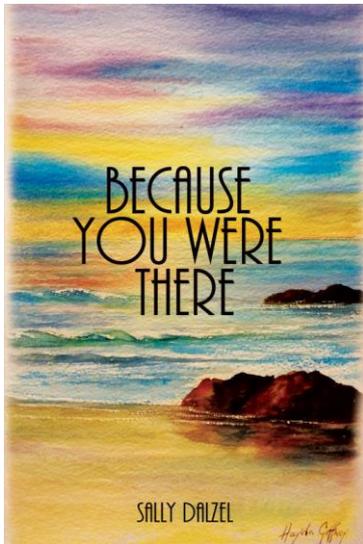


**MACMILLAN
CANCER SUPPORT**

BOOK REVIEWS

Read what people affected by cancer think about...



Because you were there (2015)

Dalzel S.

London: Austin Macauley, 2015.

33pp.

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Average star rating 3.6 (out of 5)

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Although the author was aware of her imminent loss, she couldn't have imagined the isolation she would feel when her husband died. It could comfort people to know that they are not the only ones to experience these feelings and may give them some of the strength they need to fight the negative self-pity that can take over. It could make friends more aware of the isolation faced by the bereaved. The author began a new relationship ten months after her husband died. Sometimes this is frowned upon by others, which can be an added struggle to face. However, the author is very honest about her feelings, giving the reader the opportunity to relate to her and opening up the possibility of a new love whilst holding the other dear and never leaving them.

The book opens and closes with poems, with the letters in between. I enjoyed this layout as the poetry reminds readers of the joy that is in love. The letters follow a logical order, from very early grief through to a new love and acceptance. Again, a benefit to readers for whichever stage they are at. The letters are written simply, with language that is easy to understand, yet the writing is well thought through, allowing readers to relate to and understand the author's feelings. The cover is attractive. The hand-drawn picture of a beach starts to have more meaning once you start to read as the author talks about nature and how it reminds her of her husband. The feel of the book is one of pain, yet celebration of their love and what they shared together.

I like the openness of the author. She shares her thoughts and her journey. Looking at the beauty of the earth, she describes her awe and almost how it speaks to her as she searches to find her love, set against the harsh reality of how she feels alone. She shares her thoughts over the meaning of things, even of Christmas. It is normally in still moments that we contemplate life, and she has let us contemplate it with her.

I did not dislike anything about this book. It is a helpful practical and emotional tool as it talks about the struggle of daily practical tasks as well as the emotional, inner side of the heart. It taps into the aspect of how often bereaved people can live in what seems to be a bubble, the unreliability of your emotions, and how when you think you are moving on you are back at the raw square one. It allows others grieving to relate to the experiences they have felt and possibly ones they haven't. This may benefit them in knowing the natural behaviour of human grief and the important possibility that a new, although different, life can continue.

Therapeutic radiographer, Under 25 (June 2016)

This is quite a difficult book to read because of the emotional content but it will help those bereaved to see their situation from another angle and may even prompt them to write letters to their loved one. It is easy to see that the author is a genuine person and I feel most people will warm to her and understand why she has written it. The design is fine – there is nothing to make people shy away from it.

It is a good book and could be of real assistance but is not for everyone. I found it a difficult read, mainly because I have been writing a letter each day to my husband since he died two years ago. I was amazed that someone else had shared these feelings but it is worthwhile and will show others how this form of grieving can be an enormous help. I will be careful about recommending it and need to be sure it would help. It will ultimately depend on the disposition of the reader; it could be too emotional for some.

Bereaved (56-65) (January 2016)

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and am sure it will help many people. It is useful not only to those recently bereaved, but also to anyone who is still struggling to come to terms with their loss. My mother passed away two and a half years ago, and I have been struggling with feelings of guilt; my husband had lung cancer at the time and I feel I did not commit myself to my mother as much as I should have done because of this. This book has helped me greatly to come to terms with her death; it was what I was looking for and I am so pleased I had the opportunity to read it.

The author describes her feelings of loss very well, how she copes or tries to cope. Many bereaved people wonder how they are going to carry on with life, what lies in store for them? They feel frightened and don't know what to do. Many of the answers lie within this book. The author explains that in time (this may vary from person to person) life gradually resumes some normality, but will never be quite the same again; it will be different but bearable in a positive way. Even to dating again. The book tells the reader that somewhere, out there, there is a life, but you must look for it and who knows when the time is right. This will differ from person to person.

I like everything about the book especially how the author somehow managed to get on with her life through the grief. It is inspirational to read. I like the cover and the overall design and layout. It is very easy to understand and you can read it for a short time and then pick up again later; if the grief is very strong this would be beneficial to the bereaved. I particularly like how, towards the end, the author describes that it is possible to meet someone, probably without consciously looking; although they can never replace the one lost, there is clear hope for the future in a happy way.

The author and her husband obviously thought a great deal about each other and this comes across very strongly. Unless the reader had this same strength of feeling for the deceased person involved, they may not quite 'get to grips' with the book. However, in the right hands I imagine this book would not be read once, or twice, but many times through the grieving process for however long it takes.

I have recovered from cancers in my nose and reconstruction work and I care for my husband in remission from lung cancer (66-75) (October 2015)

Many people will be able to take away something of use from this book. The author reflects upon life without her husband, and how no one else can be him. It may reassure readers that some days are good, just as you think that, you have a bad day. The author explains how she is surprised that she can do things on her own that she has previously always done with her husband and she gains strength from that realisation and knows that he would be proud of her too.

I found it very easy to read and understand. The author delivers the book in a very personal way, as though she is talking to you. She writes very much in a real and gentle way; you go through her experiences with her. I like the tone of the author; she is considered, thoughtful, questioning and real. The font size and typeface are easy to read. The front cover is OK, not my cup of tea.

I was touched by this gentle and thoughtful book; I really related to it and have thought the same things and asked myself the same questions. I would probably recommend it depending on what someone is feeling and needing. Everyone experiences and deals with bereavement in different ways.

Recently bereaved (46-55) (October 2015)

This book helped me on a personal level being at the same stage of dealing with my grief as the author; I also write in my diary every day, to tell my husband how much I love and miss him and look at poems he wrote for me. The way the author has shared her feelings and the hope she offers is just right. The cover is restful and the book is the right size to pick up to read before sleep at night.

Recently bereaved (66-75) (August 2015)

This would be useful for some recently bereaved, their relatives and friends, also health professionals and volunteers dealing with people affected by cancer. It will be most useful soon after bereavement or even in anticipation; for volunteers, it should form part of basic training.

It is very easy to read and understand but hard to read emotionally. It is excellently presented and describes feelings very clearly. It is quite short, but takes a close look at the personal life of someone bereaved and describes the experience very well. It is frank and detailed and describes a positive path that would help many!!

Clearly, it depends on the individual but I think in most cases this book would bring some peace to troubled minds. I do not know the author but this is an excellent book that I shall recommend to many other volunteers. We study bereavement but this is an excellent introduction and gives food for thought.

Living with prostate cancer and volunteer helping people affected by cancer, many of whom are bereaved (Over 75) (August 2015)



This short book has great impact and will remain in my memory for a very long time. It is mostly a series of letters from the author to her husband who has recently died. The reader is left in no doubt of the love that she and her husband shared, and the depth of her grief. At first, she feels a raw pain that will be familiar to most bereaved people but over time she documents her journey from mourning to a more optimistic place in her life. Nearly a year after the husband's death, the reader is aware of the acceptance and love in her life that does not discount her losses but approaches the future with more confident steps. Some readers may be surprised to know what positive changes she experiences towards the end.

The font of the text is rather too small for my liking, but others may not mind. It is easy to understand and the author's tone is loving and generally positive. The author expresses herself beautifully. She is likeable, and there are many observations and thoughts with which the reader is likely to identify.

The author's husband had apparently 'pioneered a therapeutic method' and they had worked together in giving lectures and presentations in the UK and internationally. Despite the author having to travel extensively to continue to conduct these presentations and lectures soon after his death, readers are not told what she and her husband were working on. I found these references to work intriguing and slightly distracting, as I was curious to know what they had been doing, as the author mentions it a lot. I imagine it was difficult for her as a newly bereaved wife to be continuing this arduous and intellectually demanding work. The reader is not told the nature of this therapeutic method, and the fact that the author gives herself a pen name for the purposes of publishing this book means that we cannot find out.

It is likely that all readers can find something of comfort in these pages. The author expresses her emotions very frankly, and discusses her relationship with her husband in some detail. I do not think that a reader would be upset by this; on the contrary, it provides some optimism in a sensitive way. Some readers may be surprised by the positive news that emerges towards the end.

Sally Dalzel's writing style is beautiful. She expresses her thoughts in a way that touches the reader and that brings a sense of positive and sensitive closure to a great many negative and fearful thoughts experienced in the days shortly after her husband's death. The content of the book is such that it would not be insensitive to give it to a friend/partner of a person who has recently died.

Former health professional, friend, carer (56-65) (May 2016)

This will be most useful after bereavement although it may be a good read to prepare for the feelings and thoughts you may experience. I was a little confused at times, but overall it is easy to understand. The cover is quite dull, but the layout is good. I could relate to a lot of what the author wrote and her tone. I would have liked more.

Recently bereaved (26-35) (November 2015)

This is easy to read with pleasing contents. I like the poems but the cover is not that appealing. It is most useful during or after bereavement.

Living with cancer (36-45) (January 2016)

Anyone recently bereaved will probably get the most from this book; however, much you prepare beforehand, it is not until someone dies that you feel some or all of the emotions described. Sally isn't afraid to say exactly how she feels and accurately describes the feeling of emptiness. As you read on, she describes that there is light at the end of the tunnel, life does go on. It may be different, something is missing and it is hard to accept that you will never see the person again, but there is hope.

It is easy to understand and Sally has a very good way of describing her pain and helplessness; I could empathise with this. The book is printed on good quality paper and set out in an easy and clear way. The cover is calming and peaceful, just what is needed at a difficult time, and the poems are easy reading. The only thing I don't like is the reference to Peter's political beliefs. I don't feel it is relevant.

Reviewing this book was difficult at first. It was hard to read about someone else when my own grief was still so raw. I cried quite a bit and once or twice put it down, thinking 'I can't do this'. But I persevered and felt better as I went on. However much you prepare for bereavement, when someone you love dies, it still hits like a ton of bricks. Sally is very good at describing her raw pain, and I kept thinking 'Yes, it does feel like that'. Three and a half months on from my loss, it does gradually get better and Sally's book has helped me. Thank you.

Recently bereaved (56-65) (October 2015)

This is a good guide when facing or dealing with bereavement. It is very sensitively written but easy to understand and to relate to.

Recently bereaved (46-55) (October 2015)

This is an interesting book. The author's views seemed at first reading to reflect her feelings but on a second reading I felt I was intruding into a private conversation and this felt uncomfortable. It is mainly very easy to understand and the language is clear. Visually, it is not that appealing but the content overcomes this.

There is a definite place for this book but it needs to be recommended with care (it requires some knowledge of the emotional state of the individual) and probably only after bereavement. It is not a book to be recommended during end-of-life or palliative care as it could misdirect and cause distress. The audience is not clear and those with sympathies towards holistic and alternative care may benefit more than those who depend on orthodox treatments. Having said all this, I found it a moving experience and gained some insight that previously had been forgotten.

Cancer survivor and retired health professional (66-75) (September 2015)

Although grief is different for everyone, there are commonalities in terms of feelings and emotions; for those who find themselves feeling lost and confused, this book can help bring some balance in terms of what is normal at such a difficult time. The timing is specific to the individual – some people need preparation to understand their feelings, others can find it scary and distressing.

The author has chosen letters as a way of expressing her feelings and despair. It is a serious book and the cover reflects that – a difficult time full of emotions and deep pain. The capacity for someone to take in what they read is limited and 38 pages is just right; the reader can revisit it as often as needed to reaffirm their thoughts and feelings. Most people in this situation will be able to relate to the feelings of sadness, confusion, loss of interest, the need to keep busy, the unexpected emotions, the searching, the guilt, and the need to invest in a personal life and new friends.

I like the format. Letters can help to relate and encourage the same practice – a private journal in which all thoughts and feelings can be expressed; in time and on reflection it can help the individual to see progress or the need to seek help. However, this letter writing, reflective style is not everyone's cup of tea and when emotions and sensitivity are high it may be misinterpreted, causing more distress

It is interesting how much emphasis is put on religion, culture and belief systems yet the depth of pain felt during grieving can be so similar. She captures well the strong and continuous presence in the early days of the person who has passed away, the constant searching, the feelings of being stuck between reality and disbelief; these are so normal and real, yet open to criticism if they are voiced by others – they need to be viewed and understood as normal. It is OK to reinvest in new friendships/relationships; it is an important part of surviving and very important to recognise that an important relationship will hold a solid base regardless.

Caring for someone recently bereaved (46-55) (August 2015)

This short book consists of private letters from Sally to her husband in the year after his death from an unspecified illness. The 12 letters express her thoughts and feelings as she is plunged into loneliness and isolation. It is a heartfelt and, at times, heartbreaking account. Everyone grieves differently, but I'm sure almost everyone who has lost a partner will identify with some of her feelings and thoughts. It is very easy to follow and understand, with an inviting and appropriate cover. The layout is not too dense and the content is presented in short, accessible sections.

As Sally states in her introduction, the letters provide a glimpse into how her bereavement gradually unfolds from raw grief, through unwilling acceptance, to being able to look forward and believe a future is possible. Most people who have been through this experience will only too readily recognise many of her thoughts and feelings; this recognition that it is a normal process and journey can be a comfort in the early days of grief. Perhaps one frustration is its brevity, particularly in the later letters where cryptic references to other people and events makes these more difficult to engage with as fully as you do with the earlier letters.

My wife died from bowel cancer in 2007 (56-65) (August 2015)

This is an interesting insight into bereavement. I have been through many family bereavements, including my parents and my own children, and this book brought back all the emotions. I found as I started to read that I had tears flowing; after giving myself time to collect my thoughts I continued and found it a very graphic and moving story. Well done Sally.

Friend of a cancer patient (66-75) (August 2015)



I read this book following the death of my nan and while I'm not sure that it helped in any meaningful way, it was interesting and gave me an insight into how another person thought about and coped with the death of someone very close to them.

Sally Dalzel wrote letters to the husband she lost and opens her innermost thoughts to others. Her book may echo the experiences of those who have lost someone, yet must cope with the banalities of daily life after something so tragic and momentous. As such, it has the potential to offer hope to those who may think they will never get through their grieving. It may be better read after bereavement. The experience of bereavement and loss is intensely individual. Though it may show people how one woman has managed her grief, it is equally possible that the minutiae of another person's life and their way of dealing with death may seem irrelevant, especially if grief is still fresh. Perhaps once time has passed, it may be a useful tool in showing that while loss may never leave you, there are ways in which life can continue.

The book itself isn't particularly appealing; it is cheaply done with low quality paper. However, this does not reflect the quality of the writing. There is nothing technical here; the language is every day, direct, and personal. It is an incredibly personal, well-written, and moving memoir of love and loss. Though the author's bereavement is central to the book, it is her love for her husband that shines through each page.

It must take a lot of strength to write such openly emotional letters to the memory of your husband; to do so and then publish them for the world to see is something extraordinary. Perhaps for Dalzel, doing so was part of how she managed her grief; the idea that in her pain, she may be able to help someone else who is going through something similar. While it didn't help me with my grief, I appreciated knowing that someone had found a path through the pain.

Recently bereaved, support worker (26-35) (August 2016)

This is a personal memoir/journal in the form of 12 letters from the author to her husband, documenting her journey following his death. Her story begins three days into her bereavement and progresses in date order for 11 months. Many of the descriptions of the rawness and loneliness of grief are spot on and will resonate with anyone trying to cope with the loss of a partner. One of my favourite quotes is: 'all of life had meaning because you were there'. However, at times, it feels like we are intruding on a private conversation. The letters are a very private communication

from a wife to her deceased husband and probably not intended for publication. This is particularly evident when the author references their long working partnership. Obviously, the author's husband is privy to all the details of this shared history. But we are not and the absence of further illumination is frustrating.

Overall, it is easy to understand. However, the author makes vague references to an unspecified organisation founded by her husband that do not seem relevant to the overall context. There is a confusing paragraph where she alludes to people taking issue with her husband's political allegiances. We are never told what her husband's views were; only that the author must publicly distance herself from them.

The author hopes that publishing her letters will offer support to others struggling with the grieving process. She mentions in her introduction that grief is 'never the same twice'. It's probably true to say that there are recognised stages of grief that we all experience at our own pace and in our own way. At the beginning, the author feels her 'heart is being squeezed so I cannot breathe'. And again: 'I feel as if someone has placed a huge weight in my heart'. Later, she describes 'this gnawing emptiness and longing'. These poignant descriptions of the reality of grief help to normalise and validate these feelings for anyone who may be unfamiliar with the grieving process.

Bereavement counsellor (56-65) (February 2016)

This is a concise account of the author's emotional journey following the death of her husband, sharing emotions that I have experienced even in different circumstances. It draws on strong emotions so may be a difficult read for the recently bereaved but may help those supporting someone who has lost a partner. A healthcare professional could use it to provide empathy to relatives.

It is well presented as a diary but there are no images. The language is appropriate, although typographical errors sometimes make it difficult to follow. There is very little introduction to set the scene and it would benefit from an explanatory epilogue. It is quite useful for comparing emotional experiences and I will probably recommend it.

Health professional (46-55) (December 2015)

I don't know why – it is easy to read, the author is honest, her story touching – but I just didn't feel a connection with this book. It may be useful for those who find it hard early on but perhaps bereavement is so personal that one must face it alone.

Recently bereaved (36-45) (October 2015)

This is a real account of someone's true feelings and emotions, told from the heart. Anyone affected by bereavement may find parts helpful, however it is ten months since I lost my dad and parts of it were still hard to read. I don't think you can often prepare the ground for death but some might prefer to read it in advance.

Recently bereaved (46-55) (October 2015)

This short but poignant insight into one woman's experience of losing her partner raises questions about loss and grief and how the survivor might prepare to negotiate life without their loved one. This makes it an interesting and useful read for all; we all share mortality as well as the potential for bereavement. It could be a useful read prior to a loss, or for someone who is approaching the end of their life, as well as during bereavement, as a touchstone with which to compare your progress.

It takes the form primarily of letters to the deceased during the first year after his death, so it reflects the nuances of emotion and insights gained as time goes on. It is easy to understand but the allusions to the author's and her husband's professional life are unnecessarily detailed as they are not the point of the book; however, they do help to convey some of the complexities that may follow a death. Some sections lapse into philosophical discussions; these are detached from the reality of daily life, but are about key issues of life, death and surviving loss. The parts about new relationships are difficult; the author talks about how vital her partner was, yet she is with someone new quite quickly. It is an interesting look at the tension between moving on and enjoying the time left, but not forgetting the person who has died.

The author's use of a pen name makes it harder to connect; it makes me wonder whose experiences they are. There are glimpses into the reality of living with grief and the distress of finding oneself alone and mourning for life with a partner who is no longer there. The significance of the relationship is conveyed well and sensitively. The poems by her partner shortly before his death give him a voice, which is very poignant. The issue of establishing a new life is thoughtfully discussed, albeit briefly. The part about her efforts to improve healthcare is short: it's good to try to improve things, but why didn't she try to do this while he was alive? There isn't enough detail to convey the subtleties of events and it was a lost opportunity to get to grips with why she was doing this. The polemic about allegations against her partner that emerged after his death is irrelevant. It is what she had to deal with but it dilutes the applicability of her experience and raises uncomfortable questions about what the fuss was about. It is not uncommon for difficult issues to emerge after someone's death, but these seem hard to relate to, as someone not in the public eye.

This book is short and easy to digest, with good descriptions of grief and grieving, but a little clouded by a digression into attempts to improve the health system and too much detail about problems with the author's business. It was written in the first year of bereavement, so is only part of the journey. Someone further along may not find it helpful. It ends with the author in a new relationship, which may be challenging to some readers. I would have rated it higher if the author had focused on bereavement and how she dealt with that rather than the public backlash after her partner died.

Stage 4 tonsil cancer survivor (56-65) (August 2015)

This book wasn't for me. Grief is a very personal experience and this book would not have helped me and does not now. I have read a lot on bereavement and this was nowhere near as useful as other books and I would recommend others first. However, it is a personal experience, so it doesn't mean it won't be useful for others.

Widow (46-55) (August 2015)

This is best read after bereavement. I don't think it will benefit anyone who has not yet lost the love of their life. You need to be at a certain stage in your bereavement to relate to the author's situation. It is a quick and easy read and very relevant to my loss and longing for a future without loneliness, but it is a very brief account of a traumatic time and moves at too fast a pace. I recommend it to others who have been bereaved but would select the recipient carefully.

Recently bereaved (46-55) (August 2015)



I like the fact that the author shares her most personal feelings. The language is easy to understand but the content is a little confusing at times, for example the parts about her work, and I skipped a few pages.

Recovering from breast cancer (46-55) (March 2016)

I will be extremely careful to whom I recommend this. Five close friends have lost their husbands. The feelings expressed in the first part match those that we have talked about and so it would be useful to help them realise that what they are experiencing is normal, that they are not going mad. However, they would find the exploration of new relationships unhelpful. Two found it abhorrent as they consider their husbands to be their soul mates. I have discussed this with my husband; we feel the same and agree that the book will be useful only to a carefully selected audience. So, unless someone is thinking about a new relationship I wouldn't recommend it. Maybe we are lucky to have such longstanding and fulfilling relationships.

I found it interesting and thought provoking and it may be of interest to younger people but not those recently bereaved unless they are exploring a new relationship. I like the first part as it accurately describes the feelings and thoughts of friends I have known in this situation. I don't like the second part; it is very honest, but the audience needs to be carefully selected. I found it quite a shock in a book about bereavement; perhaps it should be explored in a separate book.

Close friend of recently bereaved (66-75) (December 2015)

This well-written book flows well and is easy to understand. I could relate to some of the feelings and scenarios; it illustrates that they are normal. However, at times the subject is lost when the author talks about what she is doing professionally rather than describing her thoughts on her feelings. It is probably more useful as time goes by. At times, I felt I was reading a well-researched novel rather than someone's journey of bereavement. The ending is almost like a fairy tale and could give false hope; this is one person's view and it should not be generalised. It would be interesting to know what proportion of widows end up with such a good outcome.

Bereaved within the last two years (46-55) (September 2015)

This slight book is easily readable in one sitting. It is simply written and from a non-technical perspective thus negating the need for a glossary or index. However, I felt very uncomfortable reading it due to the very personal nature of the author's experience. It felt like an intrusion into private and intimate moments and whilst appreciating the excellent motives of the author in looking to assist others struggling with the grieving process I am somewhat confused as to exactly how this would help. I will be very interested to see the opinions of other readers.

Friend of someone recently bereaved (66-75) (August 2015)

This will be most useful in the first year of bereavement as it reflects on that period. It is easy to understand but contains a lot about the author's business life. I work for myself so could relate to this but others may not. The structure means that it can be read in small chunks (useful as I am finding it difficult to focus on things). The cover is nice and I like the poems between the author and her husband. However, I found it difficult to relate to the author as my own feelings have been very different. It may be useful if yours is a similar story, but not so much so if it is different.

Recently bereaved (46-55) (August 2015)

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

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Feedback

If you have any comments, please [email Sue Hawkins](#), Information Materials Researcher, Macmillan Cancer Support.

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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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