

The Monarchs

Randy Coates

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Coates offers invaluable insight into the trials and triumphs of living with cancer.

An Aztec legend says the souls of the recently departed are embodied in the millions of monarch butterflies that, like Robert and Sharon, migrate annually from Canada to Mexico. Part travelogue and part medical chronicle of one man's struggle with cancer, *The Monarchs* by Randy Coates does not sugarcoat the reality of living with a life-threatening disease. The beauty and allure of Mexico sharply juxtaposes years of bleak suffering, hopelessness, and indignity.

Robert and Sharon have always been content with their isolation. They prefer each other's company and plan to enjoy their retirement, starting with what will become a regular trip from their hometown of Toronto, Canada, to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. When Robert is diagnosed with prostate cancer, he and Sharon attempt to proceed with their retirement plans without interruption. Failing health, surgeries, and setbacks force them to reevaluate everything they thought they knew about themselves, each other, and their future together.

As retired secondary-school teachers, Robert and Sharon are well educated and take pleasure in verbally sparring with each other. Sharon's dry sense of humor perfectly complements Robert's more cynical wit, and the two clearly delight in being together. Coates flawlessly combines their spoken and unspoken reflections and points of view, and what begins in jest—"They spoke about the miraculous journey of the butterflies, swept up on wind currents to a land they had never seen...Sharon and Robert were the monarchs. At least this is how they joked with one another"—gradually takes on a deeper meaning. Coates also manages to include moments of levity in this poignant character study. When Sharon announces their new nicknames, "Mariposa" and "Corazon," Robert quips, "I hope I'm Corazon."

With the exception of the various Mexicans they meet while traveling, Robert and Sharon are an exclusive duo; they tend to look down on other North Americans they encounter. Sharon studies Spanish, and brief Spanish-language exchanges frequently occur. *The Monarchs* could benefit from a thorough review by a translator to clean up these portions, as there appear to be many errors, including a lack of italicization. Accent marks and tildes are absent as well, as in "espanol" instead of *español*, and some words are just slightly off, such as "veinte-cinco" instead of *veinticinco*. Oftentimes, Spanish is referred to as "Mexican," as when Sharon was "studying her notes on Mexican grammar and vocabulary." A small handful of grammatical errors occur in English as well, but not enough to detract from the narrative, and it's possible that those unfamiliar with the Spanish language would not notice anything amiss.

The Monarchs is not a light or breezy story, but the insight offered into the trials and triumphs of living with cancer is invaluable. Additionally, anyone even remotely interested in the migration of the monarch butterflies or in a visit to Mexico (particularly the Bajío region of Guanajuato, the locale of the colonial city of San Miguel de Allende) should read *The Monarchs*, which includes cultural, historical, and practical information for travelers.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (July 3, 2014)

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