

## Elizabeth Benedict's 'Rewriting Illness' injects tragicomedy a personal account of cancer diagnosis and treatment

By Joan Frank Globe Correspondent

*Rewriting Illness*, Elizabeth Benedict's eighth book, will mess with you — in irresistible ways. Despite its scary subject, this chronicle more like a breathtaking whodunnit — or rather, a *whatdunnit*. It may actually help readers feel better about our own natural fear while it confronts the worst.

Best of all, Benedict's writing sparkles.

It's only fitting. A novelist and essayist who teaches fiction and coaches students on their college application essays, Benedict whi language around like a gunslinger. Her account arrives in crisp, wry bites that also manage to be wittily titled: "Not Everything Sc — t out of Me" or "One Night I Touched My Arm."

Hypochondriacs and catastrophists? She's got your backs, opening with the moment her own lifelong, free-range hypochondria pr began — when a sweet high school classmate suddenly died of Hodgkin's disease. That shock stuck. "I had barely known the girl. .. had lurked in my consciousness ... prepared to pounce and shout ... 'Now it's your turn!'"

And lo: "[L]ate one night in early June 2017... I crossed my left arm over my chest and stuck it in my armpit, and there it was." A l a "vague sensation," as if that of "a tiny pellet floating inside me."

It takes not one nanosecond (especially for women) to grasp: *this could be me*. Moreover, our paranoia's justified. "If I added up t had spent anticipating the moment I'd feel a lump where no lump should be ... I knew my own fears were extreme." Benedict also that the dreaded moment "turns out to be every bit as terrifying" as she'd imagined.

The armpit event fires the starting gun of a long, frantic, sometimes tragicomic race. Yet for all its roller-coaster terrors, Benedict' hereby cancel the word *journey* as a euphemism for horrific experience) amuses and entertains, even while we're clutching the bo eyed.

Of course, Benedict Googles her discovery. "The news was either pretty good, not great, or Get Your Affairs in Order."

Her patient, loyal husband, James (already no stranger to family tragedy), and adored young-adult stepdaughter Emily try to help friends like Deena, a "thirty-eight-year breast cancer survivor" who grappled with the ordeal "backwards and in high heels: [as] a single [working] mother ... Deena would be my guru." And Deena delivers: a bulleted list of clear, smart instructions. (Bring James to doctor appointments, take notes, ask questions repeatedly, etc.) But first Benedict wants to audition some of "Google's list of natural remedies" for shrinking swollen lymph nodes (a casual diagnosis tossed out by a nurse practitioner).

Wishful thinking: everyone's first instinct, right?

So Benedict starts performing jumping-jacks. (Yes, jumping jacks.) Drinking apple cider vinegar and "shots of wretched forest green grass juice with turmeric, seven dollars each."

Oh — and Tibetan Buddhist chanting.

“I was like a naked woman running out of a burning building, beyond self-consciousness as I jumped up and down ... [efforts remind me of a teenage remedy for getting rid of unwanted pregnancies ... probably as effective.”

Benedict’s medical path (insurance, rerouting work duties, bouncing between appointments, diagnoses, treatments) reads like a hellfire chase, and will make readers feel up their own armpits more than once. But Benedict’s fearless descriptions of how every step (misstep) felt, are mesmerizing.

Our worst nightmares ignite when she is initially delayed by medical dithering and misdiagnoses. When Benedict tries to schedule a PET scan, a female doctor insists — by phone — that “the lump was a ‘reactive lymph node.’” This doctor refuses to do “anything aggressive than waiting,” offering referral to a breast specialist “[i]f it would help your anxiety.” (Italics mine.) Benedict is incredulous “Since when had I moved to Freud’s Vienna, land of hysterical women who needed their inexplicable anxieties muffled?”

That *cri de coeur* burns this account’s abiding lesson into our brains: *Act aggressively on your own behalf*. Being nice won’t cut it

Frequently, Benedict had to wait to obtain information: how she managed these periods without going mad, I’m stumped. Yet she herself: “I don’t want to know more than I know.” Wary, vigilant, she cites the posthumous irony of Susan Sontag’s proud self-des after beating a first cancer: “gleaming with survivorship.” Eventually she observes: “[Cancer] ... was like the coast of Maine ... so full of intricacies and hidden coves, crevices, and dangers ... it can never be accurately measured or fully known.”

Still later, the chapter subtitled “The Secret Lives of Doctors” finds her buttonholing an early physician who’d told her it would be take a vacation before getting a biopsy: “Did you really not think I had cancer?”

His answer’s confounding. But defensible. Sort of. Other surprises abound: the precious nourishment, in hospitals, of good art. Or nature/nurture riddle: “whether we’re born with our jittery nervous systems or ... acquire them once life has its way with us ...?”

Let “Rewriting Illness” tell you more. (Benedict is the owner of a rogue gene, which complicates things.) Give it to friends. It’s sup worth the journey — I mean, the *whatdunnit* — not least to savor Benedict’s wise, funny, piquant ruminations and revelations also way: “The appetite for information is profound, and not all metaphors are about battles and wars.”

Joan Frank’s recent books are “[Juniper Street: A Novel](#)” and “[Late Work: A Literary Autobiography of Love, Loss](#)”