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Autobiography & Memoir

Professor Cromer Learns to Read: A Couple's New Life After Brain Injury
Janet M. Cromer
AuthorHouse
978-1-4490-6420-4
(December 31, 2009)

Life as Janet Cromer knew it ended on July 5, 1998. Boarding a flight home to Boston, her husband Alan suffered a severe heart attack and cardiac arrest that robbed his brain of oxygen for more than forty-five minutes. When he awoke days later in a Chicago hospital, the Northeastern physics professor could not speak, read, write, walk, or remember. The couple's fight to reclaim his abilities, craft a new life, and redefine their marriage over and over again are painstakingly detailed in Janet's memoir, *Professor Cromer Learns to Read: A Couple's New Life after Brain Injury*.

She compares Alan's struggle to the one chronicled in his favorite book, Homer's *The Odyssey*.

> *I began to refer to the battle to save Alan's life and embark on this voyage of extreme reclamation as 'Alan's Odyssey.'… I started to read chapters of The Odyssey to Alan like a bedtime story. Once again, he listened with pleasure. Odysseus's ordeals had nothing on Alan's.*

Alan learns to redo everything while living at a rehabilitation hospital in Boston. The couple celebrates every small accomplishment as he slowly learns how to shave, chew, swallow, get dressed, learn the alphabet, and even read again. It's fascinating for the reader to witness how the brain heals itself after an injury: Alan must relive the agony of losing his mother and his first wife as the memories hit him once again, and he finds himself humming Broadway musicals and camp songs as memory chunks of music flood back into his awareness.

The book also details Janet's battle for her identity and her marriage while caring for Alan. In well-crafted prose, she sugarcoats nothing: Alan's fits of rage; her urges to pursue an affair; scenarios that she just had to laugh at or she'd go insane, like when she interviews a home

health aide to help care for Alan. In his brain-damaged state, Alan is afraid that Uche, the Nigerian-born applicant, might eat his dog. Janet writes: “I thought this must have been one of the strangest job interviews Uche would ever have, but characteristic of what working for us held in store. After the walk, I asked Alan, ‘What do you think? Can Uche come back tomorrow to help us out?’

Alan fixed Uche with a stern expression, ‘Yeah, I guess so, but don’t eat my dog.’”

Janet, a psychiatric nurse and freelance health care writer, knows just how much medical jargon to give the reader. Aside from a few quirky copyediting errors, the writing is superb—the book won a 2010 Solimene Award for Excellence in Medical Communication and the Neal Duane Award for Distinction from the New England chapter of the American Medical Writers Association. *Professor Cromer Learns to Read* is a tender, honest, raw story about a marriage that struggles to adapt and prosper in the face of extreme change. It will appeal to anyone who is a caregiver or wants to know more about the complexities of living—and thriving—with brain injury.

Dana Rae Laverty