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Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Cancer Book

BY KATHY LATOUR

Everyone by now is familiar with the *Chicken Soup* series, the brilliant books of essays where people tell their own stories of hope and inspiration concerning whatever demographic they inhabit; my daughter loved *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, but you can read about the golfer's soul, the cat lover's soul, and even the middle schooler's soul. Their latest for cancer patients has just arrived in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Cancer Book*, by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and David Tabatsky.

I like the Chicken Soup approach because you can find something for everyone in the “101 stories of Courage, Support & Love” as the cover says. The essays come from people ages 11 and up, with 25 states represented as well as four foreign countries. Essays touch on around 30 kinds of cancer and include essays by and about nurses, doctors, caregivers, patients, and friends.

The table of contents divides the stories into categories that make it possible to skip those issues you don't want to read—like family issues when you are going through cancer solo. My favorites are probably the kids' approach to cancer, which always seem to be mystical, magical, and hysterically funny compared to adults.

The book also has a nice addition, a book within a book called *It's Just a Word* by Elizabeth Bayer, a performer and computer engineer who dealt with stage 3 rectal cancer through extensive surgery and chemotherapy before her death two years after her diagnosis in 2005. In her book Bayer explores the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of her cancer journey, which she came to see as a “gift and a responsibility.”

And for those who are tired of being barraged with the “keep a positive attitude” approach, I found this to have essays that weren't all about having a stiff upper lip but more about the realities of cancer, like the essay where the adolescent boy has some serious conversations with his bladder about peeing so Nurse Ratched won't catheterize him, or about the fifth-graders and their “pure compassion” when their teacher tells them he will be missing school because his wife has cancer. There is the woman who has a party so her friends can write healing phrases on the camisoles she'll wear over the scar where her breast used to be.

A favorite line is the woman who is handed a black marker by her surgeon just before surgery and asked to mark an X on her forehead at the site of her brain tumor. “‘You're kidding,’ I say, looking up at him and grinning. It's a normal

magic marker. 'For something like brain surgery, you'd think they'd be a little more high tech.' "

In the foreward, Tabatsky quotes one woman who finally responds to someone asking if she has lost her hair with, "No, it's just invisible." Darn, wish I had used that one when I was bald.

Sure, there is lots of emotion, pain, anxiety, faith, and battle imagery, and if you don't cry in a few places, you have become hardened. It is, after all, a book about cancer.