

The Dangers of Pimento Cheese: Surviving a Stroke South of the Mason-Dixon Line

Andy Ellis

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Vulnerability and spiky wit make this account of one man's second chance an appealing and worthy adventure.

North Carolinian ad man and writer Andy Ellis brings wisecracking verve to his story of navigating a changed life in *The Dangers of Pimento Cheese: Surviving a Stroke South of the Mason-Dixon Line*. The memoir recounts the ten years Ellis spent recovering from a stroke that led to semiparalysis.

From the outset, the book focuses on the human side of dealing with a health crisis rather than the science behind strokes or specific treatments. This is a memoir that is meant to encourage fellow survivors. Topics include encounters with medical staff, friends, and therapists; musings on everything from drugs to hospital television channels; a brief section written by the author's wife, which offers the perspective of a loved one; tips from the National Stroke Association; forays in faith; and the problems that arise when a person tries to return to work. Together, such topics elucidate both fear and hope. This comprehensive, eclectic approach results in a vibrant portrait of coming to terms with the body's limits.

Chapter titles such as "Things That Have Gone the Way of the Dodo" add levity to the uncertainty of the author's circumstances. Whether he is considering posthospital adjustments or the possibility of additional strokes in the future, Ellis displays cautious determination.

Brief essays contain the humor of a seasoned columnist. Tangents include a recipe for pimento cheese and well-timed asides. Practical struggles, such as learning to drive one-handed, mix in with deeper issues, including the loss of everyday skills. One section gives useful advice on the need for patient advocacy in an increasingly impersonal hospital setting. Throughout, a strong attitude of whistling past the graveyard keeps the scales from tipping toward irreverence.

The book is also an apt examination of relationships. When the author reflects on his wife, Cristie, there's a clear understanding that becoming a caregiver is often as unsettling as being a patient. Sections that detail shifts in their marriage, the panic of witnessing her husband's falls, and Cristie's bedrock belief in God underscore the ability to love through trying circumstances. Repeated visits to an internist, a physical therapist, a psychologist, and other professionals emphasize the need for a supportive team. It is made evident that a stroke cannot be managed alone. Without slipping into easy platitudes, the book brings familiar ideas on gratitude to the forefront.

The Dangers of Pimento Cheese is an appealing memoir because of its honest, succinct guidance on handling crises. Ellis's story is laced with vulnerability and spiky wit to show how a second chance can be made into its own worthy adventure.

KAREN RIGBY (November 21, 2016)

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