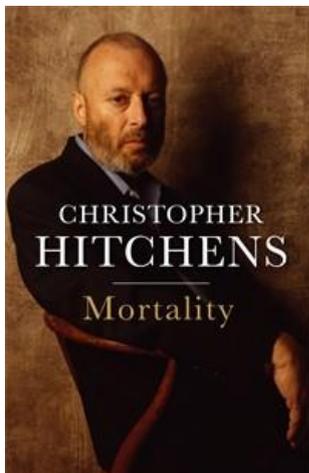


**MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT**

BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Mortality (2012)

Hitchens C.

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Average star rating 4.1 (out of 5)

Macmillan Cancer Support would like to thank Atlantic Books for generously donating multiple copies of this book for review.

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This short book is a collection of articles that Christopher Hitchens wrote for Vanity Fair after he was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer. Each article can be read on its own but the book as a whole charts Hitchens' course through the world of cancer, from diagnosis until his death. It offers an intimate insight into his thoughts at a difficult time in his life as he faces his diagnosis and increasingly runs out of options. It will be useful to anyone affected by cancer but it's also a good general read.

For the most part, it is an easy read. A few sections in Chapter Six delve into the philosophy of Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky and here things become complicated but Hitchens' doesn't use technical language. He has a wonderful command of English and a gift for capturing situations that many cancer patients face and find difficult. He describes beautifully many of the feelings that people with cancer have – entry into an unknown and unfamiliar world, the off-the-cuff hurtful remarks that people make (“my aunt died of that”) and the difficulty of facing the unknown.

He writes, in Chapter IV, for example, of an interaction with a woman at a book signing who seems to delight in telling him about people she knew who died terrible, painful deaths from cancer. The encounter made him “wonder if perhaps there was room for a short hand book of cancer etiquette” that would include advice to both “sufferers and sympathizers” that people with cancer really only want to talk about their own disease and that “if you can't bring me news about that and that alone....I am not all that interested or knowledgeable”. It made me wonder if we shouldn't photocopy this article and have it ready to hand out when the occasion arises! Another section considers whether “what doesn't kill us makes us stronger”; given how often this is said when you have cancer, Hitchens provides an interesting perspective and useful thoughts on whether this is a helpful thing to think or say.

This is not a book about how to cope with cancer but a good and important reflection of what life is like for everyone with cancer – whether you're an average person or a world famous author. I enjoyed it greatly and will definitely recommend it but it will depend on the person. Hitchens died in 2011 after invasive and traumatic treatment; someone fighting their own battle may not want to read about someone who died.

Non-Hodgkin lymphoma survivor (36-45) (November 2012)

This is a very well written and easy to read personal account of a cancer journey. The author's experience of cancer is not unlike that of other cancer patients but is documented in typical Hitchens' witty style. As a writer and orator, he puts it very eloquently: "My two assets my pen and my voice — and it had to be the esophagus". "To the dumb question 'Why me?,' " he writes, "the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not?". Anyone on their own cancer journey may find it useful.

He is no different to anyone else in seeking any intervention, however unpleasant, for a possible cure. I like his description of battling cancer: "I rather think it's battling me, it's much more what it feels like. I have to sit passively every few weeks and have a huge dose of kill-or-cure venom put straight into my veins... It doesn't feel like fighting at all, possibly resisting. You feel as if you're drowning in passivity... I prefer resistance to battling."

He acknowledges that cancer makes one focus on what makes life worth living and defending, living for each moment and not least being terrified of incapacity or imbecility at the end. He did not lose his wit to the end.

Living with bowel cancer (56-65) (November 2012)

This is a very honest account of the author's experiences – at times brutally honest but written with honesty and wit. It may inspire someone living with cancer or their carer to take a similar attitude as the author; it seems to me that his attitude benefited himself and also those around him. However I think this would only be the case if the person with cancer and/or the carer are aware of, and accepting of, their condition and prognosis. The book is very honest about the physical and emotional impact of living with a terminal diagnosis, so it may not make easy or comfortable reading for anyone who is not (as completely as they can be) accepting of their situation.

It easy to understand and follow and there is little technical language. The cover is a very nicely lit picture of the author. The size of the book (both the scale and the number of pages) is appealing; it is quite small/short rather than a large hardback with hundreds of pages. The overall look and quality of the book is very nice.

I genuinely feel there is nothing to dislike about this book. I like the fact that it is written by the person who was (at the time) living with cancer. It is a bravely worded and honest book; it is not sentimental and yet you get a real insight in to the type of person the author is and the obvious love and affection he has for his family, friends and colleagues and the love and affection he receives in return.

Overall, it is a very well written, easy to read book and I would definitely recommend it in the right circumstances. It has the capacity to inspire and gives the message that a terminal diagnosis doesn't mean life stops at that point – the message I got was that the author 'lived' to the very end.

Former carer of mother (womb cancer with spread to lymph nodes and liver) and father (lung cancer with spread to brain) (36-45) (November 2012)

This is an unflinching and honest account of one man confronting his mortality. Hitchens is scathingly frank and honest about his terminal cancer; readers will find his courage inspiring and his words thought provoking. I recommend it to others affected by cancer but not everyone will appreciate it and those with strong religious sensibilities may find sections offensive – Hitchens was an unapologetic atheist.

Hitchens was very erudite and the prose reflects this; however, it is easy to read. Towards the end, it becomes fragmentary, mirroring his decline. The book is well designed and compact. There are no illustrations but none are required.

This is a wonderful, life-affirming swansong from a great writer who faces his own mortality with courage, humour and honesty. To the question, ‘Why me?’ he writes: “the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: ‘Why not?’”.

Living with leukaemia / transitional cell carcinoma (56-65) (November 2012)

This is the last book by Christopher Hitchens, author, critic, journalist and polemicist. It is a collection of essays written for *Vanity Fair* and charts his diagnosis of oesophageal cancer, his treatment and his decline in health up to his death. It is a very personal, heart-breaking experience of terminal cancer.

It is a very erudite, but accessible book. If you are already familiar with Hitchens, you will know what a good writer he is. He writes candidly and emotionally about his journey from diagnosis to his untimely death. It is an honest, graphic, emotional, and intensely personal account, which leaves the reader emotionally spent. It is short and succinct and at times strays into his musings on, for example, how to be a good writer, but it is his thoughts and experiences of cancer that I wanted to engage with.

Hitchens very successfully articulates the tragedy of terminal cancer. His book provides some profound insights into one person’s thoughts and experiences of terminal cancer. There are some graphic descriptions of his pain and discomfort and it may be too harrowing for someone with terminal cancer. It may be most useful for those wishing to gain an insight into the thoughts of someone facing terminal illness.

Widower of colon cancer patient (56-65) (November 2012)

Hitchens’s prose is exceptional. The chapters on his feelings, from bargaining, through depression, to acceptance are very honest. The effects of the treatment – loss of hair, libido, constipation, nausea, drippy nose, loss of his voice and eventually the inability to write – are all dealt with admirably and with humour. There are also comments on well-meaning people, hospitals, treatment and prayers. The book may upset religious people but Hitchens was never shy of his atheism. The final chapter by his wife adds another perspective. All in all, an excellent book. I will probably recommend it but will advise readers that it deals with oesophageal cancer stage 4 and that all cancers are not treated in the same way or incur the same side effects.

Oesophageal cancer patient (56-65) (October 2012)

This is an immensely readable and engaging book, largely due to the wonderful use of language which is not surprising given the eminence of the author. In addition, it's a short work and the content is divided into sections that enhance the readability. There's a broadly logical timeline but the exact sequence of events isn't important in this case and it's not a book that relies on facts for its impact.

The author conveys very clearly the experience of being a cancer patient. It puts into words many of the emotions that I felt and thus would provide reassurance for patients and insight for carers. It may help the process of coming to terms with the illness and explaining one's feelings to others. The author also displays an admirable absence of self-pity, which serves as a good example to others. I'd have found it very helpful in explaining to people how it feels to have a cancer diagnosis, and how some of the treatment affected me. I would have shamelessly plagiarised whole passages!

The wonderful written style creates a highly entertaining read and the book contains some powerful insights into how it feels to be a cancer patient. Sadly, it is a very short book, which deprived me of more entertainment and enlightenment. Some of the author's arguments are rather too intellectual for my simple brain.

I may be biased; I am a long-standing admirer and predisposed to feel positively about the book. Despite his weakening condition, he leaves us in awe of his intellect and use of language. This book offers a profoundly insightful evocation of the torments to be endured and, beyond that, it is an absolute privilege to read this incredible man's final work.

Recent testicular cancer patient (46-55) (October 2012)

Not being a *Vanity Fair* reader, I did not know of the author until his cancer. It is not difficult to understand his position in the arts, the narrative flows on its own and his personality shines. I can see why he had such a wide circle of famous friends. He clearly appreciated that he stood on the shoulders of giants.

His book is a cancer journey, very subjective. It records the personal detail, some of which may be unique and some shared. It gives a rational description of the side effects of both chemotherapy and radiotherapy. To these outcomes it offers a particular mental approach that is worth considering.

It is a very easy read and easily understandable. Some of the name dropping may throw a younger reader as may some of the political comments. The Latin should have been translated – "How sweet and right it is to die for your country".

It is an accurate appraisal of a cruel, very difficult end-of-life passage – he found his corner in a foreign field. This could cause a great deal of distress. The author discusses the philosophy "That which does not kill makes strong", however what he suffers does kill. I like the honesty of the book but the author is an atheist and his beliefs may well upset those with religious convictions. I recommend it with qualification: the best audience is otherwise healthy smokers.

Metastatic kidney cancer patient (Over 75) (October 2012)

I enjoyed this book, if that's the right word, but would not have been able to read it when my mum was diagnosed or about to face treatment. It is only in retrospect that it is a comfort to me. Hitchens is typically contemptuous of his cancer; brilliantly pointing out that the 'best' cancer can do is die with its host. He denigrates it to that of a dumb virus, but at the same time seems to accept that the concept of facing a 'fight' or a 'battle' is redundant: it will either kill him, or it won't. I don't think I could have handled this bluntness in the midst of our cancer storm and my mum wouldn't have been able to cope with the ideas here at all. Hitchens's talk of 'Tumourtown' would have been too much for her, or perhaps for anyone trying to be positive. Some of the ideas Hitchens espouses may be offensive to those with religious beliefs.

Hitchens talks about his diagnosis then describes his treatment (often in detail that some might find disturbing, particularly those about to go through something similar) and his thoughts and feelings as his prognosis changes. I found it an easy read in terms of the narrative flow and those going through a similar experience will be able to identify with his descriptions of treatment and the medical terms used. In fact, he often brings a fresh approach to some of the terms that patients and carers will be familiar with. He covers the issue of what to say and, more crucially, what not to say to someone with cancer very well.

I like his philosophy on cancer; it was very brave. He seemed to accept why he had cancer (he talks a little about his lifestyle) and to have rationalised and accepted the idea of death. This doesn't mean he didn't want to survive, but that he accepted death as a possible outcome. This is important; it's not easy at all, but letting go of 'I must survive' is a very powerful mental tool. My mum could not have faced that, but perhaps it might help others.

Some of the thinking and ideas are very blunt, very brutal. This book wouldn't be at all useful to someone trying to remain positive and 'fight' their cancer – quite the reverse. Hitchens's prognosis, when he received it, was very grim – he says, "There is no stage 5" and that sums it up. A lot will depend on the person and their outlook. My mum would probably have been very upset and terrified. Hitchens's descriptions of his prognosis, gruelling treatment and side effects are very upsetting, and the book should be approached with caution by anyone directly affected. That said, he does make some pertinent comments, often with great humour, about the residents of 'Healthyville' and how they respond to people with cancer. My mum and I struggled with this and some of Hitchens's observations had me nodding and laughing. One of his friends asks, "I'm going to be in town on Friday. Will you be around?" A flippant comment, a turn of phrase, but I can see why Hitchens was slighted by it.

I wish that people who haven't been affected by the disease – so far – would read this important book; it presents more of a reality than we often get in the media and popular culture. The prevailing notion is that cancer patients must 'fight' and 'must stay positive'. Why? Some, like Hitchens and my mum, face a grim prognosis and in some ways the treatment is as bad as the disease itself. People need to know about it, they need to be more aware of the reality. If they are, then perhaps we will learn not to throw just more financial resources at trying to understand the disease, but more emotional ones too – more empathy.

Carer (lung cancer) (26-35) (October 2012)

This is one of the most incredible books I have read. The quality of the writing is superb. It does need a dictionary as the vocabulary is beyond many, with considerable classical references. I could not put it down and have read it for the last five hours, thoroughly enthralled by the content, the honesty and the reality. This is a personal story told by a most articulate man who could captivate large and small audiences. It follows the gradual, final stages of oesophageal cancer. The cover photograph of the author is spellbinding, but so real and fitting for the book. Hitchens writes in very powerful terms to express his feelings and thoughts.

I cannot describe my reaction to this book. I have not been able to put it down and I am about to recommend it to my wife and carer. The author tells of his own position and does not encroach on his family to any extent. He was an experienced writer and talker and this shows. I definitely recommend it to others affected by cancer, or anyone, excluding the fervently religious who would be offended by his atheist views.

Living with prostate cancer (Over 75) (October 2012)

This is a very emotive and thought-provoking book and could stir up some very powerful emotions. It may be useful for a patient perhaps looking to identify with someone who went through a similar experience or for a relative, to reflect on how their loved one felt before they passed away. It is very well explained, you can almost feel what he went through, so powerful are his descriptions. The size is just right; I would like to have read more, but that is just my wish that the author had lived longer.

I feel honoured to have read this book. It is very insightful; the comparisons of cancer to an alien and chemotherapy to venom stirred up some powerful images, with which I can identify. There is an anger towards cancer, which I remember feeling about my dad; I was angry that the cancer was so evil to have taken my dad away. It brought to the surface some very powerful emotions and could perhaps be used as a tool in dealing with grief and bereavement.

Daughter of pancreatic cancer patient (46-55) (October 2012)



Hitchens tackles numerous areas linked to his cancer experience. The subject may jump from Nietzsche to proton therapy to aliens but this adds to the book's charm. The final chapter features fragmentary jottings unfinished at the time of his death. The book will be most useful for those who want a short read and who have enjoyed Hitchens's previous work. This will include patients, but not just those with a terminal prognosis – Hitchens talks repeatedly about the possibility of remission and recovery.

Hitchens uses complex language, but this is to be expected. He discusses, in varying detail, chemotherapy, alternative treatments, future treatments, treatment side-effects, his hopes for the future (and how he may miss them), religion (he was an atheist), death, and the great personal difficulties he faced in losing his voice and potentially the ability to write due to peripheral neuropathy. There is also a discussion

on 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' and how this can be applied (or not) to the cancer experience. He speaks of an 'alien and its spreading dead-zone colonies' when referring to his cancer – he appears to fear that it is something that has invaded his body. He seems perplexed as to why this 'alien' would continue to grow, knowing that they would both die. I found it hard to accept that it wasn't an alien that had caused my cancer, it wasn't an alien or a bacterium or anything else – it was me.

Hitchens has never been shy at bringing his thoughts to the table and it is reassuring that this book lives up to this. Even if you disagree with much of its content, it is still fascinating to read the thoughts of such a prolific author. With the added context of his cancer diagnosis, this book will engage even more people than some of his previous works. The thoughts of many patients are echoed here – religious belief, alternative remedies, future treatments and side effects of treatment, among others. We really see Hitchens' vulnerability in his deep fear of losing his voice – no wonder when he has been described as the 'finest orator of our time', albeit by his friend Richard Dawkins. Similarly, the peripheral neuropathy that he endures opens up the possibility of losing the ability to write: 'it is assuredly to die more than a little.' Every cancer patient will hold some faculties more dear than others, but Hitchens exposes what many of us truly fear – the one sense or ability that, if robbed, will make me not feel like me. Pertinently, he also tackles the 'whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger' proclamation, usually attributed to Nietzsche. Hitchens claims that had he known the side-effects of proton therapy before treatment, he may have refused it. Cancer patients, carers and professionals will be able to relate to this; if indeed the cancer is eradicated we are often left, physically and mentally, much less strong than before. The unfinished jottings at the end demonstrate that Hitchens was still deep in thought right up until his death. This is followed by a poignant afterword by his wife, Carol Blue. As she rightly states, Hitchens 'is an impossible act to follow'.

Hitchens was already one of my favourite authors and so it is interesting to read his thoughts on his cancer experience. I wouldn't recommend this book to everybody though. It is not a useful insight into oesophageal cancer or palliative care; however, if you enjoy reading Hitchens and are interested in his take on religion while undergoing cancer treatment, then this is for you

Hodgkin lymphoma survivor (26-35) (January 2013)

Christopher Hitchens has been described as one of the greatest polemicists of his generation. He tackled many subjects during his long career as a journalist and here he offers us his unique insight into facing his own mortality. After his diagnosis of cancer of the oesophagus, he wrote this series of essays, attempting to come to terms with the end of his life and leave us with some food for thought. His writing is sharp and engaging, acerbic and literate, never sentimental or cloying; he has a sharp insightful way of writing about death and his intelligence shines through. His lack of self-pity is enviable and inspiring. He applies the same rigorous journalistic eye to his disease as he has done to ethics and politics.

The book is compelling, although not always easy, reading; it can get a bit relentless. Some insights are breathtakingly astute – not only those in relation to himself, but also his comments on the human race. Hitchens made many enemies during his time

as a writer. His views were not popular with the Christian right wing of America, where he made his home. His description of how some thought his cancer was God's revenge is particularly chilling.

Ultimately, this is a great addition to the age-old questions of life, death and everything in between. We must all die of something, at some time and Hitchens' unflinching account of his final months may help us make some sort of sense of it all.

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

The realities identified in this book will resonate with people with cancer and therefore it would be most useful to those around them to understand how they may be feeling; they may not be able to voice these thoughts in case it causes upset.

Hitchens was an orator and uses words that some readers may not know. He doesn't use jargon however and talks in a way that can be understood. It is easy to read and easy to identify with. It is not a light read, but this doesn't matter for those identifying with his message. Towards the end, it becomes a little disjointed – more a collection of thoughts. This reflects the situation of many though; thoughts become more confused as treatment wears on. Some things are hard to read emotionally.

It has a classy appearance and it is quite a slim book; this helps to make it appealing. The title is honest and will appeal to those who want to hear from someone honestly. Hitchens talks of his response to his illness in a dignified, measured and calm way. It is a useful anecdotal book.

This is a useful book for what it offers to its readers. I recommend it to people asking questions about mortality. It's not full of advice but it is something to identify with and can offer those who know someone with cancer insight into some of the emotions and thoughts people can have.

Recovered from non-Hodgkin lymphoma (Under 25) (December 2012)

Anyone could read this book and take something away about how cancer affects the patient and the people around them. I was not familiar with the writings of Christopher Hitchens, but I was very pleasantly surprised. I like very much the way he is so open and honest about his illness, about the reaction of certain members of the public to his condition and the way he is so matter of fact about his treatment. His sense of fun and irony, and love of family and friends are very apparent throughout.

The front cover is very dark, which is understandable given the subject, but the author's style makes the book readable for people at all stages of cancer. His direct and unputting way of writing about his condition is informative and moving. There are many moments of reflection, which are very poignant and at times quite comical, but these are done in a very smooth and logical way. I particularly like the style of writing and the brave honesty of what must have been an incredibly frightening experience; strangely it gave me a kind of hope even though the author's condition was terminal.

I will be careful to whom I recommend it. I found it very useful – it made me examine my own feelings about cancer – but I am one year post surgery, six months post treatment and in a place of hope, looking forward to the future. I am not sure that it is particularly helpful to someone recently diagnosed or in a dark place because of their diagnosis. It is not a tool to offer emotional support to a cancer patient or carer, more a general interest read. I enjoyed reviewing it; it is a thought-provoking rollercoaster ride of emotions written in a very easy style by an amazing man.

Living with endometrial cancer (46-55) (November 2012)

Hitchens writes about an awful experience in an almost poetic way. I found it useful to hear that his feelings, pain and perceptions of how people treated him were very like mine. It will be useful to those who have been through cancer and those who haven't. A very clear insight into a painful and horrible experience.

Cervical cancer patient (26-35) (October 2012)

This is very touching and emotional in places but, with such a professional writer, honest and detailed. It is perhaps better for long-standing patients than the recently diagnosed, for whom it may not be comforting. It gives a deeper understanding of the cancer experience that, although not relevant to everyone, shows humour and the honest emotions of someone with a difficult prognosis.

The author is a writer by profession and the book is well constructed although some of the content is quite intellectual and over my head. However, it is still interesting and perhaps educational and there is no need to read it all page by page. It is a personal journey and experience rather than a medical guide so there is no technical terminology or opportunity for misunderstanding. It is an excellent publication and well presented in style, form and materials.

I like Hitchens' honesty, humour and clarity. I admire a man who can look at his situation so directly and record his life after diagnosis so openly. I enjoyed his reference to moving from Wellville to Tumour Town with a new lifestyle and language, and may well use that terminology myself as it exactly explains the change in direction we must cope with. As a personal experience, it is excellently constructed with honesty, humour and openness that I found emotional but relevant. This is not a textbook or guide, but a good read that touches parts other books have not reached.

Living with locally advanced prostate cancer (66-75) (October 2012)

Richard Dawkins described Christopher Hitchens as the "finest orator of our time". The range and extent of his knowledge is staggering. With a great fondness for smoking and scotch and a lifelong habit of burning the candle at both ends, he knew he was tempting fate. So, the diagnosis of oesophageal cancer came as no real surprise (his father died from it too). Eighteen months later he was dead, but not before making the poignant observations on his decline in this thought-provoking little book. Never feeling sorry for himself, he addresses the critics of his atheism (you got

what you deserved) in a masterly fashion. His simple description of the effects of his chemotherapy, even the problems associated with the supposedly simple task of finding a good vein in his arm, are very powerful, as are his comments on the stage theory of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (denial to rage to bargaining to depression to acceptance) and Nietzsche's "whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger".

It will be most useful for someone coming to terms with a terminal cancer diagnosis but it is not restricted to cancer patients – every one of us ultimately must deal with our own mortality. In places, it is very moving; Hitchens talks about the things he had planned for the next decade and that he would now miss (including the marriages of his children). It is easy to read but does provoke a lot of thought. The end contains a sequence of fragmentary notes, written when Hitchens was close to death and before they could be properly edited; this is not so much a dislike as sadness and the reason I haven't given it five stars.

On page 33, Hitchens quotes the American educator Horace Mann who said "Until you have done something for humanity you should be ashamed to die". By writing this book Christopher Hitchens has done something for humanity. His intelligence and eloquence allow him to write on a subject in a way that few of us could match and yet what he says is relevant to us all.

Living with seminoma (46-55) (October 2012)



This is a serious but light-hearted book on the etiquette of cancer. As it's a personal experience there is little technical information but the language is perhaps more suitable for those who are widely read and who have a good command of English.

It is in all aspects an appealing resource. I enjoyed Hitchens' humour, honesty and the frankness of his account of living with cancer but, as a Christian, I was offended by some of his comments. I might recommend it, but it will need to be carefully timed.

Former stomach cancer patient (46-55) (January 2013)

This is fascinating reading. It is helpful to know something about the author, a well-known intellectual who does not believe in god or religion. I'm not sure who the intended audience is. It is a memoir about dying and would be most useful for those coming to terms with terminal illness. It is very easy to understand and the author explains things clearly. The hardback edition is light and easy to hold, the font is readable and I like the photo on the cover.

I found it very thought provoking; a highly intelligent man reflecting on his death, people's reaction to his imminent death and his reaction to them. This makes for interesting reading as he is known for debating the existence of God and wants to let people know that he still does not believe, even though he has been given a death sentence. I like the fact that he looks his death squarely in the eye and that he

expects his readers to be as intelligent as he is. However, he doesn't fully address the thought of death and whether it frightens him, or how he dealt with his fears.

I read articles about the author and his cancer before I reviewed this book. I thought it would deal with his fears and how he managed to accept death but it didn't live up to my expectations. In one article, there was a good explanation of what he had been through, with an in-depth interview, but the book doesn't really live up to that.

Recovering from womb cancer (66-75) (October 2012)



I am not sure that this book will be of any great value to anyone with cancer or caring for or related to someone with cancer. The colours of the cover and the photograph exude an air of gloom and the tone is depressing and fatalistic. However, the font is quite large, which makes reading easier.

When I started to read it, I had hopes that it would be uplifting. Hitchens' style of writing intrigued me and in the early chapters his arguments regarding the non-existence of God are well put; although I don't agree with his opinion, I have to give him credit for his convictions and his reasoning. However, the book is written in such a way that it is difficult to understand and sadly, after the first few chapters it became a rather tedious read and quite jumbled, which might have been due to his treatment. The record of his illness and treatment is jumbled up with reflections about atheism and literature and this will make it difficult for ordinary people to gain anything from it.

If you are already a fan of his writing, it will probably be of interest but it is of little value for others. I found it very depressing with nothing to lift the mood of anyone dealing with cancer. I would say that his intended audience is people who have followed his writing and career, not people who have cancer.

Living with breast cancer (56-65) (October 2012)

I didn't find this useful and can't think who would. Perhaps if you are familiar with the author's work and more highbrow than I am, it may be of interest. It is initially an easy read – I got through 40 pages in no time – but I kept thinking something interesting is going to happen shortly; I was disappointed. I do like his description of how his life changed: "in retrospect I see it as a very gentle and firm deportation, taking me from the country of the well across the stark frontier that marks off the land of malady".

Unfortunately, much of the book feels like the ramblings of a highly intelligent person who assumes his audience is familiar with his works and beliefs. There are long passages on what people were saying about his beliefs, why he should or should not change them, how he stoically encouraged those around him to give it another go (at getting blood or inserting a pic line or carrying on). Chapter 8 consists of jottings that were found following his death, make of them what you will.

A cancer diagnosis is, for many, a time when we question the meaning of our life, what will become of us when we die; this is Hitchens's version where he confirms his atheist beliefs. Unfortunately, I could not appreciate the many comparisons to people I do not know (e.g. Nietzsche) or those who mean little or nothing to me (e.g. Proust), the discussion of other people's theories, for example, "The notorious stage theory of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, whereby one progresses from denial to rage through bargaining to depression and the eventual bliss of "acceptance", hasn't so far had much application to my case". I was thrown by not knowing this theory, so I didn't appreciate the rest of the sentence in which he actually gives some potentially useful information, i.e. the stages people go through as they work their head around a cancer diagnosis. The same page also mentions obituaries of elderly villains like Henry Kissinger and Joseph Ratzinger.

He details the pain and suffering he endures from treatment and discussions around whether he would have had such treatment if he had known about this beforehand. I hope this does not put others off potentially life-saving or life-extending treatment.

This book is self centred and of no use to the ordinary cancer patient or family. If you wish to start questioning your life and its meaning, I am sure there are far better ways of doing it! "Many readers are familiar with the spirit and the letter of the definition of "prayer", as given by Ambrose Bierce in his Devil's Dictionary"; I suggest if, like me, you are not, you don't bother reading this book.

Breast cancer survivor (46-55) (October 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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