

Book Review

Vande Berg, L., & Trujillo, N. (2008). *Cancer and death: A love story in two voices.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. ISBN: 978-1-57273-851-5, (paperback), 192 pp., \$23.95.

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The American Cancer Society (2008) estimates that in 2008 approximately 1.4 million new cases of cancer were diagnosed and almost 566,000 Americans died from the disease. These statistics, however, do not capture the innumerable friends and loved ones left in cancer's wake. While the effects of cancer are clearly far-reaching, the everyday experiences of those living with cancer, and of those helping loved ones live with cancer, have not been widely explored in communication scholarship. Moreover, how individuals cope with grief is a topic rarely, if only awkwardly, discussed in American culture. Nick Trujillo and his wife Leah Vande Berg, who died in 2004 of ovarian cancer, have tackled these difficult subjects with both grace and gritty realism in their narrative ethnography, *Cancer and Death: A Love Story in Two Voices*.

Cancer and Death tells the story of Nick and Leah's life together before and during Leah's battle with stage IV ovarian cancer. It shares both of their perspectives, switching from her voice to his and back throughout most of the book. It also incorporates the voices of other friends, family members, and colleagues through their notes, e-mails, and stories. After Leah's death, Nick carries on, telling the story of his grief and adjustment to life without Leah. It is a beautifully written story of love and loss and an extremely honest account of the cancer and death experience. Vande Berg and Trujillo leave analysis largely up to the reader, but to have applied theory would only have cheapened the intensity of their narrative.

The book is broken up into 13 chapters, the first five providing a richly detailed history of Nick and Leah as individuals and relational partners. Chapter 1, *A Stomach Ache in October*, provides a brief two-page backdrop for the rest of the book by telling the story of Nick and Leah's first sense that something was wrong, when a dull ache in her abdomen became an intense pain that ultimately meant a trip to the hospital. Chapter 2, *Beginnings*, takes the reader back to Leah's and Nick's childhoods. This chapter provides details about their upbringings and helps to set the stage for who they will become as adults. Chapter 3, *First Loves and Losses*, takes the reader into Leah's and Nick's adulthoods as they grow and change through college, doctoral programs, first jobs, and failed first marriages. In Chapter 4, *California Loving*, Leah and Nick recount the story of their meeting and falling in love. In this chapter the reader is invited into their relationship and personal details are shared openly. Leah and Nick's relationship continues to grow across the span of many years in Chapter 5, *Life Changes*.

The next five chapters chronicle living and dying with cancer. Cancer enters Leah and Nick's story in Chapter 6, *The Shock of a Lifetime*. Upon Leah's

diagnosis, readers experience Nick and Leah's subsequent sense-making as they begin to think of what the future might hold. Simultaneously, they must perform the mundane tasks necessary to prepare for Leah's surgery. Chapter 7, *Surgery and Recovery*, provides a realistic look at the experience of surgical patient care, offering important observations relevant to patient advocacy and empowerment, patient-provider communication, quality nursing care, and social support. In addition to portraying the details of chemotherapy's physical effects on Leah, Chapter 8, *Chemo Reality*, touches on important topics including intimacy, spirituality, and society's discomfort with the baldness that is symbolic of cancer. Following her surgery and chemotherapy, Leah remains hopeful and positive until a CT scan reveals the cancer has grown back quickly, which they relate in Chapter 9, *Back With a Vengeance*. By the time she is a 1-year cancer survivor, she is also experiencing the ravages of the disease along with a loss of hope. When the certainty of her death sets in, Leah begins tying up loose ends and saying goodbyes. Chapter 10, *Uv U* (the last words Leah uttered to Nick in response to him saying "I love you"), describes the stress the cancer has put on both of them and on their relationship in Leah's last days. As Leah finally passes with Nick's coaching, the reader feels a sense of both sorrow and relief.

Chapters 11 through 13 recount the work of those left behind, in coming to terms with their loss and moving on. In Chapter 11, *Death Work*, Nick tells of learning to grieve: realizing the effect his wife's passing has had on conversations with others, becoming more social, and continuing to live. In Chapter 12, *Communal Grief, Joyous Grief*, Nick describes the many "Leah celebrations" that he arranged to scatter Leah's ashes, honor and celebrate her, and give her loved ones space and time to grieve. Chapter 13, *Life Really Does Go On*, addresses dating again, helping others whose spouses have passed, and the lessons Nick carries with him as a result of his experience with Leah's cancer and death.

Cancer and Death offers a comprehensive narrative. While the book is fairly short, it leaves the reader with a sense of completeness—Nick and Leah's story is told in totality. We begin by getting to know them in their child- and early adult-hoods, which provides a sense of perspective and context. Over the course of the book the reader is drawn into their relationship and immersed in Leah's cancer experience. Yet the book does not end with Leah's death. The story of Nick's coping and the coping of other friends and family members offers a full picture and provides a sense of closure. The narrative is also comprehensive in that it is richly descriptive; Vande Berg and Trujillo do not shy away from the details. In fact, some readers may feel uncomfortable or argue that their revelations make for "too much information," but their narrative would not be as instructive if it were not so honest and real. *Cancer and Death* gives the truest understanding of the cancer experience without actually living it yourself.

Cancer and Death is widely applicable. For scholars it touches on a wealth of important topics related to cancer communication and health communication more generally, including patient-provider communication, social support and coping, hospice care, patient empowerment, spirituality, uncertainty, grief, illness narratives, social networks, and family and marital communication. It is instructive in its use of the autoethnographic and narrative method to describe the illness experience. It also will make a good supplementary reading for graduate seminars. Moreover, it will prove to be a valuable resource for anyone personally experiencing the ravages of cancer and for anyone who works with cancer patients to better understand the

personal and interpersonal effects of the illness. No other work has so thoroughly and eloquently addressed issues of how to help a loved one die and, alternatively, how to help prepare a loved one to live after your death. This book is likely to prompt a reexamination of one's own priorities and promises to speak to every reader personally.

Reference

American Cancer Society. (2008). *Cancer facts and figures 2008*. Retrieved December 20, 2008, from <http://www.cancer.org/downloads/STT/2008CAFFfinalsecured.pdf>