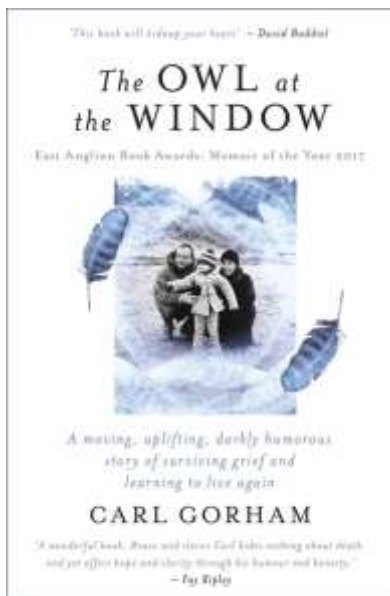


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BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



The owl at the window. A memoir of loss and hope (2017)

Gorham C.

London: Coronet (Hodder imprint), 2017.

260pp.

ISBN 9781473642331.

Average star rating 4.2 (out of 5)

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This is such a good read. It will depend on the person and where they are on their emotional journey, but I think anyone would benefit from reading it, whether they are recently bereaved, bereaved at any time in their life, or yet to be bereaved. It's such a well-written and insightful book and full of warmth.

The author describes his journey in logical order, with flashbacks to the development of his relationship with his partner. It isn't a technical book, it's completely empathetic; anyone who has been through a close bereavement will identify with the journey and the feelings that go with it. It's a very appealing book and it's good to see the photos and put a face to the wonderful descriptions of Vikki.

I have been recommending it to all my friends to read, not because of their situations, but just because it is such a good read. It is a very engaging and I couldn't wait to pick it up. Some parts made me laugh out loud, others made me cry. It is a beautiful tribute to Vikki and anyone who has been through a close bereavement will identify with the emotions, challenges, and depths of despair that loss brings. It is extremely heart warming to read how Carl developed his relationship with Romy after her mum died. Anyone who is a football fan will definitely feel there in the moment of weighing up the fortunes of a match in the comparison of a life event. It is extremely true to life and so beautifully written.

My brother lost his wife, my friend lost her husband, and I currently have three friends with advanced cancer (56-65) (August 2019)

This is a beautiful story of love and tragic loss. A first-rate book from a first-rate, published author. It is a wonderful look at how the journey of grief is navigated; it's also a comfort in that it helps to see that others feel the same way. It might not be suitable for someone whose partner or spouse is in the initial stages of cancer as it could be upsetting – it really will depend on the reader's emotions.

It reads like a novel; it is brilliantly written and moves between the present and past with the use of italics to distinguish between times. It is very easy to understand. I love the title and the attractive colours. The typeface is easy to read, and the paper is closer to vellum than white, making it easy on the eyes.

I like that the author doesn't hold back from his grief; it's there in all its raw emotion, as is the love, and the dark humour is as gripping as the love and tragedy. He is brutally honest, and his book provides useful insight into the stages of grief. It helped me to put my emotions in perspective, but the emotional content might not be for everyone. The words (p. 116) "I can't contemplate it... It's too much. Too utterly terrifying" sum up how most of us might feel at the death of a spouse or partner. There is also something that had not occurred to me before (p. 131), "Bereavement fatigue has set in. I desperately feel the need for a change of scene. To see different people", yet it is so very easy to understand. The journey through grief of the author's daughter is every bit as moving as that of her father's. We read how he helped her to construct 'Cardboard Mummy' (pp. 189-199) and how Cardboard Mummy helps her to work through grief to healing when she takes Cardboard Mummy everywhere and eventually to school and talks to the class about her mother's death.

I had wondered how the author thought of the title, but on page 151 we read that an owl scratched at and bumped against a window and that the author felt that this was a connection with his late wife and took comfort from the contact. It isn't the only strange occurrence and each time he has a "sense of something powerful and irresistible that involves Vikki". It is deeply moving. I cried reading this book and smiled and chuckled. On page 241 the author tells us that he doesn't "want to be a Miss Havisham, still tending her possessions even as they're choked with cobwebs". And I feel that he is slowly coming out of grief, or at least, getting it to a more manageable place. In the last pages, we get the ending I wanted.

This is an amusing and sad, heart-warming and heart-breaking book. It's an unputdownable read of love and tragic loss, of family and of a child's pain and bravery. There is also a wisdom in this book that gives me insight into the grief of losing a spouse or partner while being so very honest about the brutal pain. It's my usual habit to pass on books so that others can enjoy them, but I'm holding onto this one, at least for a while; it makes precious reading.

Caring for someone with prostate cancer (66-75) (June 2019)



The author tracks his life from the time he meets his wife to her death and beyond. He does not draw together advice or tips, as such. Following Vikki's diagnosis, she undergoes chemotherapy. We are given no specific details of how she is feeling, and the only effect described is the sudden loss of hair overnight while staying in a hotel, and the black humour of trying to organise a head-cover so that she could have her breakfast in full view of people she had met the previous evening. Work continues for them both, and they enjoy many holidays. The message here is: live life now, don't put things off. In one memorable chapter, the author shouts and is unkind to his wife as she urges him to follow her quickly to an art gallery; this memory haunts him after her death. Although told simply, this clearly has a profound message!

The author skips several years – in which he states that Vikki gives birth to a daughter, has further cycles of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and then decides that she will no longer attend appointments for monitoring and scans. I would have preferred to know more about this decision. It is summarised as Vikki ‘not wanting to know’, but I would guess that there are many deeper things that could have been shared; the reader cannot help but feel curious about this and I would like to know more. Vikki dies in an Intensive Care Unit in Hong Kong, in very distressing circumstances for her husband and daughter as she remains in a coma for ten days. A post mortem revealed that cancer had spread to most of her organs.

It is a standard-size paperback with a tasteful cover, showing a photo of the family, a couple of feathers and the title. The title itself refers to an event that happened after Vikki’s death – a barn owl came to the window at night. The reader is left thinking that this is significant in the mind of the author. I like the author’s writing style. It is friendly and sensitive in tone. His words flow well, and he has a warm and engaging style. He uses alternate chapters to move between ‘now’ and former times, and this is made clearer using standard text and italics to differentiate. He uses humour, which is good, but I had the impression that some of the anecdotes are not entirely true, and just there for the sake of a laugh, for example, the man in the chemists who was unable to articulate that he was sorry to hear of Vikki’s death.

The best writing in this book, in my view, takes place after Vikki’s death. The focus is now on Romy, her daughter, and how she deals with the situation. The author’s writing is sensitive and darkly humorous again. Romy works out how she will choose to remember her mother, and fortunately, her creativity brings warmth and gentleness into the potentially-bleak scenario.

The book ends on a positive note for the author. Another woman enters his life. The reader is left wondering how things may have been if Vikki had continued with her treatment. Would she have had more good-quality time? We cannot know. Her husband does not contemplate this in the book, understandably.

It would be useful for readers who have a child who has lost a parent. This child is sensitive and works out her own way to deal with her loss, not just with a memory box, but with a ‘Cardboard Mummy’ which the author is initially worried about — but in fact, people warm to this construction. For people who do not know much about the medical information that surrounds cancer, it could be a distressing book. It would be very unfortunate if people thought that this is the only course that cancer takes – i.e. inevitable metastases, followed by sudden, unexpected death. For people who are reading from many sources, this is an interesting book, well-written – but it should not be read for information and guidance as such.

Former health professional. Carer (66-75) (February 2019)

I did like this book, but I didn't love it. It is highly readable and different from many of this genre that I have read, but there was no real pull for me. I was, however, intrigued by the title. And it isn't clear why it is used until an incident recalled two thirds of the way through. Ingenious. The structure – flipping from past to present – is clever. The author writes with such joy about the love he had/has for his wife.

There are refreshing elements to this book. There is no long, detailed, drawn-out description of any of the medical procedures that his wife went through; it is more about the events surrounding these and the impact they had on the family. Also, his daughter's 'story' is included and is as important as his feelings. The account of Cardboard Mummy is excellent. So too, on a more sobering note, is the description of the final flight to Hong Kong. It conveys the trauma, anxiety and panic very well.

I wrote above that I did like this book, but didn't love it. Having recalled pieces, I can amend this statement: I didn't love this book, but I liked it very, very much indeed.

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



This is written from the heart. The pieces about the young daughter are particularly moving. However, it may be too raw for someone recently bereaved. People have different ways of dealing with things and it is difficult to judge if it would be useful.

It is very easy to understand, whatever you know about cancer. There is nothing technical and the language is always appropriate. It is not strictly chronological but not confusing. The cover is a bit bleak, but perhaps appropriate for the subject.

I might recommend it. It left me with mixed feelings and I found it a difficult one to judge. It is extremely well written, easy to read and relatable, but it didn't totally grip me. I was not particularly interested Carl's search for a new partner!

Cancer recoverer. I have also lost family and friends to cancer, including my mum (56-65) (November 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

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