



MAGGIE'S

Everyone's home of cancer care



# Maggie's Fiction Library: Guide

# Contents

Introduction and how to use	p. 1
Emotions and Relationships	p. 4
Time	p. 15
Life, Death and Dying	p. 25
Humour	p. 36

## Themes and Questions

### Emotions and Relationships

“Should I feel embarrassed about showing my emotions?”

Talk Before Sleep (novel), p. 5

“Is it right to sometimes hide the truth about cancer?”

The Quarry (novel), p. 8

“How can I share my experiences of cancer with others?”

Ways to Live Forever (novel), p. 11

“How can I tell children about cancer or death?”

Coco (film), p. 13

### Time

“When is the right time to tell my friends and family?”

Cold Feet (TV series), p. 16

“Am I running out of time?”

The Fault in our Stars (novel), p. 19

“How should I use my time during treatment and recovery?”

Cancer Ward (novel), p. 21

“How can I learn to appreciate the here and now?”

The Time Traveller’s Wife (novel), p. 23

### Life, Death and Dying

“Should I try to fight death and cancer?”

Breaking Bad (TV series), p. 26

“Can dying ever be a creative, meaningful experience?”

The Fountain (film), p. 29

“How can I come to terms with losing someone I love?”

A Monster Calls (novel), p. 32

“Are life and death connected?”

Charlotte’s Web (novel), p. 34

### Humour

“Can life with cancer ever be fun?”

The Bucket List (film), p. 37

“When is it appropriate to joke about cancer?”

Catastrophe (TV series), p. 40

“Can humour change my attitude to cancer?”

Deadpool (film), p. 42

“Where can I find reasons to smile?”

Detectorists (TV series), p. 45



## Introduction

This Reading Guide is designed to help you use the collection of novels, films and television series in the Maggie's Fiction Library to explore your own experience of cancer. For many people, being diagnosed with cancer raises several new concerns, anxieties and questions. Having to suddenly come to terms with these changes can be very hard, especially when they involve unfamiliar, unpredictable things. Finding fictional characters and stories which deal with these same challenges can allow people to better understand their own responses to cancer or introduce them to different perspectives on their situation.

This Reading Guide describes how the books and DVDs in the Fiction Library can give you examples and ideas on how you might address a particular question or difficulty that cancer has created. Like the Maggie's programme, it is designed for anybody who has been affected by cancer to use including friends and family, as a single cancer diagnosis often has an impact on several people's lives. The library and guide together could provide examples and ideas which help you to start difficult conversations with loved ones or share your own experiences of cancer.

The Reading Guide focusses on four different themes which often form part of our experience of cancer: time; life and death; relationships and emotions; and humour. Each person will relate to these themes in their own way, so the guide does not try to offer clear answers about each subject, but instead picks out many different ideas and perspectives on these themes from the novels, films and TV series. Because everyone's experience of cancer is unique and personal the guide leaves room for you to respond to these stories in your own way. There are also plenty of different types of fiction in the library, so there should be something to meet anyone's preferences. Whether you like reading romantic tear-jerkers, watching rude comedy films or bingeing on gritty crime dramas there should be something there for you.

There is also information in the Reading Guide about how the Maggie's Programme can help users to address specific issues raised by works in the library. When characters are confronted by concerns or questions which might be relevant to someone affected by cancer the guide will often list resources offered by Maggie's centres which can help with these. So, if you come across a storyline, an idea or a problem which resonates with something in your personal experience of cancer, the guide will direct you to appropriate sources of support and guidance at Maggie's. If you would like to hear more about the Maggie's Programme, or if something in the books or DVDs distresses you, the Maggie's psychologists and cancer support specialists will be able to give you expert advice and support. Members of the Maggie's staff can also give you timetables listing what each centre offers, or you can access information through the Maggie's website ([www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)).

## How to use the Reading Guide

There is more than one way to use the Reading Guide and Fiction Library – you can choose whichever suits you best. In the guide the works are grouped into the four themes, so that if there is a subject you want to explore you can easily find the novels, films or TV series which deal with that theme. There is also a list of questions connected to each theme, so that if a specific question has been playing on your mind you can find the theme and fictional works which will introduce different ways of framing and responding to that question.

You can use the Reading Guide before or after you watch a DVD or read a novel from the library - it's up to you. The guide does contain 'spoilers' so if you want the plot to be a surprise don't read it first! The guide gives a description of how each work engages with a certain theme, noting the different perspectives it provides and the ways these could reflect or change how someone affected by cancer sees their own experiences. Not all the works are about cancer, so if you need a break from talking or thinking about the c-word then look for works which have the '**no cancer**' sign next to them. Works are marked '**children-friendly**' if they would be suitable to watch or read with younger people as a way of introducing them to a theme in a fun, gentle way.

Every book and DVD listed is available to borrow from the library section of your Maggie's centre (unless someone else has got there first!). Please try to return items within a month so that somebody else can use them. Some of the films and TV series are also available to stream online through subscription services like Netflix and Amazon Prime and the guide will say where you can find them online if that is the case.

Of course, there are lots of other themes connected to living with cancer which could have been included and you will probably have your own thoughts about the way each work explores the impact of cancer. You might want to use one of the Maggie's Support Groups or Networking Groups to share these thoughts with others and discuss your reactions to the stories and characters in the Fiction Library. There are also many different types of art and examples of artworks which could have been included – this is just a small selection to help you start exploring everything that is out there.

## Chapter 1

★

# Emotions and Relationships

## Talk Before Sleep

by Elizabeth Berg (London: Arrow Books, 2004)

Elizabeth Berg wrote *Talk Before Sleep* after losing 'a very important friend' to breast cancer. She wanted her novel to 'testify to the emotional truth' of what happened and to 'personalise' the experience of caring for someone with cancer by using a fictional story to explore real feelings of friendship, love and grief.

A theme running through the novel is the shame and embarrassment characters feel when they let their emotions show. *Talk Before Sleep* focusses on the friendship between Ann and Ruth, who has breast cancer. When the two friends first meet, they spend a lot of their time together crying, watching sentimental films or consoling each other when they find life difficult. When this happens both Ann and Ruth feel 'embarrassed' by their tears and faces 'splotchy with grief', but these outpourings of emotion also bring them closer. Ann says 'it was those tears that let me

know we'd be friends' (p. 31), suggesting that crying together has been an important part of their friendship, letting them share difficult experiences. Later, when Ann is helping Ruth as she struggles with her cancer, she often apologises for crying or brushes away her tears 'as though they were someone else's' (p. 243). The novel lets us see the strong emotions and intense sadness caring for someone with cancer can draw out, as well as the sense of guilt or embarrassment we might feel when we can no longer conceal these feelings. Even after Ruth has died, Ann still sees 'howling' with grief as a 'self-indulgent letting go' (p. 271) and clearly does not feel comfortable expressing her understandable pain, anger and grief. But as the reader, we are aware that the tears and emotional 'letting go' have been a vital part of the friendship and support she gave to her friend, so we may start to question whether someone in Ann's position should be feeling

**The Maggie's programme offers many kinds of presence and friendship to users who come to a centre, including simple things like a cup of tea and a chat, or a private conversation and shoulder to cry on when you are feeling emotionally vulnerable.**

guilty for letting go and revealing their real emotions.

*Talk Before Sleep* describes how living with cancer can make someone reliant on friends and family, but portrays this dependence as a source of strength as well as a sign of vulnerability. Ruth is constantly surrounded by various friends as she approaches the end of her life, each of them adding something different to her remaining time. She concedes that her life has taken several 'awful turns', yet because of the 'constant presence' of her friends she says these distressing events can sometimes seem 'also sort of wonderful' (p. 66). Although referring to experiences of cancer as 'wonderful' inevitably sounds strange or shocking, a reader affected by cancer might recognise an element of truth in Ruth's words, which touch on the ways in which cancer can bring friends and family together. When Ann hugs Ruth, she notices how thin and fragile Ruth has become. But as she gently embraces her and pushes 'a lot of feeling across the space between [them]' Ann spots a 'slice of light' in Ruth's eyes that captures 'the stubbornness and the strength of hope' (p. 210). The novel is full of moments like this, which reveal how living with cancer can bring out resilience, weakness, frailty and defiance, often all at the same time: moments that illustrate how accepting our dependence on others might help us to find the 'strength of hope'.

Because the relationship between Ruth and Ann is based on openness and honesty, it provides Ruth with an opportunity to voice her fears about cancer. Ruth is frustrated by doctors who use the 'vocabulary of medicine' as a way of 'hiding' from the truth and avoiding frank discussions about her prognosis (p. 103). Talking with Ann brings every subject into play as Ruth feels able to tell her friend about her wish for control over her death, or her desire to 'round up a bunch of terminal breast cancer [patients]' to 'experience death together' so

**At Maggie's resources like the Breast Cancer Support Group provide a space where users can feel free to talk about their experiences and discuss their fears and hopes, sharing any aspect of their lives which they would like to discuss with others in a similar position.**

she is not alone (p. 173). Reading about these conversations could prompt us to consider how friendships can allow us to face truth directly without hiding behind euphemisms or silences.

Talk Before Sleep also draws our attention to the importance of moments when friends 'talk and laugh and eat' together and 'nobody says anything about illness or death' (p. 79). Ruth and her friends often spend time chatting about dating, eating cake for breakfast or watching films. The way they switch effortlessly between topics like mascara and mortuaries, lobsters and loss implies that simply accepting and expressing our rapidly changing moods might be an important part of coping with cancer. The novel implies that allowing ourselves and those close to us to suddenly shift between confronting the truth and ignoring it, just noticing the many different ideas and reactions cancer can provoke rather than questioning them, could help to create an environment in which all involved feel affirmed and supported.

## **The Quarry** by Iain Banks (London: Abacus Books, 2014)

*The Quarry* is a rude, raw novel full of sadness, anger, humanity and hope. It is written by Scottish author Iain Banks from the perspective of a young man with Asperger's syndrome, whose father has cancer. This means the novel presents a version of life with cancer seen 'from an unusual angle': the voice of someone struggling to make sense of how cancer can reshape our relationships, who finds it difficult to understand the strangeness of human emotions. This 'unusual' perspective might help us to recognise how complicated each individual's response to cancer can be, drawing attention to this confusing, uncertain world of emotions and relationships.

Banks's novel lets the reader explore the powerful feelings of pride and embarrassment which cancer can cause us to feel. Kit - the narrator - notices that his dad, Guy, struggles to accept the extent to which cancer has made him reliant on other people. Because Guy was too unwell to go to his Work Capability Assessment, Kit has been left as an unpaid carer for his father. Kit sees Guy weeping when he is forced to let his son help him with basic tasks like using the toilet, but Kit pretends not to notice to avoid embarrassing his dad: 'he doesn't know that I know this' (p. 35). Their relationship might make a reader think about the 'little face-saving deceptions' that a cancer patient and their friends and family might turn to - the strategies which can protect the dignity of somebody who feels they have been reduced to 'helplessness' (p. 39).

Guy himself also speaks about the anxiety and embarrassment other people can feel when they spend time around somebody with cancer. A difficult, provocative character, Guy likes to cause trouble by talking openly about his friends finding it 'distressing and upsetting' to see him

**Maggie's provides resources like the *Friends and Family Course* or *Family Counselling Sessions* which can give people a place to address the anger and resentment that cancer can cause in close relationships, by discussing this with others affected by similar issues or learning strategies for working through conflicts.**

**One of the sensitive, complicated subjects *The Quarry* touches on is the matter of money and the problems it can cause. Maggie's offers a *Debt Management Service* and *Wills and Power of Attorney Service* which both provide practical support to ease the burden financial concerns can place on relationships.**

physically and emotionally changed by cancer (p. 125). *The Quarry* lets us study the strange mixture of troubling feelings which cancer can bring into people's lives from several different perspectives, as well as the 'deceptions' we might use to cover these up.

Banks also uses *The Quarry* to confront readers with the 'general unpleasantness' cancer can sometimes cause in relationships: the anger and hostility some patients might recognise in themselves or others close to them. Guy spends a lot of his time telling Kit or his friends to 'stop f\*\*\*ing fussing', lashing out at the people he is dependent on. Guy's frustration so often spills out into criticism of others that Kit starts to believe his father is 'being horrible' deliberately to 'toughen [him] up' (p. 52). Reading the novel, we can understand Guy's anger, but also sympathise with those who must endure this 'unpleasantness' while having to care for him. Towards the end of the story, when Guy's friends have gathered to say goodbye to him, Guy uses this as an opportunity to rail against a world

full of misguided people who cling to 'superstitious idiocies', even attacking his own friends for their 'inadequacies' (pp. 335-9). He sometimes seems to be treating his cancer as an opportunity and excuse to say hurtful, insensitive things, a habit which might be familiar to a reader with experience of cancer.

Many moments in *The Quarry* raise the problem of realism and cancer, asking to reader to think about how and when we should speak openly about cancer. Guy sets himself up as 'Mr-I-Speak-The-Truth' and condemns what he calls the 'self-delusion' and 'happy-clappy f\*\*\*wittery' which some people use to avoid dealing directly with the reality of cancer (p. 193). He rants furiously about 'God-botherers' or advocates of 'positive thinking', freely discussing his condition without worrying about the feelings of his loved ones. Banks describes how Guy's straight-talking upsets other characters, who look away

or even 'wince' with discomfort when Guy refers to his 'sad, pathetic, wasting-away terminal state' with uncompromising honesty (pp. 125-6). Kit retreats into the fantasy world of his favourite computer game as a place of 'comfort' and 'happiness' free from his father's distressing condition. The novel allows us to share in the way Guy's behaviour unsettles and upsets others, but also invites us to empathise with Guy himself. When Guy talks about how we don't know how to behave around 'very sick' people or describes the 'isn't-everything-marvellous' attitude he often encounters, we might start to appreciate why he feels he has to fight to persuade others to acknowledge the truth of his situation.

Banks does not use his novel to try to find clear answers and easy solutions to the emotional problems cancer causes. Because the narrator of *The Quarry* is a young man who struggles with 'emotional cleverness' and 'empathising' the book highlights how strange and contradictory our feelings about cancer can seem, as we hear Kit trying to make sense of 'tangled' and 'complicated' emotions and relationships (pp. 4-5).

Kit retreats into the imaginary realm of his computer game because it is a place where the rules are 'definite and clear' unlike the world of arguments, hurt feelings and injured pride he finds in his house. But despite this uncertainty and confusion, Banks does also allow Kit's experiences to highlight the warmth and humanity that are also part of this environment. When Guy suddenly rests his head on his son's shoulder this rare display of affection surprises Kit but also speaks of a clear, trusting love. After Guy's death, the reader finds the chaos of grief and loss mixed with a sense of resolution as the novel lets tangled, muddled feelings exist alongside clarity and purpose. This might help someone trying to navigate a life affected by cancer to accept that their life can contain both emotional chaos and calming, grounding love and they do not have to find simple solutions to all the problems and contradictions they encounter.



## Ways to Live Forever

by Sally Nicholls (London: Scholastic, 2015)

children-friendly

*Ways to Live Forever* is written by author Sally Nicholls as the fictional story of eleven-year-old boy Sam, who has leukaemia. It is full of 'stories, pictures, questions and facts' that Sam has collected which tell us about his experiences of cancer and the role his friends and family play in shaping these experiences.

*Ways to Live Forever* lets us build a kind of friendship with the character of Sam, so could help a reader to understand the importance of close, trusting relationships for somebody with cancer. The novel contains lots of details Sam shares with the reader about his thoughts, ideas and questions: lists of his favourite things, things he wants to achieve and things he wants to find out. Sam's list of five facts about his appearance tells us about all the bruises he has because of his cancer and reveals he knows he looks 'small for eleven' and 'sort of pale' (p. 16). Reading these lists, we get a sense of how much Sam values the opportunity to share his story and communicate his feelings, fears and hopes. He likes to collect stories as well as telling his own as a means of building relationships based on intimacy and honesty which give him a place to be open about his illness. As a reader we become part of this process, so can use the book to explore this kind of relationship and consider where and with whom we might choose to share our own story.

Sam's story is also about the silences and unanswered questions that can become part of a relationship affected by cancer. Sam lists 'Questions Nobody Answers', like 'How do you know that you've died?' which he struggles to persuade people to discuss. Reading about this from Sam's perspective could help someone to notice unanswered questions that have become part of their own life, recognising the subjects they, or those around them, are unwilling to talk about. Sam's father refuses to acknowledge his

son's illness, insisting that 'Sam's doing great' despite what the doctors say (p. 28). When Sam tries to start a conversation with his father about 'being ill' it causes a silence that 'stretched and stretched' (p. 52). The novel highlights the painful, difficult silences which can become a source of distress in relationships changed by cancer, reflecting tensions which might be familiar to a reader with personal experience of cancer.

*Ways to Live Forever* also gives a reader moving illustrations of the comfort and reassurance close relationships can bring to someone facing cancer. When Sam's father starts to accept how serious Sam's condition is, he devotes all his time and attention to caring for Sam: telling him stories, playing with him or simply being present with his son. Through Sam's narration of their time together we feel the respite, peace and pleasure this gives Sam, experiencing the value of this support through Sam's own description (pp. 157-9). When Sam's little sister suddenly comes to hug and console her brother in the middle of the night, the 'soft warmth' of her simple act allows Sam to relax and sleep (pp. 113-4). The novel gives readers a chance to consider how powerful moments of warmth and companionship can be: how something as simple as a hug can give somebody back the peace that cancer has taken from them.

*Maggie's Family Psychology Sessions* can give a family specialist support and advice to help them to address the frustrations, silences and tensions which cancer can bring into our most important relationships.

*Creative Writing Classes or Journaling Courses at Maggie's* give users an opportunity to write about their experiences and share this process with a group, developing relationships with others affected by cancer through conversation and storytelling.



## Coco

(Disney Pixar, 2017) DVD

no cancer, children-friendly

*Coco* is a charming, family-friendly animated adventure about a twelve-year-old boy name Miguel who journeys into the Land of the Dead. Set during the Mexican festival of the *Día de los Muertos* – The Day of the Dead – *Coco* shows Miguel learning about love, loss, family and memory through spending time with deceased family members on the ‘other side’ of life. Whilst it isn’t about cancer, the film does address difficult subjects like grief and death imaginatively and tactfully, so could provide an appropriate way for families to begin sensitive conversations about disease and dying in a gentle, thoughtful way.

A key theme in *Coco* is memories and the way in which loved ones who have died can live on through stories we tell about them. We see Miguel and his *familia* celebrating the Day of the Dead as a time when ‘our ancestors can be with us’, using a beautiful shrine covered in flowers, photographs and mementos to preserve the memory of their relatives (9 minutes). Later, a breath-taking shot of a graveyard full of people commemorating loved ones by decorating gravestones and leaving presents shows how this process can bring light and life into the darkness of death. The animation represents the ancestors’ presences as glowing skeletons, adding a radiant warmth which helps to dispel the gloom of the graveyard (18-22). *Coco* reveals the value of these rituals, reminding the audience that precious memories can bring joy and solace into our grieving when we lose someone. At the end of the film, as Miguel starts to understand this himself, he shows his baby sister the photographs on the shrine and tells her ‘these aren’t just old pictures they’re our family’ (90). His adventures with skeletons in the Land of the Dead teach Miguel – and perhaps also teach us as we watch – about the power of memory to keep those who we have lost present in our lives in meaningful ways.

**The Maggie’s  
Bereavement Course  
gives people a place  
to learn about  
different ways of  
approaching grief  
and remembrance  
which could help  
them to come to  
terms with the  
impact of losing a  
loved one.**

Another interesting feature of the film is its exploration of the ‘power of music’ to connect us to those we love. A lullaby called *Remember Me* becomes a theme tune played many times throughout the film and each time it evokes a significant emotional response. A sepia-tinted flashback shows Miguel’s great-great-grandfather Hector playing the song to his daughter Coco, who he left behind when he died, capturing both the pain of loss and the joy of paternal love (69). When Miguel plays the same song for Coco, now an elderly lady struggling with dementia, it reaches her in a way nothing else has and she smiles and sings along (87). Together, these two poignant scenes reveal the power of shared memories to soften the sadness disease and death causes, making loved ones present again by recreating the sounds and feelings which bind us to them.

The central idea in *Coco* is that ‘nothing is more important than family’. Miguel’s desire to become a famous musician is a source of tension within his family and leads to arguments with his parents and grandmother. But spending time with his ‘ancestors’ and learning about their lives gives Miguel a deeper appreciation of the value of family. Seeing the lively character of his great-great-grandfather Hector fade away in the Land of the Dead because the daughter he still adores is forgetting him (67-69), Miguel realises that preserving and protecting loving relationships is vital. He is given a golden leaf as a ‘blessing’ from his ancestors that reminds him to ‘never forget how much your family loves you’ (80) and might also remind viewers that strong, trusting family bonds or friendships are a ‘blessing’ we should not take for granted. Miguel’s experiences in the Land of the Dead are sometimes strange and unsettling but at the end of the film it is these powerful bonds that ground and reassure him. The final scene in *Coco* shows a huge family feast attended by both living and dead relatives, while Miguel sings ‘our love for each other will live on forever’ (91), expressing his newfound confidence in the enduring power of loving relationships.

**Maggie’s Centres  
host *Kids’ Days*  
which give families  
affected by cancer  
an opportunity to  
enjoying spending  
a full day together  
and time and  
space to appreciate  
their closest  
relationships.**

## Chapter 2

★

## Time

### Cold Feet: season eight (ITV, 1997-2019)

Friendships and family are at the heart of the long-running comedy drama *Cold Feet*, but series eight is also a moving exploration of the theme of cancer and time. When one of the central characters, Jenny, is diagnosed with breast cancer the news changes how she sees herself, as well as those close to her and her time with them. This sudden shift reflects some of the ways that cancer can alter our perspective on how we live our life and use our time.

Jenny's story gives viewers an opportunity to think about the problem of finding the 'right time' to tell family and friends about a cancer diagnosis. Speaking to another cancer patient Jenny explains she has been struggling to work out when 'the right time to say something like that is'. It never seems like a good moment, because Jenny is always worried that she will be 'taking away' her loved ones' peace and happiness (series 8: episode 3). Several times in the series we see powerful, poignant shots of Jenny standing in front of her lively family struggling to find a way to begin telling them she has cancer.

Often, she is left alone listening to the voices of her husband and children fading into the background, visibly lonely and worried. Or, we watch Jenny searching the internet for information on breast cancer in the middle of the night accompanied by brooding, downbeat music that underlines her sense of isolation, as she looks for the support she has been unable to ask her family for (8:2). Jenny's desire to avoid burdening others with her news and to give those close to her 'one more day' free from the impact of cancer may be familiar to many people who have been in her position. But her difficulty finding an appropriate moment to open up might also make viewers reflect on whether there is ever a 'right time' to share news of this kind, or if hiding the truth can sometimes make things harder.

**The Maggie's  
Family Psychology  
Sessions are easy to  
book by talking to  
a member of the  
Maggie's Team and  
can help families  
to negotiate  
problems like  
finding the right  
time to discuss bad  
news or difficult  
experiences.**

**Maggie's Centres sometimes host *Kid's Days* when children and parents affected by cancer can meet and support each other during difficult moments.**

As soon as Jenny first hears that she might have cancer she starts to worry about the future. Before she has found a way to tell her family about her cancer, Jenny's behaviour begins to give away her new concerns. She suddenly decides to teach her children to cook, telling them 'you can't rely on me', then informs her husband that the children will need him 'more than ever' soon without explaining why (8:2). As the viewer, we have seen Jenny being diagnosed and understand this change in her priorities, but her family are left in the dark and cannot make sense of these signs of Jenny's anxiety about the future. Without knowing about their mum's cancer, Jenny's

children discuss their plans for eighteenth birthday parties or future careers, unaware of the sadness and fear this is causing Jenny as she worries that she might not be involved in these events. Her realisation that she 'might never meet the person [her son] is about to become' causes us to reflect on how cancer can change our relationship to the future, taking away confidence and excitement. Seeing Jenny respond to her daughter talking about 'a world without my mum in it' makes clear the emotional pain this can create and might help viewers to understand why losing control of the future can be so difficult (8:5).

While Jenny comes to terms with her diagnosis, she begins to think differently about how she is using her time. In hospital she meets Charlie, a fellow patient who has been given three months to live and who tells Jenny his mantra has become 'seize the day' (8:3). We see this change Jenny's perspective on her own life as she

**Jenny uses dressing up in vibrant, colourful costumes as way of having fun and distracting herself, finding confidence in bold outfits. Maggie's *Look Good Feel Better* Group can help users rediscover purpose through caring for their appearance, preparing them for their own search for a 'good time' when they are ready.**

**Maggie's *Mindfulness for Cancer Course* teaches users about using mindfulness exercises to manage stress and uncertainty caused by cancer, grounding their attention in the richness of the present.**

starts trying to extract as much fun as possible from every minute she has. She insists that a family trip to a music festival is going to be 'the best day of [her] life' as the song *Best Days of Our Lives* plays in the background. Then, at the festival, she tells her daughter not to pay to see a fortune teller because 'living in the here and now' is 'what it's all about' (8:3). Jenny's pursuit of the 'best day ever' is fun to watch but might also seem a little frantic or forced to some viewers. Jenny has decided she is 'here for a good time not a long time' – as her friend put it – and it is a pleasure to watch her enjoying herself, but her husband and family become frustrated by her 'rushing around' (8:5). She is desperate to find distractions from 'feeling the chemo coursing through [her] veins' but will not give herself time to rest or recuperate. *Cold Feet* allows the storyline to tease out the tensions

and complications cancer can bring into our thoughts about time and how we use it, revealing how difficult it can be to balance the search for a 'good time' against the need for calm, quiet rest.

Alongside all this 'rushing around' *Cold Feet* also focusses on the peaceful, meaningful moments which Jenny appreciates in a new way following her diagnosis. Just after she hears about her cancer, we are shown Jenny weeping in her car alone, only to discover that her new friend Charlie has been waiting outside the hospital to check she is 'ok'. He tells Jenny they can just 'sit a while' together, using a few precious moments of the three months he has left to provide a silent, comforting presence while Jenny cries (8:2). Charlie illustrates a different way of using time that could seem just as valuable as seeking out fun diversions. Jenny herself also starts to embrace this kind of moment, sitting peacefully with her husband in the hospital gardens listening to birdsong (8:4) or singing in a choir for cancer patients with Charlie. Her story suggests that if we take notice of brief, calm moments full of hope and purpose these can punctuate our lives with rich spaces of time that restore and fortify us when we are dealing with difficult things.



## The Fault in our Stars

by John Green (London: Penguin Books, 2012)

*The Fault in our Stars* is a romantic, tragic, funny novel which deals with the ways in which cancer can change our sense of time. It gives the reader a space to consider how cancer could cut short, disrupt or enrich our lives, letting us laugh and cry in response.

The romantic relationship between two teenagers with cancer – Hazel Grace and Augustus (Gus) Waters – at the heart of *The Fault in our Stars* is made complicated and tragic by time. Hazel's life is limited by the oxygen tank she must drag around wherever she goes, because it has to be changed at regular intervals. Gus describes his life with cancer as like 'Russian roulette' as it is defined by waiting for results or 'going through hell for six months' when he needs treatment. Their characters cannot escape the routines, delays and treatment schedules which cancer patients will recognise, so their relationship encourages the reader to think about how difficult it is to have the amount of time you have, as well as how you use that time, determined by cancer.

But a reader will also find a very different perspective on time and cancer in the novel, which highlights our freedom to understand time in our own way and live our lives on our own terms. The epigraph at the start of the novel describes time as like an ocean 'rising up and down, taking everything with it'. It invites us to see time as something flexible and flowing, not as a relentless straight line fixed by timetables, scans and check-ups. Gus and Hazel are sometimes able to think of time in this way. When they are returning on a plane from a romantic holiday, Gus tells Hazel that 'right now time is passing slower for us than for people on the ground', so he will 'live longer' because of 'relativity or whatever' (p. 149). Despite having been told just before their holiday that his cancer is terminal, Gus can still find ways to 'live longer' within the

**The Living with Advanced Cancer Support Group at Maggie's is a calm, sympathetic space where you can discuss plans for how to use your remaining time and learn to focus on quality rather than quantity of life.**

**If you are looking for uplifting 'little eternities' amid a life affected by cancer, the Maggie's programme includes Mindfulness Courses or Relaxation Sessions which can help you to ground your attention in the present and find peace in the full appreciation of your immediate experiences.**

time he has left. He demonstrates that life with cancer does not always have to be determined by a clock counting down or a treatment schedule, if there are moments when our experiences seem too rich and important to be ruled by a rigid timetable.

These moments are a crucial part of *The Fault in our Stars* and its exploration of the theme of cancer and time. During their holiday to Amsterdam Hazel and Gus share a long, 'unexpectedly magnificent' meal together. With food 'like God himself cooked heaven into a series of fine dishes' and the sun like 'a toddler insistently refusing to go to bed' (pp.165-72), time becomes slow and full of pleasure. Their experience suggests that taking time to share with loved ones, enjoy a good meal or simply appreciate the present could create what Hazel calls a 'forever within the numbered days' in our own lives: a 'little eternity' within a life disrupted by cancer.

## Cancer Ward

by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (New York: Noonday Press, 1968)

*Cancer Ward* is a long, challenging novel set in a cancer ward in Soviet Russia. The author, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, had spent time being treated for stomach cancer whilst he was a prisoner in a Soviet camp, and *Cancer Ward* contains echoes of his personal experience of cancer and its impact.

The novel uses various characters on the ward to explore different perspectives on cancer and time. For instance, the young student Vadim captures the frustrating feelings of lost, wasted time which can be a feature of living with cancer. His angry, frantic thoughts about 'unfinished work' and 'interrupted interests' reflect the way that a cancer diagnosis can suddenly force us to give up on our aspirations, careers and plans for the future. Vadim is gripped by a 'demonic, insatiable hunger for time' (p.268) which might resonate with patients who have been trapped in repetitive routines of treatment and recovery, unable to carry on with their lives outside of the ward.

*Cancer Ward* also reveals how time spent in a cancer ward can be shaped by the rigid patterns of hospital practices. In a chapter called 'The Patients' Worries' Solzhenitsyn describes how the consultants on their ward rounds bring a 'wave of attention, fear and hope' wherever they go (pp. 54-5). One patient sits with a 'tense expression' waiting for the oncologists to arrive, while another keeps 'a sharp look out'. The anxiety and unease they display affirms feelings which may feel familiar to patients, friends or family members who have had to wait in wards for results or clinical opinions. It prompts us to think about how draining and stressful these delays can be, revealing why they affect patients' feelings.

**The Maggie's programme will often include resources like Art Therapy, Creative Writing or Music-Making which can introduce users to new ways of using time while living with cancer and different strategies for processing and expressing our thoughts and feelings.**

As well as reflecting these anxieties about 'lost' time, delays and anticipation, *Cancer Ward* also introduces readers to alternative perspectives on the passing of time. When the character Yefrem starts reading a book on another 'dull' and 'heavy' morning in the cancer ward, he begins to experience time in a new way. He finds that the 'calm, quiet book' starts 'talking to him', with its words 'speaking softly and simply to [his] heart'. Yefrem, a construction engineer who would never normally spend time reading, is captivated by his novel. The hours slip away until it is suddenly 'time for lunch', as his imagination is drawn out of the boring, repetitive hospital routines and into the engrossing world of the book (pp. 112-114). Time spent waiting on a ward is transformed into an opportunity to explore fictional worlds and find stories or ideas which can speak to our hearts.

Solzhenitsyn's novel also gives the reader images and examples which suggest a range of options for responding to questions about cancer and time. When the central character in *Cancer Ward*, Oleg, is released from the ward after treatment he visits the zoo. There, he sees two animals that perfectly illustrate these different options. On one side of the zoo's entrance Oleg spots a squirrel in a wheel 'rushing around, but always on the same spot' whilst on the other side he notices a 'proud goat' who 'stood motionless': a vision of 'dignity' displaying 'the sort of character a man needed to get through life' (pp. 537-539). Both animals are waiting, trapped in cages, but only one is exhibiting a calm, dignified resilience and seems to have found stillness and peace. The image of the goat could remind someone faced with time waiting in a cancer ward that the way they approach this delay remains within their control.

**Being the goat instead of the squirrel by maintaining a sense of stillness and dignity can be very difficult when you are living with cancer. Maggie's provides Meditation Classes and Mindfulness Courses, or training in Yoga and Tai-Chi, which can settle and ground users in their bodies and the present moment, helping them to restore feelings of calm and poise.**

## The Time Traveller's Wife

by Audrey Niffenegger (London: Vintage Books, 2005)

(almost) no cancer

Audrey Niffenegger's novel *The Time Traveller's Wife* is about love, loss and time travel. The story only very briefly includes cancer, focussing instead on an imagined genetic disorder which causes people to jump around in time between different points in their lives. Niffenegger creates a fantasy world which explores what it means to 'live, fully, present in the world' and investigates the idea of existing 'outside of the time constraints most humans are subject to'.

*The Time Traveller's Wife* is narrated by two lovers, Clare and Henry. Henry has a fictional condition called 'Chrono-Impairment': a genetic disease that means he has 'difficulty staying in the present' (pp. 300-310). He spends his life trying to find ways to 'embrace the present with every cell' in the spaces when he isn't jumping suddenly into different years and different points in his life. Henry's condition means that he and Clare must devote the moments they do have together to working out how they can cherish and fully appreciate these times, focussing on the pleasure of 'here' and 'now' instead of worrying about before or after (p. 272). Their shared story becomes a metaphor for the difficulties we all face when living in a world full of distractions and concerns which threaten to pull us away from the present. When they each use practical strategies to ground themselves in the here and now – Clare creates art, Henry swims and jogs – a reader might learn something from this search for tools and approaches which address their 'difficulty staying in the present'.

Although the  
time-travelling  
workshop remains  
one for the future,  
Maggie's does give  
programme users  
an opportunity to  
learn new strategies  
for staying in the  
present moment,  
like *Mindfulness  
Courses and  
Mindfulness Practice  
Groups*.

Because it is a novel about time travel, *The Time Traveller's Wife* introduces readers to many different types of time and experiences of time. As 'The Man out of Time' who is 'thrown around in time' Henry gives us a sense of what it might be like to live 'outside of the time constraints most humans are subject to' (p. 445). The quotation at the start of the novel from J. B. Priestley's *Man and Time* tells us that 'Clock Time is our bank manager, tax collector, police inspector' but 'inner time is our life'. Henry is sometimes free from the 'clock time' governed by timetable, routines and waiting lists, so his character could tell us something about why and how we might choose to live by our 'inner time' rather than measured, rigid time. For Henry 'time is nothing' and he can go 'elsewhen' in his life, but living in the real world it can sometimes feel like our time has been divided up into countdowns, delays and deadlines we have no control over. Even for readers who haven't learned to time travel yet, reading Henry's reflections could prompt them to reconsider their own relationship to clock time and time constraints.

Clare cannot time travel, but because her life is intertwined with Henry's she spends much of it thinking about time. Her voice gives the reader a different kind of insight, highlighting how certain types of experience can change our perception of time passing. Clare describes how, when Henry has gone, every moment 'feels like a year, an eternity' and is 'slow and transparent as glass' (p. 1). Or during her pregnancy it seems to her that she has left the 'sunlit quick world where time runs like dry sand through an hourglass' for a new world where 'time and feeling are thick and dense' (p. 360). Because Clare is time-conscious she recognises her shifting sense of time and notices differences in her experience of certain moments. Like Henry, Clare's thoughts remind the reader that time is not necessarily an unbending, unstoppable force that we cannot control but something which seems to fit around our feelings and experiences. Clare's perspective reveals that time-travel is not the only way of escaping the 'quick world' of clocks and hourglasses.



## Chapter 3

★

# Life, Death and Dying

### Breaking Bad: season one (AMC, 2008-2013) DVD (also available on Netflix)

*Breaking Bad* is a disturbing, gripping story about cancer, crime and death. At the centre of the series is the character of chemistry teacher-turned drug manufacturer Walter (Walt) White and his drastic reaction to the news that he has inoperable lung cancer. This guide focusses on season one, which covers Walt's diagnosis and treatment for cancer, as well as the shocking consequences of his decision to turn to a life of crime, cooking drugs to raise money to leave to his family.

Walt's response to cancer is characterised by a fear and anger which might seem familiar to many people affected by cancer. His determination to 'fight' and 'beat' his cancer, defying his 'death sentence' by making money as a

legacy to leave behind, seems to be linked to the medical 'war' against death which patients can be caught up in. In the second episode of season one, we see how Walt has started to become reckless, violent and brutal after learning about his cancer. He uses his scientific expertise to dissolve the dead body of a drug dealer in acid but can only refer to his victim using euphemisms like 'the body situation' or 'chemical disincorporation'. This could be taken as an extreme, exaggerated example of the scientific dehumanising of patients which can occur in hospitals: a culture of silence which will fight death and disease but does not know how to talk about these realities in honest, humane language. In episode three, flashbacks connect Walt's treatment of the corpse to a younger Walt in a classroom explaining that science can account for '99.88804%' of the human body's composition. We could interpret his character as an exploration of how a single-minded preoccupation with fighting cancer using chemicals and radiation can distract

**Concerns about finances and leaving money to loved ones are natural for someone affected by cancer. If you are worried about money, but decide not to become a drug lord, you could take advantage of the Debt Management Service or Financial Advisory Service which Maggie's offers to users.**

**Maggie's provides both Couples Psychology Sessions and Family Psychology Sessions, which can help users to address the distance and uncertainty cancer can create within relationships or teach them about how to share difficult truths.**

both patients and doctors from the human dimension of patients' lives: the narrow focus that can lead us to neglect those parts of a person which clinical treatments will not heal: the vital 0.11196% that science cannot explain.

Breaking Bad also gives viewers a chance to explore how fearing, fighting and denying cancer can lead patients into isolation and loneliness. At various points in season one we see Walt thrown into the strange, unsettling environment of cancer wards, treatments rooms and oncologists' offices. The camerawork, lighting and sounds all highlight how disturbing our experiences in these spaces can be. Yet instead of trying to share these experiences by speaking with his wife and family, Walt initially chooses to enter the World of Cancer alone. When Walt's wife, Skyler, tells him that 'the worst thing you can do is shut me out' (series 1: episode 1), as viewers we feel the tension between everything we know about

Walt's diagnosis and the lies he has told his wife. We witness the strain that lying or withholding the truth can place on our relationships. However, when Walt does finally tell the truth in episode four, his abrupt announcement is met with an agonising silence. As the camera flits between his family members, capturing their shocked, uncomfortable expressions, the viewer experiences the emotional distance and halting conversations which cancer patients fear. Watching this, we may also begin to understand why people with cancer might sometimes choose to shut others out.

There are moments in Walt's story which hint at ways of relating to cancer and death constructively and imaginatively. His decision to manufacture drugs is not an example to be followed, but there are other aspects of his behaviour, like his response to hair loss, which could challenge viewers' assumptions in interesting ways. When Walt notices that chemotherapy has started to lead to hair loss, we see him playing with his thinning hair in a mirror then picking up a razor. The next shot shows the stunned, awestruck faces of his family, as they

see Walt with a shaved head for the first time (1:6). Walter Jr.'s delight and pride at his dad's new look – 'Badass, dad!' – shows the positive, inspiring impact of Walt's decision to embrace his changing appearance, revealing how this kind of choice can challenge preconceptions about what it means to live with cancer.

In *Breaking Bad* the choices Walt makes during his time with cancer invite us to think about how we would act in his position, or to imagine alternative paths through the World of Cancer. For example, when Walt's wife stages a family 'intervention' aimed at persuading Walt to undergo chemotherapy, the argument that

follows opens up a sensitive, important conversation about disease and dying. Skyler is convinced

that using chemo to prolong Walt's life is the only viable option, but Walt insists he does not want to be left 'artificially alive' and 'just marking time' by aggressive treatments. He condemns the medical culture that involves 'doctors talking about surviving as if it's the only thing that matters' (1:5). Although Walt's resistance is motivated by his misguided intention to defy death by using crime to gain money and create a legacy, it does also raise an important question about the aims of cancer care, and whether clinical treatment is always the only option.

**The Living with Advanced Cancer Support Group at Maggie's gives someone facing these kinds of questions about end-of-life care and cancer treatment a space where they can discuss their thoughts with others in a similar situation in an open, honest and supportive environment.**

**For people looking for creative ways of working with hair loss caused by cancer treatment, the Maggie's programme includes Wig Fitting Services and Look Good Feel Better Sessions, as well as a Hair Loss Handout with advice on scarves, hats and wigs.**

## The Fountain

(Warner Bros., 2006) DVD (also available on Amazon Prime)

*The Fountain* is a strange, mystical film full of many meanings, stories and feelings we might associate with death and dying. A scientist's desperate search for a cure for his wife's cancer becomes a fantastical adventure which leads him through denial and anger towards new ways of understanding loss – an adventure which could reflect or alter our own ideas about cancer and dying as we watch it unfold.

In *The Fountain* our natural desire to fight death and prevent the loss of a loved one is brought out in the character of Tom Creo, a scientist researching new treatments for brain tumours, played by Hugh Jackman. During his mission to discover a cure which will prolong his beloved wife Izzy's life, Tom becomes increasingly driven and obsessional. His colleagues accuse him of being 'reckless' and 'losing perspective' as he forces them to focus on this single aim (19 minutes). His frustration spills out into anger and even violence, like in a particularly distressing scene in which he attacks the doctors caring for his wife in a final, hopeless effort to save her (68).

Tom's fury and pain are difficult to watch because it is easy to sympathise with the desperation which drives this behaviour, but the audience can also see that he is being controlled by dangerous feelings. At Izzy's funeral, a powerful shot shows Tom walking away from friends and family to be alone because he cannot accept the words of comfort and consolation others are speaking. He still angrily insists that 'death is a disease just like any other' and 'there's a cure' (71). Because the way we treat and react to cancer is often motivated by the search for cures and new ways of fighting disease, Tom's aggressive, uncompromising approach might seem familiar to someone dealing with cancer. It could prompt

**Maggie's often offers resources like Relaxation Sessions, Mindfulness Courses and Yoga Classes or Tai-Chi Classes which can help users cultivate their own sense of peace and poise when they are dealing with difficult experiences and worrying conditions.**

a viewer to consider how easily this fight can become destructive and damaging, leaving us no room to respond to sickness and death in more constructive, thoughtful ways.

This frantic search for a cure is not the only aspect of Tom's relationship to death which the film presents. Set alongside the story of his research are fantastical visions of Tom suspended in a mysterious sphere with a tree at its centre. In this strange parallel world Tom's interactions with the tree symbolise his relationship with Izzy and show a calmer, more peaceful process of coming to terms with her prognosis. As the sphere travels through space we see Tom practising meditation and martial arts, a graceful silhouette against darkness and stars, as if this mystical world reveals a different, deeper side to his feelings about his wife's condition (10). Izzy herself likes telling Tom about Mayan myths in which death becomes a 'road to awe' and part of a journey into a new kind of life (57). It is as if she is encouraging those parts of her husband's mind which are trying to face death with dignity and poise, using their bond to pull him towards acceptance and away from lonely denial. Eventually, after Izzy's death we see Tom in his parallel world speaking to the tree honestly, grieving and saying he is no longer afraid (77-79). His different worlds and changing emotions come together in a final scene as Tom stands at Izzy's grave (89). Here the film unites all the many meanings and ideas we attach to death, encouraging viewers to think about the different aspects of their own relationship with disease and mortality.

*The Fountain* might also make us reflect on the strange, surprising links between cancer, death and creativity which we can sometimes encounter in our own lives. Izzy's disease seems to have prompted her to write a fictional tale about a brave conquistador and his queen in 16th century Spain, which mirrors her relationship to her husband and the real problems they are facing.

**Maggie's Centres often host *Creative Writing Courses* where you can learn how to find your own creative voice and imaginative outlet, or Bereavement Support Groups which can help you come to terms with the complicated, confusing nature of grief and loss.**



She uses her novel as a creative medium to express her fears and hopes, which could inspire a viewer to find their own source of imaginative invention and communication. Izzy is fascinated by ancient Mayan mythology which treats death as an 'act of creation' involving new possibilities as well as painful loss (47). Watching her try to persuade her husband that dying can have positive, creative dimensions shows us how this kind of perspective could help free somebody from a futile fight against death. The film itself moves between different worlds and viewpoints, drawing out images and ideas which suggest that death is not just a tragic ending but can also contain fond memories, new meanings and hopeful creations.

## A Monster Calls

by Patrick Ness (London: Walker Books, 2015)

family-friendly

The original idea for *A Monster Calls* came from author Siobhan Dowd, who died from breast cancer in 2007 before she could finish the novel. Before she died, Dowd asked her friend Patrick Ness to finish *A Monster Calls* and Ness agreed to take her idea and to 'run with it' and 'make trouble'.

The book 'makes trouble' for the reader by drawing attention to the gaps cancer can create in our lives: the things we may chose to leave unspoken or unacknowledged. The first chapter is full of spaces on the physical page, holes which make the reader think about words like 'death' and question whether they would be comfortable saying them aloud. It introduces us to a boy called Connor and the nightmare he keeps having about his mother, who has cancer. When Connor starts having nightmares about a 'monster' these imaginary encounters expose the 'truth' he has been denying and evading in his real life: the 'terrible thing' that happens at the end of the nightmare. It is easy to relate to Connor's desire to 'push back' the truth when faced with the idea of losing

a loved one. He is told by people around him to 'be brave' for his mother (p. 112) and often reacts angrily and even violently to the idea of his mother's death. This might encourage a reader to consider whether we are conditioned to want to fight and deny death by the world we live in, or to think about the damage denial can cause. But the Monster also tells Connor that sometimes 'people need to lie to themselves'. It is hard not to sympathise with Connor when he says he 'can't stand knowing' that his mother will 'go', so the novel also invites us to be alert to those moments when we might need to set 'terrible things aside' to give ourselves time for rest and recovery.

Because Connor treats the recurring nightmare about his mother as 'something no one else ever needed to know' (p. 16) it becomes a secret that leaves him lonely and isolated. His experience of feeling 'entirely alone' may be relatable for

Connor's story reveals that confronting the prospect of letting a loved one go can be deeply distressing and confusing, but Maggie's offers *Individual Psychology Sessions* which can help users to understand and cope with these changes.

**If you can't find your own Monster, Maggie's Centres host Support Groups for anyone affected by cancer, creating a calm, open environment where you can hear other peoples' stories of living with cancer and tell your own story if you are ready.**

readers whose lives have been affected by cancer. To Connor, it sometimes seems like he is 'completely invisible to the rest of the world' (p. 152), capturing the way that being caught up in the World of Cancer can feel like being cut off from 'Normality'. The people Connor meets in his everyday life often don't know how to respond to him, avoiding him 'like he was giving off a bad smell'. This encourages us to think about how and why coming to terms with cancer and death can feel like a deeply personal, solitary experience.

*A Monster Calls* also suggests that telling stories might be a way to penetrate this isolation and share our time in the World of Cancer with others. The Monster claims that stories can be 'more important than anything' when they 'carry the truth' (p. 168). By telling stories of his own, the Monster tries to coax Connor into relating his own story and the truth it carries. Connor's

resistance reveals how hard it can be to accept and share our stories, but when he does eventually speak the 'final and total truth' it allows Connor to let his mother go and acknowledge his grief.

There is complication and contradiction throughout *A Monster Calls*, which invites the reader to notice how confusing and changeable our experiences of cancer can be. The Monster knows that 'humans are complicated beasts' and that a person's mind can 'contradict itself a hundred times each day' (p. 222). The novel does not try to resolve or even explain these contradictions but shows instead that they can be woven into our stories. It simply acknowledges that we can 'believe comforting lies' while also 'knowing painful truths' (p. 224), or asks the reader to accept that it is only when Connor 'held tightly onto his mother' that he could 'finally let her go' (p. 237).

## **Charlotte's Web**

**by E. B. White (London: Penguin, 2003) no cancer, family-friendly**

*Charlotte's Web* is not a novel about cancer, but a thoughtful, gentle exploration of dying which suggests that we can treat life and death as part of the same natural cycle. It looks at death through the eyes of children and could be a good place to start if you need to introduce a younger person to ideas of loss and grief.

In *Charlotte's Web* the reader learns about death from the perspective of a young girl and a 'very innocent little pig' who is her close friend. This gives

the reader a sense of what it might be like to suddenly become aware of the threat of death. Wilbur the pig loves life and is desperate to hold on to his pleasant existence in his 'comfortable manure pile' with his friends (p. 68). The prospect of dying makes him 'tremble with fear' because it calls into question all that he holds dear and his response reflects the disturbing, unsettling impact this can have.

Although it captures this fear, *Charlotte's Web* also invites the reader to see death as a natural process that is part of every person's life. The character of Charlotte, the spider who helps Wilbur escape the farmer's axe, shows through her own death how dying can include meaningful, uplifting moments as well as feelings of fear and loss. The 'beautiful' web she makes with her last energy invites us to think about how creativity can become part of dying, as her 'hour of triumph' is also her last hour alive (p. 207). At the end of her life Charlotte is 'weary and old' but also 'peaceful and contented', so her death mixes sadness and difficulty with calm, creative acceptance.

**Maggie's offers help for people facing loss caused by cancer, providing Bereavement Support Groups or private Psychology Sessions for anyone trying to come to terms with the death of a loved one. These can enable users to find meaning from memories and from what has been left behind, as well as coming to terms with what they have lost.**

The farmyard which *Charlotte's Web* is set in is a place where life and death are always present together. New, baby geese are born just as flies are caught in Charlotte the spider's web – one life begins as another ends. The changing seasons and patterns of nature remind the reader that we can treat living and dying as part of the same cycle. Charlotte leaves behind hundreds of eggs, giving the friends she leaves behind a way to 'treasure her memory' as they grapple with grief. The birth of tiny spiders lets the reader see Charlotte's death as part of something new which produces cherished memories and shapes the future, as well as causing pain and sadness.

## Chapter 4

★

# Humour

## The Bucket List

(Warner Brothers, 2008) DVD (also available on Netflix)

*The Bucket List* is a hit Hollywood film starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. It uses humour and laughter as a way of exploring life with cancer and the difficult decisions we face as we move towards death. Watching this film gives the viewer a chance to reflect on the role humour might play in their own experiences of cancer, or to consider whether they think laughter is an appropriate response to something as serious and distressing as cancer.

In *The Bucket List* humour is often a source of truth – a tool which makes it easier for the two main characters to be honest about their experiences of cancer. When Nicholson's roughish, frenetic millionaire Edward Cole is sharing a hospital room with the calm, thoughtful Ray Carter (played by Freeman), they use humour to help and support each other as they undergo treatment. Carter tells Cole that chemotherapy is 'not too bad, if you don't mind round the clock vomiting'. Cole's sarcastic response – 'that's a relief' – plays on Carter's joke but also hints at the way humour can relieve tension and remove uncertainty by making the truth about cancer easier to speak and to hear (14 minutes). Several times in the film, joking and laughing give the odd-couple friends a route into difficult discussions about cancer and dying, while they travel round the world ticking off items on their bucket list. When they visit the Taj Mahal, Cole starts a conversation about burial and cremation, using a quip about being 'frozen like Walt Disney' to lighten the mood. Carter's desire to be cremated and have his ashes placed in a 'choc full of nuts' coffee can makes the pair giggle, too (65). But in amongst the smiles and giggles they have both also shared important information about how they want their bodies to be treated after death.

**Travelling in pursuit of fun and laughter can become daunting and complicated when you are also dealing with cancer.**

**Maggie's offers Gentle Movement Classes to help get you out and about when you feel able and can also offer expert advice on practicalities like Travel Insurance if you are planning a holiday abroad.**

The idea of comic 'relief' is a central theme in the film, as the 'bucket list' of things they want to achieve before dying gives Cole and Carter a reason to fly across the world in search of joy and laughter. As Cole puts it, they have found a way to go out 'guns blazing' and 'have some fun' (31). The contrast between the sombre setting of the cancer ward and the enjoyment they find in exotic destinations like an African safari and the Great Wall of China encourages the audience to think about why the respite humour, silliness and fun brings can be a vital part of a life with cancer. We see this idea presented in a different way in the moments after both characters are first given their terminal prognoses. Instead of starting to discuss this devastating news straight away, Cole asks Carter if he wants to play cards, while Carter responds jokily 'I thought you'd never ask' (29). Their reactions suggest that humour can sometimes protect us from the truth as well as helping us to share it, by providing relief and buying time to process bad news, or giving us a reason to smile when we are processing pain and loss.

*The Bucket List* also invites us to see humour as a source of hope and defiant optimism for people whose lives are affected by cancer. When Cole catches onto the idea of a 'bucket list' he tells Carter 'we've got a real opportunity here': a chance to avoid a 'ceremonial procession into death' spent being 'smothered by grief and pity' (34). His speech defies our expectations of what it might be like to die from cancer. The sudden cut a few minutes later from Cole and Carter in the cancer ward wearing hospitals gowns, to the pair in an aeroplane wearing parachutes and preparing to skydive, underlines how surprising and unconventional we might find his behaviour (38). To treat terminal cancer as an 'opportunity' to smile, laugh and enjoy yourself ignores the assumption that this must be a time full of 'grief and pity'.

However, this approach does also cause problems. When Carter tells his wife about their planned bucket list adventure, she cannot accept the idea

**Maggie's *Living with Advanced Cancer Support Group* is for those with cancer to discuss their plans for living and dying and to talk about opportunities, loss, laughter and grief with other people searching for the right balance.**



of her husband going away and 'giving up' on treatment. When she calls Cole 'a fool who thinks he's figured out a way how not to have cancer' (37) her anger and distress might cause us to pause and reflect on how personal and complicated our choices about living with cancer can be. For some people, at certain times, laughing and fooling around feel like completely inappropriate ways of responding to cancer that are impossible to relate to. *The Bucket List* opens up many different perspectives on cancer and comedy, leaving the viewer to work out their own thoughts on this sensitive issue.

**The *Friends and Family Courses* at Maggie's provide a space in which difficulties understanding how a loved one is responding to their cancer could be shared and talked over.**

## **Catastrophe: season one** (Channel 4, 2015-2019) DVD (also available on Amazon Prime)

The 'catastrophe' in the first season of this popular comedy-drama is caused by cancer and a combination of many other disastrous events and difficult circumstances. The two central characters, Rob and Sharon, are thrown together after a brief romantic fling leaves Sharon pregnant. Together they have to face a series of comic, surprising and sometimes tragic situations, but *Catastrophe* is about the humour and humanity which we can find in amongst the chaos, shock and sadness that are part of all our lives.

*Catastrophe* explores the strange, unexpected directions sudden changes in our health and circumstances can take us in. In the first episode alone, we are introduced to Rob and Sharon, learn that Sharon has become pregnant and discover that she has cervical dysplasia. The half-hour episode is fast paced, funny, shocking and surreal, especially when they first visit a clinic for a scan. Sharon, supported by Rob, turns up for the check-up hoping it will return a 'whisper of certainty' to her life and body as she struggles to process the news of her pregnancy. Yet the results of her tests only add to her confusion and

concern. The clinician uses obscure, unhelpful medical jargon to announce that Sharon has 'what we call a pre-cancer'. The scene that follows uses comedy to highlight how bizarre and absurd the meeting has become. Sharon inevitably fixates on the mention of cancer whilst the doctor's attempt to explain the technical term 'pre-cancer' only adds to the confusion (episode 1, minutes 9-11). Those with experience of cancer might appreciate this opportunity to laugh at the familiarity and farcicality of this breakdown in communication. Sharon faces what might be a relatable, recognisable struggle as she tries to come to terms with her diagnosis whilst hearing it expressed in language she barely understands.

**Maggie's Centres often host a *Gynae Cancer Network Group* to support women dealing with the same sort of complicated issues and confusing medical language that Sharon is trying to make sense of.**

*Catastrophe* also finds comedy in the strange, unpredictable ways that people react to the news of a cancer diagnosis. When Rob hears about Sharon's 'pre-cancer' in the consultation all he can do is sit staring at the clinician and ask if they have pamphlets, while Sharon panics next to him (1:10). His hilariously useless contribution draws attention to the real problem of pamphlets, which can seem inadequate and irrelevant when they are given to someone who has just been told they have cancer. Others react to Sharon's news in similarly funny, unhelpful ways. Her friend starts talking about somebody who 'cured his prostate cancer with walnuts' (1:19) and her brother makes a brilliantly insensitive offer to raise her unborn child if Sharon does 'succumb to the cancer' (2:8). The show uses humour and laughter in a warm, humane portrayal of the difficulty people have working out what to say and when to say it. Looking at these ill-judged reactions from a comic perspective could help people affected by cancer to laugh off accidental insensitivity or unintentional uselessness when they encounter it in their own lives.

In *Catastrophe* we see examples of the power of humour as a coping mechanism and source of defiance and hope. The show covers an impressive array of calamities including marital problems, failing careers, unplanned pregnancies and family arguments. But the characters take on a situation which feels like 'every possible thing that could have gone wrong has gone wrong' (6: 22) with a resilience that comes from their ability to laugh at themselves and their lives. Sharon can joke about her 'not-cancer cancer' (1:20) and being 'riddled with pre-cancer' (3:10), or even her own death (1:24) as well as crying and collapsing when she needs to. There are times when people use humour in disastrously inappropriate ways that remind viewers of the importance of care and sensitivity, like the consultant's deadpan joke about Sharon being 'lucky' that 'it's just the one baby and some bad cells' (2:13). But *Catastrophe* is focussed on the humanity and humour which can pull us through our own catastrophes and help us to find reasons to smile when everything goes wrong.

## Deadpool (20th Century Fox, 2016) DVD

*Deadpool* is a rude, riotous and unconventional take on living with cancer. Its main character, a mercenary called Wade Wilson who becomes the super-antihero Deadpool (played by Ryan Reynolds), stubbornly refuses to respect any kind of boundaries or conventions, including the ways in which cancer patients are expected to behave. The film gleefully pokes fun at the superhero genre, Hollywood, and also societal and medical reactions to cancer, providing its own unique take on living with the disease.

By refusing to conform to any expectations or follow anyone's advice, *Deadpool* lets the audience experience what it might be like to test out the limits of life with cancer. The film kicks off with a frenetic high-speed car chase and gunfight, with Deadpool quipping his way through a violent clash with a gang of criminals. Later, a series of flashbacks reveals that all this is happening after he has been treated for cancer and that Deadpool's superhero persona is his response to the disease. The film cuts straight from a shot of two X-rays displaying angry red lumps and an oncologist telling him to take time to 'process' the diagnosis of advanced stage cancer and 'not to do anything rash', to Deadpool holding a criminal's body speared on two samurai swords (27 minutes). Deadpool's actions are rash and ridiculous, but they might still reveal how humour can help us to gain a sense of control over cancer. Deadpool is always in command of his story, narrating the film, talking to the audience and even fast-forwarding the action at one point (63). His refusal to let cancer dictate his decisions suggests that being able to laugh at himself and his situation has enabled Deadpool to retain a feeling of purpose and to keep his illness in perspective.

**Maggie's often offers courses like the *Where Now? Workshop* which can help users construct new plans and rebuild a sense of purpose and perspective after treatment for cancer. Attacking criminals with a samurai sword is unlikely to be recommended during the workshop, however.**

**Laughing with others can be a powerful source of hope and consolation. Maggie's hosts several *Support Groups* where sharing jokes is often an important part of the conversations about living with cancer and coming to terms with the impact of the disease.**

The film includes a sharp satire of our tendency to chase miraculous 'cures' for cancer and the ways in which certain groups might seek to exploit this. After his diagnosis Wade (before he becomes Deadpool) laughs and jokes as he is shown brochures for experimental foreign 'clinics' offering to cure him. But eventually – when he thinks he has nothing to lose – he agrees to be part of a sinister trial run by a shadowy, cruel scientist. As Wade undergoes a series of unpleasant treatments it becomes clear that they are intended to be absurd, exaggerated parodies of the real world of cannulas, drips, radiation and chemotherapy familiar to all cancer patients. The villainous pseudo-scientist Ajax tells Wade in the laboratory that 'the one thing that never survives this place is a sense of humour' (44), but Wade keeps finding ways of extracting laughter out of various unpleasant treatments. Watching him smirk and giggle his way through this parody of a cancer ward could give the audience a reason to reflect on the strength and endurance humour can give: the power to resist both passive despair and misleading promises about miracle cures.

*Deadpool* is not only about the positive power of humour, as it also gives us a way of exploring the limits and dangers of joking about cancer. There are moments when Wade/Deadpool uses humour to cover up the truth and hide his emotional pain. Framed against a shot of his sleeping wife, we see him sitting alone on a bleak, stormy night thinking about how 'the worst part about cancer isn't what it does to you, but what it does to the people you love'. When his wife Vanessa asked why he couldn't sleep Wade laughed it off as a 'another Liam Neeson nightmare', using humour to avoid sharing his concerns with her. Making a joke out of his anxieties instead of voicing them has left Wade lonely, gently weeping as he stares into the bleak, damp darkness (35-36). In this context, humour becomes a way of shutting someone out, alerting the audience to the more problematic role jokes can play within a life affected by cancer.

This warning is balanced against the way humour sometimes gives characters in *Deadpool* a means of speaking the truth instead of avoiding it. The horrific results of the procedures used to 'cure' Wade's cancer leave him with shocking scarring. When he first returns to the streets of his hometown the camera picks out the disturbed, fearful faces he encounters, letting us experience for ourselves how people recoil from him as he passes them. Their reactions are very different to Wade's friend Weasel's use of humour to tell the truth about the scarring. Rather than avoiding his friend or staying silent, Weasel tells Wade his face is so disfigured it looks like 'a topographical map of Utah' (58), using a joke to acknowledge the drastic change in Wade's appearance. As Deadpool, Wade himself uses a similar strategy when he describes his battered face as looking 'like I got bit by a radioactive shark' (29). Humour here makes possible a kind of defiant acceptance of the reality of his condition. If cancer patients and those around them are struggling to come to terms with the visible signs of treatment, joking and laughing could give them a comparable way of confronting their own situation: a hopeful, defiant means of being open and honest.

## Detectorists: season one (BBC, 2014-2017) DVD

no cancer

*Detectorists* is a calm, thoughtful comedy drama about life's small pleasures and the opportunities to smile and laugh that often pass us by unnoticed. It asks us to recognise the value of the things we already have, instead of always searching for new treasures or fool's gold.

The importance of life's little joys and small details is crucial in *Detectorists*. The first season follows two metal detectorists, Lance and Andy, as they search for the location of a Saxon burial site. But the series finds humour in the trivial, discarded items they unearth during their search: the ring-pulls, buttons and toy cars that somehow end up in country fields. Andy's bewilderment at finding a miniature Chevy Corvette in an overgrown patch of rural Essex reveals how small discoveries can bring fun and intrigue into our lives, when we take time to notice them (series 1: episode 2). When – much to the bartender's irritation – Lance and Andy manage to pay for two pints with a collection of muddy, discarded loose change they have unearthed while detecting (1:3), this could remind us of the potential value of the unappreciated things we stumble across. When the head of their detecting club gives a gloriously dull, uninspiring talk on the 'humble, boring button' (1:1) it still draws our attention to the comedy and pleasure that can be extracted from 'boring', trivial things when we approach them ready to smile and laugh.

Linked to this is the theme of surprises, which are a crucial element of the first season of *Detectorists*. By finding humour in the unexpected, *Detectorists* often turns shock and dismay into laughter. There are small surprises, like the 'suede surprise' that Lance cooks for Andy which turns out to be 'surprisingly bland' (1:2). Here, the depressing tastelessness becomes

**Lance and Andy's interesting discoveries and entertaining encounters come when they are out and about in the countryside. Maggie's On the Move exercise groups can help people get outside and active when cancer makes movement more difficult.**

a funny 'surprise': a new joke for two friends to enjoy. Then, there are the larger shocks, like the unexploded Second World War bomb that finally detonates when a fellow detectorist disturbs it (1:3). Lance and Andy's stunned faces and comic bafflement as they hear the bang and watch smoke rising in the distance somehow adds humour to a chaotic, dangerous incident. The way their reaction is portrayed illustrates the power of humour to transform sudden shocks and difficult situations – a power that we might be able to put to good use in our own lives. *Detectorists'* gentle, warm brand of humour allows the audience to laugh lovingly at its eccentric, flawed cast of characters. It is full of wonderfully weird people, like head of the detecting club Terry, who enjoys repeatedly reclassifying his coin collections, and his wacky wife Sheila who seems to exist in her own happy world. Instead of mocking or dismissing their quirks, *Detectorists* find fun and joy in the strangeness of its characters, delighting in their differences in a way that might feel reassuring to anyone who stands out because of their experiences or appearance. Even the mysterious Mr Bishop, the landowner who seems to have lost his mind and spends time talking to 'invisible dogs', is treated sympathetically and comically, and eventually becomes part of Lance and Andy's gang of oddball friends. The series could help viewers to recognise the power of humour and laughter to encourage acceptance and create connections, affirming our shared humanity through jokes and banter.

In the end, *Detectorists* suggests that we can end up searching for new treasure without appreciating what we already have. The first season tells the story of Lance and Andy's unsuccessful search for gold, but it turns out that the real treasure in their lives was already right in front of them. When Andy's girlfriend, Becky, asks him to notice all the things he has missed because he's been 'locked in [his] own little world staring at the floor', the next scene shows Lance and Andy missing a spectacular military jet flypast because they are detecting, fixated on the earth with headphones on (1:2). Their comic

**The value of male companionship turns out to be a treasured part of Lance and Andy's lives. The Maggie's Men's Group is a place where men can share stories and bad jokes and enjoy each other's company.**



cluelessness perfectly illustrates Becky's point about the kind of single-mindedness that can distract us from the good in our lives. Lance also writes and performs an unexpectedly poignant song about 'how you don't know what you've got until it's gone', with Andy's help (1:3), which reinforces this simple, important message. Finally, in the concluding episodes of the season, each of them notices what they already have. After they fall out over their treasure hunt, Lance finally realises they were 'happy' just 'finding junk and talking b\*\*\*\*\*s' together (1:5) and Andy discovers that his 'gold' is actually his pregnant fiancé and the family they are going to start (1:6). Laughing about the length of time it took them to spot the gold right under their noses, we might also remember to cherish and protect the important people that already form part of our lives, who will always give us reasons to smile whatever life throws at us.

## About the Author:

Ewan Bowlby is postgraduate researcher at the University of St Andrews, working on new forms of emotional and psychological care for people affected by cancer. Ewan was diagnosed with brain cancer aged twenty-one, so has personal experience of cancer treatment and living with cancer. He has made use of the valuable practical and emotional support offered by the Maggie's centres in Oxford and Dundee and is currently a member of the Maggie's Dundee Men's Group.

Ewan's research is focussed on using popular artworks including films, television series and novels to design new forms of holistic care for cancer patients. It draws on his personal experience of living with cancer, as well as the stories of the many inspiring people he has met in Maggie's centres and cancer wards.

## Thanks and Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Maggie's Scotland for supporting this trial project, as well as the staff and centre users at Maggie's Dundee for their invaluable help and encouragement, especially Lesley Howells and the Men's Group. Thank you also to the University of St Andrews and George Corbett for supporting the research which led to the Fiction Library trial, and to the University of St Andrews Print and Design Team.

This project has been made possible by the generous funding provided through the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities (SGSAH) and the U.K. Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

For more information on this trial project and its sources please email Ewan Bowlby at [eb252@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:eb252@st-andrews.ac.uk).



Scottish Funding Council  
Promoting further and higher education

SCOTTISH GRADUATE  
SCHOOL FOR  
ARTS & HUMANITIES



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council