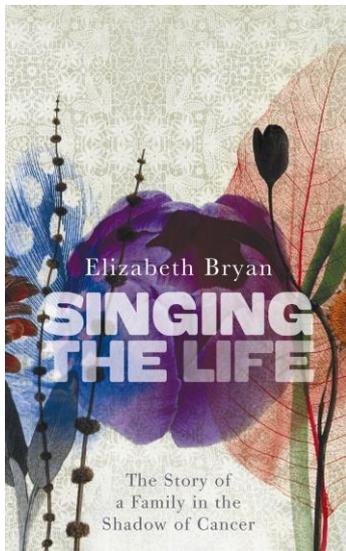


**MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT**

BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Singing the life. The story of a family in the shadow of cancer (2007)

Bryan E.

London: Vermilion (Random House), 2007.

xiii, 306pp.

ISBN 978-0-09-191715-9. £12.99.

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Average star rating 4.3 (out of 5)

**Macmillan Cancer Support
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ**

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Although I did not have any of the cancers described in this book, I could relate to parts, for example, the thoughts and feelings of the three women. It also opened up many thoughts about the right way to approach gene testing with possible patients.

The terms and statistics are a bit overwhelming at the beginning, but it gets easier to read as you get further in. The author describes the emotions very well. It helps to know that your thoughts and feelings are normal and to accept the different aspects of cancer, good or bad. By its nature, the content may bring comfort or distress.

I was very interested in the research that has been carried out into the cancer gene and the discussions that must then take place; whether to tell family members about the choices available at important stages of their lives must be an extremely hard decision. I found the book moving and I was saddened by the deaths of various individuals. Having said that, I also found the acceptance of the women a source of comfort, and it enabled me to look at my own circumstances in a different light.

Non-Hodgkin lymphoma patient in remission (46-55) (August 2010)



This is the story of someone's journey dealing with the cancer that affected her and her family. It would be especially interesting to people affected by the BRCA1 gene.

It is written as a story; there is no self-pity and there is a feeling of optimism throughout. The author is a doctor in her own right and assumes an understanding of the genetics of hereditary cancer.

As a general book to read, it is enjoyable but I do think you need to have had experience of breast cancer or cancer, especially the BRCA1, to persevere to the end. It is well written and Elizabeth Bryan is inspirational. It made me cry, as I truly didn't expect her to die.

Breast cancer patient (46-55) (August 2010)

This is a personal insight into Elizabeth Bryan's experience of living under the cloud of cancer and, ultimately, fighting her own battle against it. From very early on, she had to face the reality of living with the threat of cancer whilst also dealing with the emotions of watching and supporting family members with the disease. Her experiences are complicated, traumatic and wide ranging and this book, which details those experiences so accurately, provides an invaluable insight into her world.

Cancer patients and carers will gain a great deal of knowledge and guidance from this book. It contains a section towards the beginning that will also help those struggling to relate to children or young people who are experiencing the loss of a family member through cancer. There are many different relational, emotional, physical, personal, and medical dynamics to the book – too many to mention – but the reflections on the experiences of the young people are of great interest.

The book is obviously of significance to those who have a family history of cancer as it discusses in depth the options, decisions and medical research that Elizabeth faced, considered and acted upon. Due to its very personal nature, I believe it is suited to patients or carers rather than health professionals. However, a wide range of people in very different situations could find comfort, reassurance, guidance and valuable insight from Elizabeth's experiences. It will help those living with cancer in many ways, but particularly in understanding some of the emotions of patients, carers, friends or relatives. It shows us how these emotions can affect the decisions we make and the behaviours we exhibit. In addition, it portrays the absolute necessity of having adequate support and a positive environment when facing the trials of either living with cancer or caring for someone with cancer.

There is a lot of detail early on about the diagnosis and outcome of some of the illnesses before some of the family members are introduced. At times, this is confusing, especially when combined with the mass of family history and genetic theory. However, after this initial confusion, the book begins to flow and the order of events becomes much more logical. As Elizabeth begins to describe the events of her and her family's lives in chronological order, her style becomes more personal and easy to read. The book seems to find its pace and gently ease its way to the finish. Elizabeth's story is completed with a wonderful tribute by her husband, Ronald. Ronald informs the reader of the sad news that Elizabeth lost her battle against cancer. Although it is sad that the book must finish in such a way, Ronald manages to complete it with sensitivity, gentleness and with great credit to Elizabeth.

The book is very appealing both in appearance and subject matter. There is a good balance between the author's narrative, quotes from letters, poems, journals and song lyrics, and information from medical resources. These quotes support the issues raised by the writer; the additional materials do not overpower the reader but support the main thread of Elizabeth's thoughts. The book raises and answers questions concerning issues that are very current and of great interest to the public and for that reason, I believe it would appeal to a wide-ranging audience. My only fear is that the complicated outset of the book may put some readers off, but as a whole, the book is attractive and appealing.

What I like most about this book is Elizabeth's honesty and openness. She is honest about her own reactions, failings, concerns and behaviour and she is honest about

the people around her and their emotions and actions. She is honest about her family, her friends, her environment, her work, her treatment and her symptoms. She does not seem to restrain her thoughts or contain her opinions even if that results in exposing her own and others' weaknesses. It is alluded to in the book that she may have faced some criticism for this honesty at times, but it is refreshing to read the truth about a cancer situation without feeling that the communication of events or ideas is constructed, constricted or overly censored. At times Elizabeth recognises that she needs to reassess her feelings and ensure she is not in denial but again she is honest about this reaction and takes the reader through this process of reassessment, culminating in a review of her own emotional response. Elizabeth has to be courageous at times to achieve this honesty but her story is all the more powerful in having achieved this.

There are a couple of things I don't like. Firstly, at the start of her illness, Elizabeth paints a very rosy image of her symptoms and initial treatment. Most cancer patients experience pain and physical discomfort and this is not adequately conveyed. One of Elizabeth's friends, on reading a draft of her book, questions her about it. After that, she describes it in more detail but I still feel that it is not conveyed to the level at which I believe most cancer patients feel they have suffered. It is difficult to communicate suffering without being graphic and causing fear in the reader. The suffering of the patient is not the main message that the writer is trying to convey but I feel a better balance could have been achieved.

Secondly, many readers will find it hard to relate to Elizabeth's privileged financial and environmental situation. Her home life seems idyllic, but many cancer patients and carers find that financial burdens are a major source of stress at an already difficult time in their lives. Elizabeth cannot be criticised for describing her personal situation – this is her life experience. However, it is important to acknowledge that, for most cancer patients, life is a great deal more traumatic and stressful.

This is an informative, emotional, honest, pleasant yet tragic, well-constructed and beautifully written book that gave me great insight into the life of a woman who lived her life under the cloud of cancer. Most of us will meet cancer at some stage in our lives, but very few will have to live for so long considering, and acting in relation to, this disease. Elizabeth Bryan, although not unique in her experience, has told a story that has information and guidance that so many people can use. The fact that she wrote down her journey for the benefit of others and reflected on her experiences as she lived through them is wonderful; it is a valuable resource for the world to inherit.

Cancer survivor (26-35) (May 2010)

Although this book is primarily about a family who have a cancer gene, it is suitable for anyone to read. It is about how they coped throughout their cancer journey and deals with the reality of a cancer in the family very well – it isn't all doom and gloom. You can gain a lot from reading how someone else deals with cancer. If you have genetic breast cancer or breast cancer in any form, it will be informative to see how someone else deals with it. You can also pick up hints and tips along the way.

It's quite a long story (nearly 400 pages), but it is an easy book to pick up and read. There is a comprehensive glossary for anyone wishing to find out more. It reads more like a family story than a book you read for information. It's in a readable font and includes photos so you can see the person you're reading about.

Although I am not a breast cancer patient, I could relate the author's cancer journey to my own in some respects. Chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and surgery are the same, no matter what type of cancer you have.

When you have cancer, you sometimes think you are alone, but this book reminds us that we are not. The last sentence – "Of course, you may not survive, but you have to believe you will" – is a very powerful statement and one that we should always have at the back of our minds on our cancer journey. The positive thoughts work!

NHL cancer patient (46-55) (March 2010)

The following reviews were written before we introduced the star rating system.

This would be good for everyone to read, including health professionals, as it delves into the emotional and mental turmoil of someone living in the shadow of cancer as well as the physical problems. It also helps us think about what we say and do when we talk to cancer patients, whether it is a loved one or someone that we barely know.

It touches on all areas of the cancer spectrum, obviously particularly breast, pancreatic and ovarian, but it also delves deeper than medical information, although it did help me better understand the basic procedures, particularly chemotherapy. However, it also relates to everyday life for patients and their families, as the author has experienced cancer from both sides.

It is confusing at the beginning. The author swaps and changes the years and I had to re-read parts to gain a better picture. It does then settle into a logical order, but she does not always explain who she is talking about, which can be frustrating. She may have told you earlier in the book but when they turn up again you can't always remember what phase in her life they are from; this doesn't help the story flow as well as it might. It might be more helpful to have the family tree at the front of the book rather than in the middle.

It is very easy to understand, and it helped me have a better understanding of various cancer-related things I have come across, e.g. blood count and cell importance during chemotherapy. There is a thorough and easy-to-use glossary, but I didn't have to refer to it as Elizabeth explains everything so logically and clearly.

I like its honesty. Elizabeth tells it how it is, and you trust what she is telling you. You get to know her and her family and she doesn't dwell on things so you understand what she is telling you without becoming bogged down. I gained a respect for her and her positivity. Because it is such a personal story, I didn't agree with some of the things she said (mainly in Chapter 15) and became a little cross. I had to put the

book down and rationalise my feelings, remembering that my own experiences were different from hers and those around her. However, my grief is still raw and other people may not agree.

As far as you can 'enjoy' reading a book about cancer, I was engrossed in Elizabeth's and her family's story. I wish I had read it when my dad was still alive; it might have helped me understand what he was feeling, even though he didn't want to burden us with his emotions. I think it would have helped me share his journey more. That is why this is such a good book for anyone affected by cancer. It gives an insight into how the young children in the family coped with the emotions that cancer brings and how they reacted to it. Then in turn, they discuss what they feel looking back as adults and explain why they behaved in such away and what they really wanted.

It is a thought-provoking book. I know from experience how traumatic it is to watch a loved one die from cancer, but this family live with it and its threat daily, wondering whom it will attack next. Somehow, they manage not to let it take over their lives. You cannot help but admire Elizabeth, appreciate her honesty and admire her lack of self-pity, or anger come to that.

It reassured me that the emotions I went through after my father's death are 'normal'. As Elizabeth talks about the practicalities of caring for someone with terminal cancer, it made me reassess and alter somewhat the guilt that I could have done more. It gives family members and carers an idea of how it feels to go through chemotherapy and how those who look on helplessly can help, e.g. giving the patient something to look forward to and keeping things as normal as possible.

The thing that stands out and what will always stay with me is the insight Elizabeth gives the reader into the emotional and mental side of the cancer patient. She is extremely honest about her personal journey and she writes as though you are sitting with her listening to what she has to say. However, the flip side of this is that there is one chapter (15) where I didn't always agree with what she had to say. She wrote that a sudden death must be harder on those left behind rather than a death from cancer. I don't think deaths should be compared; it is still a painful loss. Shock and guilt come with most deaths even if they are expected, and those left behind always believe they could have done more.

Singing the life helped me understand many more aspects of cancer, from the medical side and from the emotional side. It is a book for anyone who knows someone with cancer and, even if you do not, it will open your eyes to the lives some people are trying to lead.

Daughter of a cancer patient (36-45) (April 2010)

This is an interesting book for anyone to read – it is very moving but full of useful information. I like the personal experiences of the author, who is a doctor – as well as a carer – and who has cancer herself. Some people could find it upsetting.

Bowel cancer patient currently in remission (46-55) (October 2008)

This is a truly inspirational book. It is frank, open, honest, and full of feeling, written by someone who loved others and wanted to leave a legacy of support and hope. The writing is educated without being sophisticated or scholarly. It is written for all audiences, although occasionally it is a little difficult to follow, especially in the early chapters before the author becomes passionate.

I read many technical books for my degree in Health Studies, and when I'm not studying, I read a lot of other books. None have touched me like this one. The author is the kind of person we'd all want as a friend and in writing this book, she has befriended all of us as we struggle to cope with the effects of cancer, either on ourselves, or our loved ones. A truly memorable and heart-warming book.

Twin sister of a brain cancer survivor (56-65) (May 2008)

As a health professional, I like this book. I'm just not sure about the genetic details for a member of the public – they would find it either fascinating or off-putting. Apart from the beginning, however, it is easy to read. The author writes in an honest, realistic and non-condescending manner. She is obviously warm, intelligent, and practical.

Carer/healthcare professional (46-55) (May 2008)

Although this book is written primarily for someone with cancer, it could be of equal interest to family, friends, or healthcare professionals. It will be beneficial and informative for those with cancers that have a genetic predisposition and for those whose lives have been dominated by cancer. Living in the 'now' is a strong focus of the book and may provide some solace for those who find uncertainty and fear unwelcome partners on their cancer journey. Above all, it offers very clear explanations of the genetic aspects of the disease and provides encouragement to those affected by explaining scientific advances for future generations.

The scene is set clearly and the complex family relationships are explained at the outset. The factual content unfolds as a natural consequence of this, culminating in a remarkable story of survival against a background of familial cancer. I took a while to settle into some of the technical language. However, when used, it is clearly explained and there are always opportunities to cross-refer and remind yourself of who had what and when, and what the medical connections and conclusions were.

The tone of the book is, in the main, very matter of fact, but this is reassuring. The author knows what she is talking about and is very well qualified and informed. It is very easy to pick up and put down and read in manageable chunks. It is captivating right from the beginning and takes the reader on the family journey.

This is a highly informative and an inspirational book. It is a deeply sad, profound and honest account of a woman who has lived in the shadow of cancer all her life, ultimately to be touched by it. She hasn't let it engulf her though, and has truly learnt to live with it ... or even sing with it.

Breast cancer patient (36-45) (April 2008)

There has been so much cancer in my wife's immediate family that we feared it was only a matter of time before she, too, would be diagnosed. Reading the book before my wife was diagnosed helped prepare me for caring for her: reading it again now is helping me in the grieving process.

On first reading, I became impatient with the amount of detail devoted to the cancers of the author's relatives. Now I realise how integral and important this is to her own experience. It has helped me to appreciate how much the cancers of my wife's relatives prepared us for hers.

I feel sure that I shall read this book again and again. I feel that I have met the author through her book, and that we have shared an experience together.

Widower (Over 75) (February 2008)

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.

It’s why we’ll take the time to understand you and all that matters to you, so we can help you get the support you need to take care of your health, protect your personal relationships and deal with money and work worries.

We’re here to help you find your best way through from the moment of diagnosis, so you’re able to live life as fully as you can. For information, support or just someone to talk to, call 0808 808 00 00 or visit macmillan.org.uk

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