ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Seeing through Death into Life: A Memoir
Verona Rylander
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In this insightful memoir, Verona Rylander openly shares the personal heartbreak of losing her husband to cancer.

A painter, sculptor, and jewelry maker, but primarily a homemaker through the first three decades of her marriage, Rylander and her husband, Jim, were about to embark on a new phase of their life after their three children went off to college. They had been content during their marriage, but Rylander was beginning to feel that her life had become ordinary and she wanted a change. As Jim considered retirement from the law firm where he worked, she took up mountain climbing, and embarked on several treks and climbs to Mt. Rainier and, finally, to Mt. Everest in Nepal, where she relished the "survivor" challenges she faced. Upon returning, and after learning about the concept of transpersonal psychology, a combination of Western and Buddhist principles written about by Ken Wilber, Verona enrolled in a counseling program in Boulder, Colorado. The couple prepared to relocate from their home in Houston when Jim suddenly became ill and was diagnosed with stomach cancer.

Torn between her desire to pursue her new dream in Boulder and support her husband who was being treated for his illness in Houston, Rylander struggled to find a balance. With the help of family and friends who stepped in to help Jim, she was able to pursue both initially, and traveled weekly between the two cities, and between her two separate lives.

Covering the three years of his illness, she masterfully conveys through lyrical prose and metaphor how she often came to rely on her newly-developed counseling and climbing skills to cope during Jim's initial chemotherapy treatments, a brief period of remission, and then the return of the cancer in a form of leukemia that required a bone marrow transplant. In each chapter, she reveals a new perspective about her situation, behavior, and concerns, and at times, a new stress or tension.

Rylander, who has written two books of poetry, brings an artist's viewpoint to her analysis of her circumstances. With a nuanced eye, she cites the smallest details in the environment around her that sometimes serve as a foreshadowing of events to come in her own

life, as well as the broader issues that she is facing, including many contradictions in her own desires, feelings, and emotions during that time. The memoir is both her unique, personal story, but also one many readers will be able to relate to, particularly her feelings of denial, her husband's distrust and unhappiness with some of the medical professionals, her need to find a daily escape from Jim's pending death, and especially the difficulty of not knowing what the outcome will be for them.

At the same time, her brutal honesty about feeling trapped in a caretaker role that was not of her choosing, and having to divert her focus from her academic and professional pursuits at times as a result, may allow readers feeling similar burdens to admit their own conflicted feelings.

Rylander's moving account of how she dealt with her husband's illness provides a hopeful message for all who are going through a similarly difficult ordeal.

Maria Siano