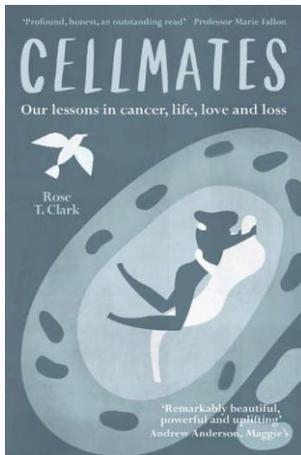


**MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT**

BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Cellmates. Our lessons in cancer, life, love and loss (2013)

Clarke RT.

Glasgow: Saraband, 2013.

216pp.

ISBN 9781908643179.

www.saraband.net/

Average star rating 4.1 (out of 5)

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I like everything about this excellent book. It reads very well and it is powerful, open and honest. It shows how people affected by cancer can be stretched to their physical and emotional limits yet still find light at the end of a very dark tunnel. It is useful for anyone affected by cancer, including carers and healthcare professionals.

Carer/family member (56-65) (April 2013)

This honest book deals frankly with many issues, including end of life. It is most useful for carers and should be read by cancer health professionals. I suggest that patients wait until after treatment to read it.

It is very easy to understand and there are helpful contact numbers at the end. The language is frank, as if the author is talking to you; this can make you laugh and cry and certainly brings back a lot of memories if you have been involved in cancer treatment in any way. The cover is attractive.

At times, I laughed; at others, I reflected and I cried. I could not read it cover to cover as I needed to break to think things through and to let my emotions flow. You need to be strong enough to deal with your emotions before you start to read it, which is why I wouldn't recommend it for those on treatment.

Survivor of leukaemia and oral cancer (February 2013)

I could not put this down; it had me enthralled! I had not realised that the story was about a couple in Scotland but I am Scottish and it endeared the book to me straight away. It reads very well and is very easy to understand. It will be useful for a wide range of readers, even someone who hasn't been touched by cancer. It shows how hard a journey it can be for patient and carer, physically and emotionally. It also explains bereavement and emotional issues, as that can be a 'nightmare' in itself – no one is ever truly prepared. It has it all.

Former breast cancer patient (2001) (56-65) (November 2012)

This is a truly inspirational read and a very useful book, particularly for carers, friends and relatives. Rose is a remarkable woman who cared for her husband John from his diagnosis of bladder cancer, through his treatment, to death. She bares her soul in this book, which she wrote as one of her promises to John. It covers a rollercoaster of emotions and all things good and bad that the couple went through during a highly stressful and testing time. It is at times sad, but an amazing record of the special moments they shared and went out of their way to make happen. John was incredibly strong willed and wanted things to happen his way, sometimes to his detriment, and Rose tells how she supported him, almost to breaking point. She describes how she dealt with the practical things: the endless appointments and tests; juggling a job, family, friends and visitors; her mental and physical exhaustion; helping her husband to hide how poorly he really was to friends and family; finally, their acceptance of help and support, which transformed their care.

It's a light book that is small enough to carry around with ease. The pages feel nice and soft; the text is average size and is clearly printed. Rose describes everything so well using beautiful language throughout. It flows well, is a pleasure to read and incredibly difficult to put down! Although John has bladder cancer, the emotions, worries and difficulties that people go through share a common ground. The psychological and physical effects are well described, along with how important it is to get help when needed and not pretend everything is ok when it clearly isn't. Absolute top marks for this amazing book.

Breast cancer patient (26-35) (November 2012)

This tragic account of losing a loved one is not appropriate for every stage of cancer. If you have just been diagnosed it could be a terrifying read – John decides against radical surgery and I am not clear if this compromised his medical situation and played a part in the secondary cancer. It is important to look at the options and agree a treatment course that is right for the patient, but this can have devastating and irreversible consequences. However, if you have no illusions, it might dramatically improve your strategy and confidence; it is rich in advice, humour, hope, strategy and love. Essentially, it is a simple story of a sick man and his carer, a beautifully written and important story of living, loving and letting go. I completely understand the analogy of being cellmates – the carer and cared for share an inescapable world.

It is a good example of taking control and looking at options. Rose and John take an educated approach and demonstrate good cancer management, even when persistence, negotiation or criticism of medical decisions is required. At times, care fell shockingly below standard, yet a sense of dignity is always retained. Peripheral issues like Rose's attempts to remain in her job and care for John are raised and rationalised. A switch into full-time caring might not be everyone's choice but the demands on the individual are well illustrated. Inevitably, the theme turns to that of a good death and this too is handled with energy and decorum. A sound funeral plan and Rose's survival conclude the book – without regret, but rather a celebration of John's life. For anyone supporting a friend or relative, the book gives a clear understanding of how personal that support needs to be, in order to not be intrusive. There are also some detailed and well-aired aspects of grief and of grief masking what becomes a further health issue for Rose. The final section, "what I wish we had

learned earlier”, is great – especially the point of dismissing fighting the cancer. The advice for patients and carers is always genuine.

The style is sometimes narrative, sometimes unsent letters and ultimately a journal; these integrate well, conveying timescale, release and coping. The account is sometimes frank and harrowing, but a no-holds-barred approach that Rose and John should be proud of. There is obviously an underlying anger and injustice, but this is handled in a normal, guilt-free way. The emotional lack of control, with imprecise timescales for survival gives a great aura of hope and a feeling that there is an opportunity to prolong life to the limit of realistic achievement. The importance of a supportive medical team underpins this.

This book is a fantastic example of learning through experience and using this learning to help others. No one wants to be told that they, or anyone they love, has a painful and incurable condition, but this is also a story about making things count and making what is left of life a living experience. It is a tale of resilience and good, determined, practical advice. My only criticism is that Rose compromised herself too much, but who would do anything less for the person they love? Rose demonstrates a great pride in John and a healthy self esteem in the risks and solutions she sought.

Well done Rose, the writing style is perfect and the advice sound. What a great book, I feel honoured that you shared your story!

Breast cancer survivor (46-55) (November 2012)

This very powerful book is beautifully written from the heart by a carer who lost her husband to cancer. It could be recommended to terminally ill patients and their carers. It shows graphically the enormous impact that cancer can have and will help people understand the extent of pain and the conflict of trying to keep a loved one alive in spite of this, in the hope that there will be more good times. It also highlights the varying standards of care that may be experienced at the end of life.

It follows a timeline from diagnosis to death and describes some of the carer’s rehabilitation and the long-term effects on her life. The last few pages seem a little unnecessary but the acknowledgements and references may be useful to some.

It is easy to understand. The language may at times offend some readers as it was written at times of extreme pressure, frustration and agony. This is understandable in the context in which the book is written, but it may upset some, just as the whole story may. The cover in shades of grey sets the tone for the tragedy that unfolds.

Given the impact that this book may have on some readers, it needs to be given with support. It could cause some distress. It brings to life the most dreadful choices that a carer must make at critical times. It describes graphically the impact that the patient’s agonies can have and the reliance on the support services available.

Prostate cancer patient (Over 75) (October 2012)

This is a compelling and articulate book, a true story of love, laughter, suffering, hope and sadness. The story involves a rollercoaster of emotions and clearly portrays the power of human spirit as Rose cares for John. Fulfilling his desire for her to write the book continues this. It is a highly valuable addition to the literature for people with cancer and those that support them (directly, indirectly, informally or professionally). It offers a frank portrayal of what life was like before and during the cancer journey for John, Rose and others around them, and continues with Rose's story of recovery. Rose recounts a story of love and devotion and describes with absolute honesty the impact of cancer and its treatment. The story offers a powerful insight into the range of emotions experienced and some strategies for protection and self-preservation.

It will be helpful to patients and those supporting them in their journey by offering a connection with others who have been through the experience and enabling them to consider their own reactions and emotions. It prompts the reader to consider their own emotions and behaviours (both positive and negative) and in doing so provides a frame of reference to seek support. Rose outlines how her focus on John led her to ignore her own health and needs, enabling her to reinforce that support is available and should be accessed in a timely way. This support enables the carer to remain as well as possible in order to support the person with cancer. The story describes several different actions that Rose took and outlines how they helped, or did not. This helps to offer a toolbox of ideas for those currently on their cancer journey. From a professional perspective, the story offers insight into what it is like to have, or to look after somebody with, cancer. It portrays the anxiety of accessing specialist oncology care and not just an available hospital bed in the case of emergency admission. The focus is predominantly on the person with cancer but Rose's story alerts us to what it is like, or may be like, for the carer. It prompts us to look at how those around the person with cancer are doing too, in order to direct them to appropriate support.

I like how the book is presented as a human story with frank and honest recounting of experiences and emotions. It addresses issues that are not easily talked about, including balancing visitors and visiting times with time together. It evokes emotions and induces reflection and could be a powerful trigger for discussion between the patient and those around them and/or the health professionals supporting them. There are icons of doves at meaningful points in the text. They offer the reader a chance to stop and reflect on the powerful experiences recounted.

I recommend this across the board. It is very useful for those on the cancer journey but there are so many competing demands it may not be realistic. It will also be very useful in recovery from bereavement; Rose's story offers clear hope for the future.

Breast cancer survivor and ex-oncology nurse (46-55) (October 2012)

This is a good book, easy to read and I definitely recommend it.

Relative (56-65) (October 2012)



This is a great book for carers and its overall appeal is good. It is a brilliant insight into the emotions that carers go through. Most books are from the patient's viewpoint and carers tend to be ignored; this book puts that right.

Breast cancer survivor (36-45) (February 2013)

It's hard to describe who would find this book useful. It is the true story of how one person coped with caring for a loved one with cancer. It doesn't mean that what they went through will be the same as you, but you may have the same feelings and emotions; I did. Don't dismiss it as 'another carer's book', written after someone dies; it really makes you think about both sides of the story. As a patient, it shows you the other side of cancer – being a carer. As a carer, it shows you that you are not alone. It is sad that you know the ending before you finish the book, but sometimes that's what happens. It's not always a happy ending, but it will help others cope with their own cancer journey.

It is easy to read and I read most of it in one go. There were no technical words that I didn't know or understand. It is written by a normal person dealing with a disease that affects everyone in different ways. I don't have the cancer described so cannot say if it is inaccurate; all I can say is that I went through a lot of the things that John did. Cancer is cancer, no matter what type you have or where you live. At the end, the author includes a list of things she found helpful. We can all use some help, and it's good that she gives you her honest thoughts; what she found helpful might help you.

I like the author's honesty, learning that sometimes you can't bottle things up, it must come out. She has similar thoughts to most of us going through this in our lives. I found this book very emotional – you feel like you're going through it with them.

Primary bone non-Hodgkin lymphoma patient (46-55) (January 2013)

Rose gives a very honest account of her husband's cancer journey and the impact of his cancer on their life – the reality of living with cancer and its aftermath and moving on. As my late husband's carer, I found myself thinking, 'yes, this is really how it is'. I could relate to Rose's experiences: the diagnosis; treatment; the anxiety of waiting for results; the enjoyment of some normality during periods of 'stable' disease; the highs, lows, hopes and fears; the energy needed to keep friends and family informed.

The title is excellent! The book is easy to read and the tone is spot on in its reflection of how cancer affects every aspect of your life together. Rose describes how the cancer journey took 'two ordinary' people through the full range of emotions relating to each stage of the cancer. Her book reflects the amazing strength two people drew upon to keep going until the battle was lost. I was pleased to read the author's list of the '20 things I look forward to doing when I am well' and the section on 'what I wish we had learned earlier'. There are some useful contacts at the end of the book too.

The book finishes on a note of reflection and a list of things to do in the future. This struck a chord with me; since my husband died over a year ago, I have felt a new-found freedom, free from the cancer, the appointments and all that went with it. A strange freedom in a time of immense sadness, yet knowing, as did Rose and John, that there would be an end and there would be a new different life.

Widow and former carer (56-65) (November 2012)

This book takes you on one couple's journey. Anyone with experience of cancer would relate to the emotions explored as the couple battle with bladder cancer and the medical profession during the highs and lows of the disease. As the carer, Rose's determination to support her husband unfolds in a way that draws the reader into her world. When John dies, the story does not finish; their journey continues through grief and recovery and what they learned along the way. Someone with cancer may gain an understanding of what the carer/partner may experience. It may also help in the planning of end-of-life care and getting parties to talk more. Medical professionals should read it too; Rose excellently balances an understanding of the pressures doctors and nurses face with the need to listen to the individual's concerns.

The pitch is perfect, neither complicated nor simplified. The simple explanations of jargon do not impede the flow of the text. The cover colour is dull but the image is appropriate. No images are used in the text and I do not think they are necessary.

The layout – three parts, plus end section, subdivided into logical subheadings – is a refreshing concept and helps the flow and ease of reading. The tone in part one is excellent, a sound balance of saying it how it was, a little humour, but no over-dramatic explanations of the processes and difficulties faced. Part two is matter of fact and I could empathise with the sense of doing what is expected although you want to shout at the world. I was a little less engrossed in part three and skipped bits; the road to Rose's recovery is more intense, too open and raw, in the sense that she expresses the same emotions on several pages. I am not devaluing her emotions in any way; I just felt I had the sense of her grief within the first few pages. Also, I would not explore my grief in that way (as with my friends and parents who died of cancer). The 'What I wish we had learned earlier' section is excellent; hindsight is a wonderful thing and Rose really hammers home the lessons she and John learned along the way. I particularly like 'Wednesday 15 April' (pp 96-97). Medical professionals take note! I love how Rose takes charge and knows more than the professionals when it comes to John's needs. I can relate to her emotions; you must stand up for what you know best for yourself or your partner. I was, and strongly believe in being, proactive.

I thank Rose for writing this book; I am sure it will help many people. On my journey as a cancer patient and living with cancer, I read personal testimonies but never finished them – they were too 'all about me; I have had this the worst'. 'Cellmates' is a balanced read; I read it in two days and wish I had read it 10 years ago, when my dad was diagnosed with bladder cancer too late to do battle with the disease but I would have been inspired to fight for him with more knowledge.

Living with breast cancer and relative of bladder cancer patient (56-65) (October 2012)

At the end of this book there are details of support organisations and practical advice on how to navigate the cancer journey. It's sensible, basic advice that will benefit anyone finding themselves in the foothills of this odyssey. Whether a carer or patient would be able to receive such advice with anything approaching equanimity having read the book up to that point is another matter entirely. For this is an unsparingly honest account by Rose Clarke of the ordeals she and her partner John endured following diagnosis of John's renewed illness, his treatment and eventual death. Above all, it is a chronicle of pain: the recurring, at times horrific and unrelieved, pain experienced by John that inflicts searing emotional (and eventually physical) injuries on Rose, too. At the end of this, there is pain in another dimension, the agony of loss.

Readers who are newly diagnosed with cancer and/or their carers may find it a disturbing, if not frightening, read. Much of the book is given over to a forthright, honest account of John's suffering, which on several occasions is unrelieved by treatment. Although it contains practical advice – and there are clearly lessons to be drawn from Rose and John's experience – it is not primarily a self-help book. It is an illustration of where the cancer journey may lead, the toll taken in all manner of respects, and a reflection on life in context with the illness.

As one who "survived" a similar trial (as my late wife's carer) I identified with much in the book, to a striking extent. The cycle of hopes nurtured then dashed, the moments of transcendent peace and clarity, the intensity of togetherness forged in the heat of battle, all woven into a spiral whose inexorable downward trajectory becomes apparent only when its end is in prospect. There is anger, too, provoked by recognition of the familiar institutional failings that marred John's treatment and exposed him and Rose to avoidable suffering. Is it too much to expect hospitals to coordinate care between different disciplines, to offer a full service at holidays and weekends, to train all frontline staff in pain recognition and response to it?

There is a slight uncertainty about the prospective audience and the book's intentions. It is very useful to the appropriate audience – health care professionals, survivors, and exceptionally strong-minded carers. The contacts and practical advice at the end sits uneasily with the preceding material. Would it be wise for a "newcomer" to read this often-harrowing account before accessing this guidance?

Carer (46-55) (October 2012)

This is written from the carer's point of view but is also useful for friends, family, and patients. It is excellent in helping the reader feel that they are not alone with cancer, which can appear needlessly cruel at times. It is a frank and honest account. If you need a down-to-earth approach, it provides an excellent, truthful approach. It is very easy to understand, even the technical bits, which are handled in plain English.

The love story is very appealing and the frank account of a couple coping with the cancer journey very compelling. It made sense of some of our story. A story shared can be very comforting, especially when it feels as though you can't take another piece of bad news or disappointment. I didn't always relate to the choices this couple made, but I respect their opinions and the fact that they did what was right for them at the time. We all have to find our own way through.

This book adds to the cannon of cancer literature and is a worthwhile read but is at times harrowing; I defy anyone to get through it without tissues. It illustrates the cruelty and relentlessness of cancer and the sometimes-impossible choices. The author is unflinching in describing the effects of being a carer.

Living with breast cancer, five years from diagnosis, still receiving treatment (46-55) (October 2012)

This book helped me to understand more clearly the emotional demands on my wife and immediate family, but it offers valuable insights for everyone. It has some helpful practical advice based on lessons learned the hard way and many useful insights into the psychology of patients and, especially, of carers. On a subtler level, it provides an admirable example of how one can maintain one's dignity and humanity. I was reassured that many of my thoughts and emotions are echoed in the book.

The language is clear and technical terms are explained, though I was all too familiar with many anyway! The tone is warm and personal; some achievement, given that it deals with intensely raw experiences and emotions. The episodic nature of the content breaks up the text and enhances its readability. I like the candid no-nonsense approach but, as a recent patient facing a five-year monitoring programme, the graphic descriptions of suffering have made me even more fearful of the hardships that may await me if my cancer returns. I'm not faint-hearted so I can imagine that patients of a more nervous disposition may find some passages troubling. I felt uncomfortably voyeuristic in the parts of the book that deal with their relationship.

This book achieves the impressive feat of sensitively recounting a deeply poignant love story whilst simultaneously offering valuable practical insights, advice and reassurance for those of us at the sharp end. Reading it was a moving and enriching experience. Although there's something for everyone, it may be most valuable to carers for advice, insight, inspiration and reassurance, especially if dealing with advanced cancer, and to the recently bereaved in dealing with loss. I'm not sure that current or recent patients are likely to find much solace in the graphic accounts.

Recently treated for testicular cancer (46-55) (September 2012)



I earnestly encourage you to read this if you have cared for someone with a terminal cancer. It is a personal account of someone with cancer, their carer and their journey with cancer and it shows the terrible reality of living with cancer. It describes the impact of the experience of living with a cancer diagnosis – the emotional suffering, despair, courage and the eventual loss. The author attempts to describe the effect that cancer has after death and the necessity to change radically your course in life. Health professionals will find it a useful tool to help understand the emotional effects experienced by cancer patients and carers.

My father died from lung cancer (36-45) (October 2012)



It is very difficult to give this book a star rating; I would give it five stars for honesty but one for likely usefulness. It contains very challenging information about repeated instances where it was not possible to control physical pain. This could be very difficult for someone going through advanced cancer or for their carer.

Having had someone close to me die of cancer, I found it useful to discover that in comparison my experience was mostly extremely good, but I couldn't say if someone else would want to read this harrowing account. I am not clear who the intended audience is. I can see that it is therapeutic for the author to have written all this down.

Former cancer patient (Hodgkin Disease) and bereaved carer of husband with rare cancer (56-65) (December 2012)

This is an insight into an individual reaction to cancer but the couple in the book are not typical. It is thought provoking but only a robust individual affected by cancer could read it and not be affected for the worse.

The language is acceptable but the content and style may upset many patients and relatives. The appearance and layout are fine – the grey colour of the cover suits the depressing tone. I cannot agree with the description on the front – “remarkable beautiful, powerful and uplifting”; I found it very depressing. It is an angry book with a tendency to “awfulise”. Regardless of anyone's stage of cancer there is still room for joy and love. Although the author and the forward claim that the book shows these, there is little evidence and what there is, is buried in the despair. The cover should have clearer warnings. Many more people live and thrive with cancer but this book risks reinforcing the belief that cancer means certain death. It would be a devastating read for anyone recently diagnosed or their family. There is more acceptance now of the importance of positivity in cancer outcomes. This book claims to be uplifting, but is the very opposite. I would be very wary about people reading it early in diagnosis and treatment as it does nothing to encourage hope. It even includes words like “radiotherapy and chemotherapy – they don't work”. It may give health professionals an insight into how some people feel and react and it might be useful to someone like me who is “recovering” and is strong enough to read it even though it obviously raises the spectre of recurrence with poor outcome.

I feel strongly that it could do a great deal of harm. It will have an impact on how the public sees cancer and not in a way I would wish. As for patients, I managed to read it because I am in a good secure place; I have dealt with my fear and could protect myself while I read it. If I had read it at my diagnosis (devastating in itself) I may not have had the mental strength to endure my treatment and my outcome would have been very different. I wouldn't want my husband or children to read it.

Recovering lung cancer patient (56-65) (September 2012)

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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