

Outpedaling "The Big C": My Healing Cycle across America

Elizabeth McGowan

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Elizabeth McGowan lost her father to melanoma when he was forty-four and she was fifteen. She rediscovered him during a bike ride across the US, following her battle with the same disease. Joyful, introspective, terrifying, and sobering, her memoir is about reconciling her mortality with her father's.

In the spring of 2000, McGowan marked five years of remission. Her intensive, eleven-year battle with cancer began just after she graduated from college. Her cross-country ride was undertaken, most often, alone; she sent journal entries home from local libraries and mailed home rolls of film. While riding, she made casual, unexpected connections with other survivors; some gave her checks, a bed for the night, a new story, or a tip for the road.

Transitions between the bike trip and McGowan's childhood are seamless. She recalls her explosive and complex father, as well as her own health challenges. She experiences hospitality and kindness via little gestures that magnify human connections. As she moves through the Grand Tetons and across Yellowstone, American authors, including William Least Heat-Moon, William Stegner, and Edward Abbey, move with her; and American history informs the way she sees and understands the landscape and its people.

McGowan digs into the past to make sense of her present, and her reflections are frank and unsentimental. She sees both herself and her father with brilliant clarity, acknowledging the traits that both impeded their progress and made progress possible. She argues against the rhetoric of war that surrounds cancer and acknowledges her own fears and reluctance to engage in further testing.

Outpedaling "The Big C" journeys through illness and America, viewing the ability to put one foot in front of the other as a gift. McGowan makes sense of her circumstances and develops strength across her powerful, 4,250-mile bicycle trip.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (September / October 2020)

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