

Better Off Bald: A Life in 147 Days

Andrea Wilson Woods

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Better Off Bald is a realistic memoir about being a caretaker for a loved one with cancer, one that reveals all of the vulnerability that was hidden for the patient's sake.

Andrea Wilson Woods's heartbreaking memoir *Better Off Bald* covers the period in which she cared for her teenage sister, who had cancer.

Fifteen-year-old Adrienne was a depressed, suicidal teen when she was diagnosed with Stage IV liver cancer and realized how much she wanted to live. She loved music, went to endless concerts, and was a good student. She kept a diary of her woes, including heartbreak, school drama, and crushes; those entries show her deeper side, beyond her medical struggles.

Woods, Adrienne's sister and legal guardian, stayed by Adrienne's side, helping her to pack as much adventure as possible into her remaining days. Adrienne met Jay Leno and formed a friendship with her idol, Dave Navarro of Jane's Addiction. Her optimism and joy are apparent throughout, despite her illness.

Flashbacks are interspersed among Adrienne's medical challenges. The chaos of the sisters' lives becomes apparent, including difficulties created by their addicted mother and by their unstable financial situation. Cute, happy memories of when Adrienne was a child, and of the sisters' adventures right before the diagnosis, are also included.

The human aspects of dealing with a terminal illness are shared: on top of her grief, Woods tries to wrap her head around a science that's complicated to grasp even in more normal states of mind. To help, the text is written like a painstaking journal—a day-by-day, blow-by-blow account of Adrienne's illness as seen through Woods's eyes. Its chapters are broken up into sets of days, which are prefaced with Adrienne's diary entries; some close with photographs.

While Woods's attention to detail makes the book immersive, the work runs long. It is inundated with medical jargon, superfluous conversations with medical professionals, and daunting lists of medications and dosages. Footnotes help to explain the complexities of Adrienne's illness, including the meanings of white blood cell counts and blood pressure readings, but their information is monotonous.

Candid regarding personal struggles and feelings of helplessness through Woods's sister's final days, this diligent work contains everything that Woods learned about cancer, the liver, and necessary medications. *Better Off Bald* is a realistic memoir about being a caretaker for a loved one with cancer.

ASHLEY HOLSTROM (February 12, 2020)

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