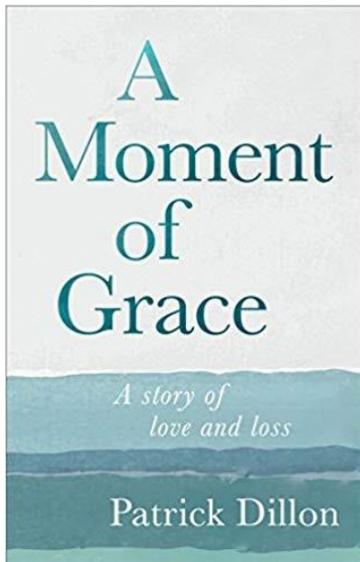


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BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



A moment of grace. A story of love and loss (2018)

Dillon P.
London: Ebury Press, 2018.
224pp.
ISBN 9781785038464.
£12.99.

Average star rating 4.7 (out of 5)

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This is one of the most beautiful books I have read recently, so true and gentle yet raw too. Nicola was a young 51-year-old theatre producer at London's Roundhouse. She was natural, not flamboyant or extrovert, but glowed within this work. The couple had been together for 28 years. With their two children almost grown up their life was good but in May 2015 Nicola was diagnosed with leukaemia. Patrick describes the last 13 months of Nicola's life, from what seemed an ordinary London day when she was diagnosed, to her last breath, and his feelings after her death.

Nicola was awarded an OBE for her contributions to the arts but didn't receive it while she was alive. Her last work was Monteverdi's L'Orfeo, who goes to Hades to bring back his dead wife so he can return her to the light – four months later she was diagnosed. Patrick didn't realise he would be setting out on his own journey to recover her and also find himself in a dark place searching for the gates of hell. In his book, he talks a great deal about that journey; it is a testing and fearful time but their deep love unites them and strengthening their relationship to the end, and beyond.

The cover design is beautiful and gentle just like the story, and the title is perfect. It is beautifully written; the language throughout is appropriate and the content is structured logically and thoughtfully. I like that that author had a real reason to write it; it seemed vital to write it for the whole family, a tribute to his wife. I could relate to it as it mentioned places I had lived; the descriptions are spot on. I like the almost poetic way that Patrick Dillon writes, his book is full of sadness, love and hope.

This wonderful book is a beautiful, tender account of Patrick's life with Nicola during her illness and after her death and his unbearable grief. It's a very uplifting book full of love and slowly of letting go. Sad yes, but looking forward with hope. There is so much romance in the mundane and how this family survives and ferocity in the way they all love one another. It relates to real life, the struggle, the precious moments that bring us together, in a way that we might not find during times of wellness. It is very useful to help us understand our own feelings in these situations, to help us feel we are not alone. It's gentle, beautiful, full of grace exactly as the title says, and goes beyond to the future, enabling a huge amount of hope. We do not talk about death and grief enough; this book helps in exploring feelings during this very sad time.

Recently bereaved, and cared for someone bereaved. Retired Macmillan specialist practitioner (66-75) (October 2019)

This book could be read at any time. If you are at initial diagnosis it may help you to put things in order and highlight what is important for you. Carers and family members may choose to read it before, during or after illness. It's not a step-by-step guide, it's an insight to what was most important in Patrick's and Nicola's journey.

It's not in strict chronological order. Patrick often reflects on what has happened as well as describes things as they happen, sometimes jumping from before Nicola dies to afterwards and back. The tone and language are perfect for his personal journey of love, life and loss. The language is pure, real, informative and at times emotional.

I enjoyed reading about Nicola and Patrick's life. He inspires people to live in the moment, treasure every second. He says it isn't a sad book, but you can't help but be moved. It is an honest and often raw account of their lives together and the journey of their family and friends. His moving account allows the reader to think not only of the sadness of death but what was important from the outset and the journey they took.

Patrick has made a lasting tribute to Nicola and, in the process, given readers an insight into how to evaluate things from a different perspective, remembering the simple pleasures in life. A view from a hospital room, a tree in the garden, photos on a wall, an email or text, food, doctors and nurses all played a role in their journey. He made simple pleasures something to treasure, things people take for granted. Nicola took pleasure in the simple things whilst she was dying. He allowed readers to take the intimate journey of their love for each other and their close family and friends.

Relative (36-45) (September 2019)

This is an honest account by someone who has dearly loved and lost someone. The author's compassion for his wife is evident throughout. He gives a sensitive yet down-to-earth account from diagnosis, through treatment, to his wife's eventual death. He explains his own feelings and those of his children. It would be particularly helpful to someone recently bereaved by a close family member or friend, but also for health professionals working in palliative care. It will depend on the individual, but it could be particularly useful afterwards to alleviate the stress of bereavement.

The topic is dealt with in chronological order with some jumps forward to illustrate an event at the time; it is never confusing to read, though. It is well written, with great compassion and sensitivity – the author is articulate and honest. The book is a good size that one can read anywhere with a classy cover of pale green. The typeface is very clear on strong paper. Photos and illustrations would have been superfluous.

This is an extremely well-written account of the emotional journey of a man who witnesses his wife being diagnosed and treated for cancer. The audience is aware that the author and his wife have had a happy, busy life together and that fate has dealt them a cruel blow. The book should give comfort to those who have suffered a similar fate. The descriptions of the places visited in their past are vivid and entertaining and the juxtaposition between the family's utter misery during and after the wife's illness and normal, uncomplicated life going on around them is poignant.

Skin cancer patient (56-65) (July 2019)

I highly recommend this book. The story of a loved one's battle with cancer could be dark and dismal but this is full of love, laughter, hope, taking you on a rollercoaster of emotions. It is not technical or packed with facts and figures, it's real life laid out.

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

This could help someone recently bereaved, or a close family member or friend, to understand there is life after you lose someone. For patients and carers, it is best read beforehand to help them understand the path that they may be travelling. It gives the perspective from both sides and is written well, with great care. It flows well even though the author jumps back and forth, and is easy to understand and read. I think it would be very beneficial for the intended audience, it is written to make you feel you are there with them on their journey. The cover doesn't give anything away; it doesn't make you feel apprehensive about what's inside.

Living with cancer (myelodysplastic syndrome) (56-65) (May 2019)

This recounting of the journey of cancer diagnosis, treatments and palliative care will resonate with many bereaved partners. In many ways it implies permission for individuals to grieve in whatever way they feel is appropriate to them. It should be compulsory reading for healthcare professionals involved in end-of-life care.

It is very easy to read and could be read at one sitting. Any technical words are explained. The language is appropriate and makes for easy reading. As this is a personal experience, the tone reflects the author's mind and feelings.

The book has little presentational effect; the plain cover does not invite an audience to pick up the book and benefit from the messages inside. It is just the right size to fit into a coat pocket or bag but be warned: reading it in public might not be the best plan as you recognise the feelings and emotions you might have experienced. The lack of illustrations and photos does not detract from its value. The only negative is the lack of an index or chapter titles. I wanted to return to various sections without having to look through all the chapters to get to where I wanted to revisit.

This is a clear and careful recounting of the ultimate journey, a sharing of love and fears within the context of a couple's relationship. I like the honest reflections, the sharing of experiences and the expression of feelings about the process of diagnosis, tests, treatments and the dying process, along with how the author felt.

Despite the author's claim that it is not a sad book, I found that the examples and descriptions of care and the emotional experiences described did promote feelings of sadness and reflections on my own experiences of caring for my wife and being present at her death. The book also promotes support for my feelings to realise that others have trod the road before and experienced the same feelings of despair and remembrance of those good moments of shared love. For some, the personal benefit will be the realisation that it is fine to grieve in the way that makes sense for you.

Recently bereaved (66-75) (December 2018)

Patrick Dillon records his wife's last months with leukaemia and their daily life. He is an architect and writer, his wife Nicola a successful producer at London's Roundhouse. They had been married for 28 years and their life together seemed idyllic – a perfect relationship, two lovely adult children, interesting careers, a great lifestyle – then the diagnosis. The outcome, death, is known from the start. The reader travels with Patrick, Nicola and their children through her illness on a roller-coaster of emotions. Treatment causes much suffering, and alternately gives them hope and optimism and then despair as Nicola becomes more ill. At times the reader may feel like an intruder on a loving relationship described in detail. Many events in are recalled and all seem perfect. Texted 'love letters' are quoted, and the couple's deep love is very apparent. Patrick acknowledges that his love grows as Nicola's illness progresses. They enjoy remarkable outings, holidays in favourite places, and immerse themselves in every precious moment of the last months of Nicola's life.

It is mostly chronological, but the author does deviate often from the current time, after his wife's death, to various points in time during her illness. There is not much medical detail; it is written solely from the author's perspective, describing what he sees and feels. It is very easy to understand. The author is a professional writer and has a huge skill in expressing his thoughts and experiences. His writing style is beautiful, poetic at times. The reader is constantly made aware of how wonderful the experience of being alive can be, from the smallest things – leaves on trees and colourful skies – to larger-scale experiences, such as celebrations and holidays. I was saddened that the author did not express gratitude to the medical professionals and the donor of his wife's transplant, and the Anthony Nolan Trust. He did thank others, with reference to the making of the book, and supportive friends and relatives.

The cover is tasteful and the text is well laid out and clear to read. There are no pictures. The author refers to taking photographs regularly, but does not share any with readers. (A photo of his wife can be found on the internet. I was curious to see what she looked like. He only referred to her appearance as 'having a wide smile'.)

This memorable book reminds us to take advantage of every day. The author savours wonderful memories, which provide lasting legacies, and the support of his children through his grief. It may or may not be helpful. The author describes his wife and their life together as just about perfect. She was also stoical throughout her illness, which may not resonate with everyone. However, each person's experience of bereavement is unique, and it may comfort some people to read about the feelings of others. And it serves as a great reminder to us all to appreciate our lives daily.

Caring for someone recently bereaved. Former health professional (66-75) (October 2018)

I love this book. That may seem odd for a book about death and bereavement, but I love it because it is just that. There are no clever gimmicks, no playing at being an author and no sensationalising or dressing up of illness. Instead it is written with warmth and love and respect for all involved, especially the author's wife. Anyone could read it at any time, especially after a death. It is easy to understand as it reads as if you are sitting with a coffee and chatting. No pretentiousness here. The book is a great size and has a lovely feel to it, with calm colours on the cover.

What I love more than anything – something I haven't come across before – is the mesmerising way Patrick writes about the significance of place, the importance of places to him and his wife. This resonates strongly because that is what I seek: a place where I can feel at peace and at home. So far, this is Scotland, too far away to visit often. This overtook the usual description of diagnosis and treatment; it is there, but not laboured, as if we are wearing their shoes, not quite believing that death is likely. Patrick's honesty about love, emotions and loss shines through I couldn't help really liking him. Sir, you have my respect and are welcome for a coffee anytime.

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



I am glad I read this book but be prepared to be sad! I like its honest descriptions of how cancer affects the people around the person with cancer. It is best read after bereavement. It is easy to understand and the understated cover is appropriate.

I had a cancer diagnosis in 2011 and I have lost family and friends to cancer, including my mum (56-65) (February 2020)

This beautifully written and deeply moving book gives an insight into grief but, more than anything, is the story of a loving relationship. Patrick describes how close he and his wife were and their loving relationship before she died, so it may be helpful to someone grieving for a partner, but could be helpful before bereavement. Patrick reflects on life with his wife and family, describing happy times as well as the sadness and difficulty of his wife's treatment for leukaemia, the tragedy of her death at fifty-one, and life after her death. It is very much a celebration of the love and the life they shared, written with deep gratitude for the happiness they experienced.

The paperback cover is beautiful – a simple image of lavender flowers – and a very moving way to illustrate a story about remembrance, and about a beautiful person who was deeply loved. I like the typeface, and the white space makes the text very comfortable to read. It is easy to understand, and I like Patrick's honesty and sensitivity. He does go back and forth in time, sometimes I had to re-read sentences, but the order of events isn't so important. He recalls different memories at different times, weaving a patchwork of memories around the story of what happened.

Patrick writes beautifully, with warmth and tenderness, and his language poignantly express his experiences. He describes family life and his thoughts and feelings with honesty and intimacy – the reader feels privileged to read about the love and kindness that they shared. It's as if he trusts the reader enough to be open and frank, and the reader can feel that they are following this family's journey through illness and loss, but also feeling their joy and deep love. I experienced it as a love story – a moving tribute to a woman who was very much loved, and an account of many happy times shared as a couple and as a family. One very moving memory is of a painting that his daughter made, showing a landscape his wife loved, which they put up on the wall for her to see from her hospital bed.

I don't dislike anything. Sometimes I wondered a little about the children – their son, who had exams when his mother was diagnosed, and their daughter, who was at university. I wondered how they coped with such a terrible situation as their adult lives were just beginning. However, the focus of the book is Patrick's relationship with his wife, and he might have wanted to keep his children's story more private. And he does describe how the family supported each other so well.

This is a very uplifting book. Patrick writes of the relationship with his wife, "In our last year together we were more happy, in some ways, than we've ever been". It can help to remind us that wonderful, loving relationships are possible, and of the importance of deeply cherishing those we love, and the memories we have of them. It might really help people who are going through a partner's illness, or grieving their loss, by showing that they are not alone, and that surviving heartache and grief is possible. I might recommend it. For those recently bereaved, Patrick's descriptions of his feelings might feel very raw – he writes very honestly about the shock of grief and his desperate sadness. However, this may comfort some readers; it shows that other people are living with, and surviving, loss, despite how overwhelmingly difficult it can be. It would be good to have available as a resource – people would find it helpful to read the summary at the back and decide if it might help them.

Nurse (36-45) (October 2019)

I like this book. From the outset there is hope and positivity. The author describes the beautiful personality of his wife well and how they hoped for a positive outcome. It was not to be, but he describes how they made the best of bad times, how it brought them closer together and they realised how much they meant to each other. He also describes how his adult children dealt with their mother's illness and death.

It is very easy to understand; the author flicks back and forth from the time before his wife died to the time after she died but it flows well and makes sense; this is just a style of writing. He doesn't gloss over how ill his wife became and describes in some detail her last weeks. She suffered, but still made the best of every moment.

The author describes how he feels after Nicola's death – anger and hopelessness often overwhelm him. He portrays well the loneliness of bereavement, particularly of a partner. However, he doesn't go into detail about how he feels or how he deals with it and so, although very good, it is not really about bereavement after death; it is more about the loss of their lifestyle and how they dealt with the illness. The illness was short, and Nicola suffered much discomfort but the book concentrates on what is good in the journey rather than what is bad; an important way to look at things.

It will be helpful to anyone with cancer, not just leukaemia; at diagnosis you are overwhelmed, and it is useful to know how other people deal with the news – it helps you to re-think how you deal with it. It is a difficult subject and I have given the book four stars as I don't think there is a perfect way of dealing with it.

A six-year survivor of womb cancer (66-75) (December 2018)

This is beautifully written, genuine and detailed but I did not enjoy it. The author states that it is not a sad book, but it is a story of love and loss and extremely sad from start to finish, heartfelt and poignant. Someone recently diagnosed with cancer may be frightened or alarmed. Nicola's journey is tough, and despite her positivity and optimism, she eventually succumbed in a heart-breaking way.

The cover is simple, and the typeface and general layout are good. It is expertly written, flows well, and the author consistently tries to ensure the reader understands the varied treatments and medical episodes.

I would not recommend this book because it only provides knowledge about the journey of a terminally ill cancer patient. It may give a health care professional insight into the journey of someone who is terminally ill, but someone recently diagnosed may be frightened and a carer might become depressed or low in mood and believe that they may ultimately be in Patrick's shoes. I can't help wondering, although it may have helped Patrick and Nicola's children, who else will benefit from reading it.

Carer of terminally ill breast cancer patient (56-65) (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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