

ALLISON PEARSON SHELF LIFE



Chronicles of love behind the cancer

MILKSHAKES AND MORPHINE: A MEMOIR OF LOVE AND LOSS

by Genevieve Fox



384PP, SQUARE PEG,
£14.99, EBOOK £9.99

ON SMALLER DOGS AND LARGER LIFE QUESTIONS

by Kate Figes



192PP, VIRAGO,
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NOT THAT KIND OF LOVE

by Clare & Greg Wise



320PP, QUERCUS,
£16.99, EBOOK £8.49

Writing openly about cancer is a relatively recent thing because openness about cancer was a painfully long time coming. When my grandfather, the dearest of

men, was dying in the mid-Eighties, I didn't hear "lung cancer" mentioned once – although that fate had lurked within him since he went down the pit aged 13. Those with cancer suffered twice. Once with a cruel disease that could spread through a healthy body like a forest fire. Secondly, from a taboo that made them feel stigmatised and alone.

The first cancer memoir I can recall was *Stay of Execution* by the American journalist Stewart Alsop, which I came across as a child. More than 40 years later, it remains vivid in the memory because of the cool professionalism with which Alsop inspected his mortal fear. He reported the leukaemia as he would a war: the ambushes, the small victories and, ultimately, the death towards which he walked, clear-eyed and courageous. There was gallows humour too. Alsop received a note from his ancient cousin, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, who, after two mastectomies, called herself Washington's only topless octogenarian. "Stew – what a nuisance – love from your aged coz," she wrote.

People simply didn't have the words back then for cancer. In the Nineties, a number of gifted

journalists began to coin them, carving out a new section in the bookshop. Stricken with throat

cancer, the garrulous, gregarious John Diamond literally lost his tongue but found a compelling, mordant voice to address his condition in *C: Because Cowards get Cancer Too*. Martyn Harris, late lamented of this parish, wrote with devastating acuity about his terminal illness in the *Telegraph*. Ruth Picardie, cruelly struck down with breast cancer aged 33, had no time for euphemism. Told that the cancer might spread to her brain, she snapped: "Great, I'm going to die, but I'm going to go bonkers first." Black humour was no defence against the heartbreak of leaving her toddler twins. "How," she demanded, "do you write the definitive love letter to a partly imaginary child?"

Silent now, all three of those valiant voices. (Hard to credit that, 20 years ago, they were criticised for writing "emotional pornography".) Their legacy lives on in the new generation of cancer chroniclers. Picardie actually crops up in Genevieve Fox's *Milkshakes and Morphine*. The two women were colleagues and friends. Unlike Picardie, Fox got a correct, relatively early diagnosis when she found a lump under her chin. The Interloper, she calls it. The description of her onerous treatment is, sadly, all too familiar. What makes this such an original and wonderful book are the buried memories that her tumour force to the surface. We learn that



Fox's widowed mother died of cancer

aged 42, when she and her siblings were still little. "I'm face to face with a nine-year-old motherless girl and I don't want anything to do with her lest she curse my children," Fox writes. Her own sons, Reuben and Sebastian, are 15 and 12. "Please don't let me be taken from my boys. Please let them have a normal, unremarkable childhood."

The dread of not being able to protect her young from her demise is worse than any side-effect. And no wonder. After losing her parents, Fox's own childhood was one of great

privilege and deafening neglect. An advert placed in *The Lady* asked for someone to create "a happy family atmosphere" for Three Recently Orphaned Children. Like something out of Dickens, the Fox cubs were passed around temporary carers and distant relations; wildly entertaining characters for a novel, but no damn use for filling "the heart's hollow that being motherless creates".

Miraculously, *Milkshakes and Morphine* manages to be a very funny, life-enhancing book and not just because its spirited author survived to tell the tale. It's the ideal present for Mother's Day, defining, as it does, that gift that comes free with birth; something we can take utterly for granted until it's gone. "Perhaps when you are very ill you want to be held," the middle-aged orphan Genevieve reflects, "as you

would hold your own children... I allow four words that have been waiting in the wings to step forward. I want my mother."

Childhood memories also play a defining role in Kate Figes's *On Smaller Dogs and Larger Life Questions*. Coming up to her 60th birthday, one of our most acute anatomisers of family relationships received a shocking diagnosis of breast and bone cancer: "treatable, but not curable". As the product of a bitter divorce, the young Kate learnt "to be good and not make life any more difficult". Having spent her life dedicated to others – as a wife, mother and family mediator – the disease forces her to put her own

needs first. "I know I am the one who has to throw every ounce of energy and intelligence that I have into burying the bitch of cancer, for she is the bitchiest of bitches."

There is a rare honesty and rawness to Figes's writing that makes tears jump into your eyes, although often you know she would be laughing loudly if to laugh didn't hurt so much. Listening to her husband and daughter try to fathom the mysteries of the weekly shop, concluding that 10 packs of Dentastix for Zeus the dog is clearly a priority, the control-freak Kate concedes that she has to let go. Feeling less guilt and responsibility for others is an unexpected bonus; so is being acutely alert to time passing. Like other contemporary cancer chroniclers, Figes lacks conventional religious faith but, living alongside death, comes to believe passionately

in the God of small things, not least a miniature dachshund.

The actor Greg Wise could never have foreseen the day when he would need to speak for his brilliant, vivacious big sister. Eighteen months older than him, Clipboard Clare was ever the capable fixer. But she started a blog about her cancer, which became hugely popular, and when she grew too ill to continue, Greg took over. The result is the haunting *Not That Kind of Love*. There are two very different voices here. Clare is not especially anguished when she gets her diagnosis. Poignantly, she assumes she is going to live. "Don't

It must have been the purest agony to watch his darling sister lose all agency

worry, I am not maudlin. My Marilyn Monroe wig arrived today," she assures her followers. Contemplating all the advice about food and healing, Clare remarks ruefully: "I don't think my body will ever be a temple but it might stop being a roadside truck stop." There is none of Figes's

determination to do battle with the bitch cancer. "I am sort of the battlefield and rather passive in the whole process. My only role is to provide a venue," she jokes.

Untrue. She is the best of companions, blessed with a dancing intelligence as she savours the benefits of a famous brother taking her to hospital, "because he is funny and charming and virtually every nurse either recognises him or goes into flirt overdrive". As Clare deteriorates, Greg becomes her 24/7 carer, stripping to his underpants to help her shower, conducting the "symphony of medications" and translating when language starts to elude her. A "water stripe", he realises, is a straw.

It must have been the purest agony to watch his darling sister lose all agency but, to the end, he insists they are a team, figuring out how to negotiate this last journey together. "I wiped Clare's face. I held her hand. I kissed her forehead. I told her I loved her. I said how unbelievable we had both been, but I said it was all just getting too f----- up now. I told her that she didn't have to worry, that everything was sorted. And I told her she could go now, if she wanted to." Clare died a minute later.

Wise's reflections on compassion fatigue are worth the price of this book alone, but what you take away is something splendid and unwearied: a sibling's devotion that feels remarkably like what we mean when we talk of a state of grace.

This fine trio of cancer chronicles proves that Philip Larkin was right. What will survive of us is love.

Buy these books from *The Telegraph* at a discounted price at books.telegraph.co.uk or call 0844 871 1514

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Haunting: Clare Wise and her brother, Greg, in happier times, main; and Genevieve Fox as a child with her sister and aunt, left

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