Newfoundland Studies

The Necklace of Occasional Dreams: A woman's journal of living with her husband's cancer. Kathleen Winter.

Susanne Carter

Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds15_2rv04

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)
1715-1430 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Carter, S. (1999). Review of [*The Necklace of Occasional Dreams: A woman's journal of living with her husband's cancer*. Kathleen Winter.] *Newfoundland Studies*, *15*(2), 263–265.

The Necklace of Occasional Dreams: a woman's journal of living with her husband's cancer. Kathleen Winter. St. John's: Killick Press, Creative Publishers v, 161 p., illustrations, softcover, French flaps, 1996, $11.95, ISBN 1-895387-62-0.

SUSANNE CARTER

IN THE FIRST JOURNAL ENTRY of this book, Kathleen Winter reveals that her intention was to write a book about wildflowers. But the diagnosis of her husband's lung cancer intervened, and her journal entries took a different turn. The writing of *The Necklace of Occasional Dreams: a woman's journal of living with her husband's cancer* began.

Winter did not set out to publish a book when she began writing these journal entries, recording her private pain, analyzing her conflicting feelings, and discovering an escape from the day-to-day stress of living with a dying man. These entries began as a private refuge, a therapy of sorts for a woman in love with words. Winter began keeping a journal during the summer of 1992, shortly after her husband's diagnosis. She continued writing entries until James' death two years later; by that time the original journal had grown into several notebooks. This book is a compilation of Winter's personal selections, drawn from the two-year-journal. The book also includes journal entries written by James during his final Christmas at home and shortly before his death, as well as a poem and several drawings by their young daughter, Esther.

The journal entries Winter has selected for publication explore the changing nature of her marital relationship after the cancer diagnosis, the nature of death, her relationship with her daughter and how it is affected by James' illness, her spirituality, her relationship with nature, and her independence.

One of the first realizations Winter makes early during her husband's battle with cancer is that the nature of their relationship has been profoundly changed by the prospect of their future together disappearing. "Before we can have a spontaneous kiss or hug each other out of joy, delight, or the happiness of little things in life," she writes, "we have to step over the abyss of death. This is how I feel, anyway" (9). It is James who first observes that he and Kathleen have become a different couple because of the cancer. This observation "revolutionizes" the way Kathleen views the cancer and her relationship with her husband:

> Looking at us as the old us — with cancer — is not the same as looking at us as a whole new couple. If I look at us as a new couple altogether, I see new possibilities. No longer is the future a failed version of our hopes. The future does not begin with the old couple, the past. It begins with us the way we have become. Our old hopes might be dead. It's time to see that they are dead, and to bury them. To start from now, instead, presents us with a whole new set of possibilities (43-4).

Despite Winter's obvious love and compassion for her husband, she writes frankly of the need to carve time for herself amidst the intense demands placed on her time and energy brought about by James' illness. At times she berates herself for wanting a life outside of caring for James. But she also realizes she needs a life beyond that of wife and nurse. As she learns to drive for the first time, Winter comes to view her car as "a sanctuary, a chariot of freedom, an escape vehicle" for a woman whose life often feels as if it is not her own (17).

By the second year of James' illness, Winter writes candidly that she is "profoundly exhausted and emotionally drained." "I can't take another twenty minutes of this," she confides, "let alone years.... This is going to go on until I am destroyed too" (70).

But there is consolation to be found in her religious faith, in her relationships with her daughter and friends, and with nature, and in the pleasure of solitude. Winter has a resilient, "joyful spirit" that is often able to transcend sorrow and find pleasure in small comforts such as the "sound and scent of a night breeze" or "the breathing of a lace curtain at the open window" (95).

The strength of this book lies in those entries of candor, poignancy, insight, and unabashed honesty that offer a realistic glimpse of what it is like to experience the demise of a spouse and become widowed at a relatively young age. If the strength of the book is its candor and insight, however, the weakness of it is that it is not more insightful. A book of this length (161 pages) is more akin to a short story or novella than a novel in construction where there is little room for digression. Yet many of the journal entries seem like diversions that might have been relevant at the moment they were first written, but should have been edited carefully before publication to give the book more focus and tighter construction. Winter rambles and strays and digresses during much of the book, writing about peripheral topics

such as the intricacies of trapping rabbits, her criticism of males, the awkwardness of staying in sterile, contemporary hotels, comparisons of hospital care options, nature discoveries, and bird counts. These digressions seem self-indulgent, certainly uneven in quality, and often only marginally relevant to the intent of the book, to show how women's lives and relationships dramatically change in the face of impending death. Even the two journal entries authored by James seem extraneous and oddly appended — adding to the book's overall lack of continuity.

I wanted to feel more empathy for Kathleen Winter as a wife and widow than I did as I read her journal entries. Her writing never fully drew me in, invited me to feel her pain. I remained oddly detached as I read, wanting to feel more than I did.

The Necklace of Occasional Dreams is another book in a growing genre of writings that look at dying and widowhood in a realistic yet sensitive way. Among these are *The Place He Made* by Edie Clark (NY: Villard Books, 1995), *Widow's Walk* by Anne Hosansky (NY: D.I. Fine, 1993), and *Grieving: A Love Story* by Ruth Coughlin (NY: Random House, 1993). It is unfortunate that the uneven quality of Winter's book will not earn it a place among these titles. Although readers will appreciate Winter's honest exploration of a husband's death from the widow's point of view, they may also be frustrated by its unrealized potential.