

Winning Wishes

Anne Hutcheson

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A couple embraces uncertainty in this appealing novel about the power of positive thinking.

Anne Hutcheson's third novel in The Cancer Chronicles series, *Winning Wishes*, explores the role of positive thinking amid sudden health crises. For fellow survivors and loved ones, this measured tale of devotion portrays a midlife couple embracing uncertainty.

A dramatic plot stacks problem upon problem, beginning with Jack's mother, whose decline prompts his return to Mountain View, Colorado, to move her to a hospice. Away from home, he's struck by an aneurysm. His wife, Penny, then advocates for his care while enduring the return of her stage IV breast cancer. The straightforward narration emphasizes Penny's difficult circumstances, which she navigates with admirable presence of mind. A focus on practical tasks, such as organizing logistics, traveling to the hospital, and tying up loose ends at home and work, however, creates narrative distance.

Penny is viewed in motion, immersed in the necessities of caregiving. Yet for all her efficiency and resolve, subtler aspects of her inner makeup remain less clear. The novel lacks the scenes necessary to explore her perspective, making it hard to fully grasp her optimism.

Successful insights occur when the work's spareness permits specific moments to stand in sharper relief. Such details offer indirect glimpses at Penny's emotional state. They include Penny, on her way to Jack's side, considering the airport crowd "surging around her like oranges in a bag, jumbling, jostling, jockeying," and her determination to "dress to the nines" during her cancer treatments as a form of self-respect and perhaps defiance, which bolsters the spirits of another patient.

Jack's rehabilitation and Penny's efforts to accept the new shape of their marriage comprise the novel's main thrust. Throughout, the medical community is drawn in a cold, brusque light that underscores their challenges. Skepticism toward the way patients are viewed continues themes from previous installments of the series. Still, the need to portray staff as unreceptive to alternative ideas results in characters—including a nursing supervisor and one of Penny's doctors—who come across as harsh, abrupt voices rather than complex figures. Others, including Jack and Penny's adult children, serve as supportive peripheral characters.

Winning Wishes presents an uplifting view despite the serious illnesses at its center. Penny and Jack illustrate the benefits of shouldering each other's burdens even when reprieves seem few and distant. Without overt references to a specific faith, Penny's spirituality appeals to believers as she powers through adversity.

KAREN RIGBY (March 22, 2016)

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