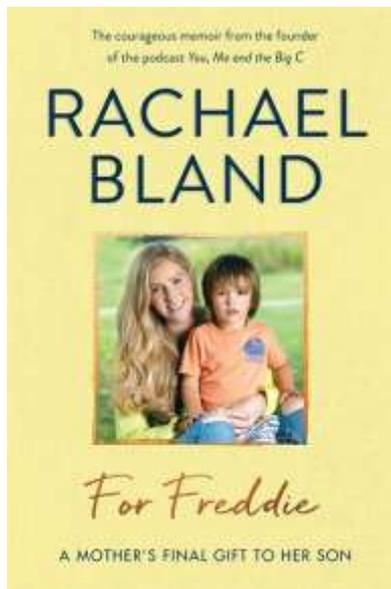


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# BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



**For Freddie. A mother's final gift for her son (2019)**

Bland R.

London: Michael O'Mara, 2019.

320pp.

ISBN 9781789291322.

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

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This book has the potential to give someone living with cancer a positive mindset, particularly around self-reflection on the positive things they may have, such as supportive friends and family. It may have limited use for someone caring for someone with cancer in terms of practical advice on how to support an individual; however, it is a positive and uplifting read that may bring some comfort.

It is very simple to understand with technical language kept to a minimum. As the author wrote it for her son she has taken care to explain any areas that may cause confusion. The language is very informal, and this makes it appropriate for any reader, regardless of their understanding of cancer. I read the hardback, which had a very appealing design, including two sets of photos from the many events that are referred to throughout. The typeface is quite large making the book easy to read and the paper is of high quality. The tone is informal and simple with relatively short chapters, making it easy to dip in and out.

This was certainly one of the books I have enjoyed reviewing most for Macmillan as the author is incredibly personable. Whilst cancer clearly had a major impact on her life, the fact that it isn't the focus of her book shows that it certainly didn't define her. The book is incredibly honest, funny at times and when cancer is mentioned it is done so in a clear and understandable way. It could certainly be considered useful as a general interest book. It is very positive, and the author conveyed her experiences well. It may also be inspirational given that she completed it following diagnosis to ensure that her young son had an 'enduring keepsake'. However, it has limited use to increase understanding around cancer. It is essentially an autobiography meaning that the author's experience with cancer doesn't begin until page 267 (out of 319). If someone was looking for a book to help increase their understanding of living with cancer I may recommend other books that have this as more of a focus.

Overall, I really enjoyed this book; it reads as an interesting and intimate account of the author's life and it is clear she has had a lasting impact via her podcast, "You, Me and the Big C". Although its practical use may be limited I have recommended it to several friends as a positive story about an inspirational woman.

**Son of lung cancer patient (26-35) (July 2019)**

This is a deeply personal account by a mum with a terminal prognosis to her young child so that he has something to remember her by. It is a deeply personal account of Rachael's life from childhood up to the present day. It does touch on her cancer throughout and in a later chapter she goes into more detail about diagnosis and treatment, which give an insight into living with an aggressive type of cancer that is so difficult to treat and that has an eventual terminal prognosis, but it isn't really about that; it is more of a mum's manual for her young son on how to approach life.

It's a very easy book to read and only a small part is devoted to cancer. It is in chronological order with the lessons Rachael has learnt along the way. It is a very personal account as she is speaking directly to her son, it is primarily a life guide for her young son in the future. It is a very poignant and deeply moving account of the author's life and how she would want her son to remember her and as such the language is clear and direct. It is an appealing book. The colour photographs are all high resolution and give the book an even more personal feel. The typeface is very clear, and the book has a real quality feel to it.

It is such a personal book that it feels like the author is talking directly to you. It is written with honesty and this highlights a real sadness in that Rachael knows she will not be around for her son as he grows up. However, it never slips into sadness or self-pity. It is written with real hope and Rachael's lust for life shines through. Her optimism and joy for life are a contrast from the more introspective parts of the book when she reflects that she will not experience the future joys ahead of her young family. She had only a short time to write the book and it must have been overwhelming just to process the prognosis, so to write such an uplifting and powerful book is a testament to her skill and intelligence. It will always remind her son and husband what an amazing person she was.

There is nothing I dislike, although the reality of Rachael's situation and the reason behind the book are never far from your thoughts. Anyone who has been told or had a loved one told that their cancer may be untreatable will identify with many of the feelings addressed. I found it a difficult read, especially towards the end as it becomes apparent that Rachael's cancer will kill her. It is such a personal book that you sometimes feel you are intruding. It should be primarily treated as a celebration of the author's life and her family.

It may not be for everyone affected by cancer. Rachael doesn't provide direct advice to other people with her cancer, but it is a very personal account of being diagnosed with a cancer that is terminal. It is a very uplifting book even though the outcome is very sad, and some parts are difficult to read. Rachael is honest throughout and it must have been difficult to write some of it, but even though it is a sad situation she never lapses into self-pity and has a positive outlook on life that is quite astounding. It is an essential read as it is filled with hope even at the darkest of times. It focuses on the things you can affect rather than worrying about the things over which you have no control. It is a shining example of how to live a life based on hope and optimism.

**Living with non-Hodgkin lymphoma (46-55) (May 2019)**

In terms of offering information and facts on dealing with cancer, this book is not particularly useful but that is not its focus. It is a heartfelt story of a life, written very honestly and with great passion. It is suitable for anyone and demonstrates that life goes on after cancer and death. The bright yellow cover with its photo of Rachael and Freddie reflects the content and tone – upbeat and, in the main, very happy.

I was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer at a similar time to Rachael. I followed her story and got a great deal of help and support from her blog. I found her death difficult to take and expected to be upset by this book, but it was quite the opposite; Rachael's writing style is warm, laugh-out-loud at times and very uplifting. Whilst she does deal with her diagnosis, treatment and impending death, this is not the focus. It is the story of her life so that Freddie, gets to know who his mum was. She achieves this for her son and provides a humorous review of a life well lived for everyone else.

In short, the book is a wonderful legacy for Rachael's son, a stark reminder that not everyone diagnosed with cancer will survive, but more than that a testament to the author's strength of character who achieved so much in getting the conversation around cancer started. I will recommend it because, although Rachael died, her book is very uplifting and interesting and shows a great deal of strength and a life well lived

### **Breast cancer patient successfully treated in 2018 (36-45) (May 2019)**

This is a superbly well written book by one of the co-hosts of the "You, Me and the Big C" podcasts. Rachael wrote it quickly for her young son when faced with the news that her breast cancer was terminal, and she had only weeks left. She wanted to answer her son's questions about his mum as he grows up and to share her life lessons and advice with him and so much of the book is about her life before she was diagnosed in her late 30s. Her account of learning of her diagnosis, treatment, anxiously awaiting results and next steps conveys her strength and positivity through all of this. Given the nature of the book, the detail around her treatment is specific to her circumstances. Rachael manages to reflect on the positives that have come from having cancer, particularly in terms of support.

It is eloquently written and easy to read. Rachael signs off with some beautiful messages for her son when he's older. It's an emotional read yet she still manages to inject some of her humour. I would not have been able to read it whilst my diagnosis and outlook was still raw, but as a parent with young children and a huge fan of the podcasts, I thoroughly enjoyed it. It concludes with various friends and colleagues commenting on their memories of Rachael and how she dealt so admirably with her cancer and found passion and energy to make the podcasts happen.

It is a general interest book for someone living with or affected by cancer, particularly if they have young children. It may help others identify how to help someone affected by cancer, or to understand the emotions of those facing a terminal illness with young children. I like how Rachael doesn't focus on her cancer but shares her background that influenced how she faced cancer and her determination to change how people talk about and perceive cancer, through the podcasts.

### **Living with ovarian cancer (36-45) (April 2019)**

This is an amazing book for anyone who has young kids. It could motivate a parent to write something down so that their child or children can know their true mum or dad, not just learn about them from a third party. It could also help cancer patients – Rachael does not give up her dreams.

It is mostly in chronological order, but she dips into the cancer all along the way. It is brilliantly written – no big cancer words to confuse anyone not on the rollercoaster. The photo on the cover is beautiful as are the photos inside; they show true family.

I knew what this book was about and wasn't disappointed. If you're hoping that it is all about cancer, it is far from that; only one chapter has any detail. I like that it is the story of her life as told to her young son – the good and the bad. If you have kids, it will really help you with the discussions to have. If you don't, it is a well-written book; I read it in a day and my sister has asked to borrow it.

### **Ovarian cancer patient (46-55) (March 2019)**



This book will inspire parents to consider how they can bless and encourage their loved ones after they die. Rachel has created a confessional but with humour, describing the roller coaster that can be the case with an aggressive cancer. 'My cancer was not like anyone else's. My outcome would be individual to me'.

The chronology jumps around to a degree, but the language is normal and easy to understand. It is visually appealing and has sections with colour pictures. It is set out well and of good quality design.

It is human and personal – a mother's attempt to help her son (aged four when she died) know her. It is mostly about her life and loves, what makes her tick. Sometimes she is repetitive and a little irritating but her relating of her cancer journey is feisty and real. She is brave and positive throughout. When bad news comes you need to engage your 'internal warrior'.

### **Macmillan GP (46-55) (August 2019)**

Anyone could read this book, but it is more of an emotional read of a personal nature than a book with lots of facts – the facts are very much contained in the author's podcasts. It might help a parent with cancer do something for their own children, leave memories for example, or discuss the subject with them, but parents without financial means may resent the fact they cannot do the same things for their children.

### **Friend of breast cancer patient; former carer for my late husband who had primary lung and prostate cancer and secondaries to the brain (66-75) (June 2019)**

Anyone could read this book, but Rachael wrote it mainly for her family; it is very personal. Rachael recounts the important times of her life in order and it is easy to understand. The cover photo is lovely, and the back has a message from Rachael to her son, photos of her family and colleagues. The content is well set out, with good sized chapters, an easy-to-read font and family photos.

I followed Rachael's podcast from the start: she was an inspiration to thousands who shared the ups and downs of her treatment, she made cancer easier to talk about and comes over as a very special person – this is clear from the last chapter with memories from her friends. I believe she was inspired to write by her radio co-worker, Tony Livesay whose mother died of cancer when he was a child. It made me think what I would say to my children in this situation. It is a special legacy from mother to son, but Rachael is honest about her illness, which is empowering. I hope it will be useful for Freddie, but it might be a hard read for someone in Rachael's position.

### **I have had sarcoma x2 but have finished treatment (66-75) (June 2019)**

Rachael wrote this for her son, Freddie, when it became apparent that she would not survive her triple-negative breast cancer – she had only months to finish it. She wanted to leave a memoir and, as a journalist, felt a book was the most appropriate format. She wanted to tell him as much as possible about her pre- and post- “mummy life” and leave him with advice for his future. She describes her life and achievements as a journalist, athlete, campaigner and fund raiser – a remarkable woman.

It is visually appealing; the photos bring Rachael and her family to life, the typeface is easy to read, and the tone friendly and often motherly, as she would have wanted. Rachael looks back over her life, so it jumps around, but this is understandable and in context. It is easy to understand and well written, with no technical language

It is heart breaking, funny, interesting, informative and inspiring. I followed Rachael's podcasts and press articles so already knew much of her “story” but learnt more about her and what an incredible woman she was. The end, when she knew she was dying and would not see her son grow up, was heart breaking. I was left with an overwhelming feeling of sadness. It brought home that life is short; we cannot expect to live our allotted “four score years and ten” and should appreciate each day with loved ones while we can. However, it is inspiring to see how much one person can achieve in their life and their impact on others.

I recommend it as a human-interest story, but I don't feel it will help anyone looking to read about cancer. Rachael only really touches on cancer as the reason for her death. She was diagnosed at 38 and died at 40, so it won't be particularly helpful to anyone, let alone a cancer patient, but it wasn't written to help or inform, it was written for her son. It may be suitable for people who have recovered from cancer, again as a general interest read. It is a lovely memoir to Freddie and would be enjoyed by people who love autobiographies. It is well written, but an incredibly sad story of a promising life cut far too short. Rest in peace, Rachael, xxx.

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

This is a real demonstration that cancer can affect anyone, and we can empathise with Rachael through the tales of her childhood and beyond. Her 'life lessons' could apply to anyone. She describes her diagnosis and treatment in the final chapters, but the focus is to tell her story for her young son. The emotional connection and the idea of leaving your story behind for your family could comfort someone living with cancer.

It is beautifully written. It is not technical; a chapter towards the end does have some description of diagnosis and treatment but mostly in lay language. The cover and the photos of Rachael, her friends and family demonstrate how she continued to live her life after diagnosis. I found myself empathising with her in the stories long before she began to talk about her cancer. Her love for Freddie comes through strongly and I hope he will feel the same when he reads the book.

I was already aware of Rachael through her radio work and her podcast 'You, Me and the Big C' – in fact, I did a presentation at my office in which she featured as a 'Powerful Patient'. Through the book, I learnt about her background, her personality, her overwhelming love for her family and finally her bravery in living with her cancer. I was really moved. It's great that royalties are going to a breast cancer charity. It could be a real source of emotional support to those living with cancer, perhaps an inspiration. It's not focussed on cancer specifically but was not written to be.

#### **Medical writer (26-35) (May 2019)**

This is a well-written memoir of an interesting life, tragically cut short. Rachael wanted to record her experiences for her young son to read when he is old enough. It is addressed to him and shares memories of happy times together and advice for his future. Towards the end, Rachael writes about her cancer (including excerpts from her blog "Big C, little me"), the strength she got from her family, and how she never gave up. It could give people an insight into what someone with cancer goes through emotionally and physically. Rachael writes with a great deal of humour, which can offer a more light-hearted perspective in the face of something so devastating.

It is very easy to understand. Rachael describes her childhood, family, university, starting her career, meeting her partner, and her passions and interests. Towards the end, she writes about her diagnosis and its impact on her life. It is an appealing book with a bright cover and glossy photos from her life. The paper is good quality and the font larger than average. Rachael is honest and readers who have listened to her podcast are likely to be fond of her and her no-nonsense way of talking about cancer.

I like her honesty and advice to her son. Everything changed when she was diagnosed, and she used this experience to pass on her life lessons – don't take things for granted, try to make yourself happy, seize the day. She was not afraid to write about areas that others may find trivial in the face of cancer, such as beauty and holidays. It could provide comfort to someone with cancer or a friend or relative. Rachael did not want cancer to define her and wanted to ensure that her life and loves were documented for her son. There is nothing I dislike, but some may find it harder to connect to than to other cancer journeys as it is addressed to her son.

#### **Relative of someone with bowel cancer (26-35) (May 2019)**

This memoir from mother to son is a personal experience of terminal diagnosis and its impact on her and those close to her. Rachael writes from the heart, expressing her emotions, not just reflecting on difficulties and challenges but acknowledging and appreciating happier times. She has tried to capture every possible situation that could lead to questions that most parents are able to answer as their children grow.

I like the manner and tone; it feels like a one-to-one conversation, with a very open and honest approach. It is a very touching read in places where the distress that Rachael feels in leaving behind a young son and missing their time together is very apparent. She has balanced it with her fun and happier times as a child and through her life to help Freddie connect with a wider network of family and friends. The photos are very powerful as they tell their own stories and maintain her identity at every important stage in her life. It is a very well thought through and written book.

It is a good source of information for those at the end of life and those offering support in communicating and reflecting, although every interpretation is personal. There is no wrong, just different, and this could work as a guide.

### **Living with the consequences of breast cancer (56-65) (April 2019)**

Rachael Bland wrote this book as a memoir for her son, who was only three when she died. There is very little about her cancer, but that is deliberate as she wanted to leave a memory of herself and her life for her son. More information about her diagnosis and treatment can be found on her blog Big C, little me.

It is extremely easy to understand as it is aimed at her son for when he grows up. I really like the way she had the idea to write the book and carried it through. Some of her memories and wishes for her son will resonate with anyone who is in a similar position. Her style is very calm, and I really admire her for that.

It might be an interesting book for someone who wants to see how a young woman with everything to live for coped with such a terrible situation. There isn't a lot of technical information, but I think it is exactly what she wanted to achieve – a memoir of her life, her university years, her love for her friends and her family and her sadness that she will not be there to see her son grow up. I got a real sense of how passionate she was and how loved she will always be.

### **A relative/friend of someone with breast cancer (46-55) (March 2019)**



This book may help people with the aspect of learning to live with diagnosis and prognosis and the emotional journey that this entails, but I do not think it is for everyone. I imagine a health care professional would find it interesting, to explore the emotional fall out from a situation such as Rachael's.

It is well written, and the content is easy to understand. The cover has a beautiful picture of Rachael and her boy. The pages are easy on the eye and general layout good. The photographs inside are a nice addition.

I like the idea of the book and the reason behind it, but I did not enjoy it. It is written "For Freddie" and I believe that it should be just for Freddie. I began to feel I was intruding, reading someone's personal diary. Rachael has left her son a beautiful diary, rich in content and emotion, and I cannot fault the book itself – it is written beautifully and has photographs and contributions from many of Rachael's friends and family. I did finish it, and it may just be my problem with the book, but it is the first time I have reviewed a book about a cancer journey that I was reluctant to finish.

**Carer (breast cancer patient) (56-65) (July 2019)**



I love the premise of this book, that the author wrote it for her son. I think it may have got a lot of press coverage when it was published, or the author did, or it must be good, mustn't it? However, I feel that if it hadn't been written by a relatively well-known and loved person, then it would not have been as well received, in fact, it may well have been passed over completely.

The style of writing presents as though the author was writing in a great hurry; and with her diagnosis, she may well have been. It is also almost too positive. It is written as though talking to her son – it was for him – and it made me feel uncomfortable.

The way in which she handled the cancer was the best part as it was done swiftly and succinctly. Overall, quite honestly, I was bored by it. However, I could not help but be touched by the last word of her story; 'Mummy x'. Even the most hard-hearted person would find that emotional.

**Living with cancer (myelodysplastic syndrome) (46-55) (March 2019)**

## Further information

### Why does Macmillan Cancer Support review books?

We use reviews to help us compile a list of suggested cancer books, the [Macmillan Core Book List](#). Cancer information centres and public libraries can use this list to select appropriate and relevant books for people affected by cancer.

We add reviews to the [Directory of information materials for people affected by cancer](#) so that people affected by cancer can see what others in a similar situation think about a book. You can also see details of all the books reviewed in the [Book reviews listing](#), which also has links to all the reviews.

We recruit most of our reviewers through the [Volunteering Village](#) and the [Cancer Voices Network](#), people affected by cancer who have signed up to help Macmillan Cancer Support in a number of ways. Volunteers are a vital part of our book review process; since 2007, over 1,500 Macmillan volunteers have written more than 6,000 reviews of over 500 different books.

If you are a health professional who would like to review books for us, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

### Information and support for people affected by cancer

If you are looking for support to help you live life with cancer, you may wish to contact one of [Macmillan's cancer information and support services](#). Or you can call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00** (Mon-Fri 9am–8pm). We have an interpreting service in over 200 languages. Just state, in English, the language you wish to use. If you are deaf or hard of hearing you can use textphone no 0808 808 0121 or Text Relay.

You can also email us using the [website enquiry form](#). Alternatively, [visit our website](#).

### Feedback

If you have any comments, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

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

**For information, support or just someone to talk to, call 0808 808 00 00 or visit [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)**

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