

**Geoff Goodfellow, Grace Goodfellow and Randy Larcombe. *Waltzing With Jack Dancer: a Slow Dance With Cancer* (Wakefield Press, 2011)**

*... and he let me sit on his shoulders; so I could see the world. | From up there, high on his sunburnt shoulders, it was beautiful. | Everything was perfect. (93)*

This reminiscence from the prologue to Grace Goodfellow's story *the c word* evokes a personal memory and revives an image that has fixed itself in my mind for many years. It is this – an Adelaide Writers' Week in the hot sunshine, sipping cool drinks between sessions, shooting the breeze with writerly types, when Geoff Goodfellow and daughter Grace stop to chat. Young Grace was then about four or five years old and I'm sure I remember her high on Dad's shoulders in the dappled light under those golden green leafy trees. It was something of a surprise to see Geoff in this different light, as the proud and doting father of such a sparkling girl. Previously I had seen and heard him at a number of poetry readings and a literature class where his reading style was up-close-and-personal-in-your-face-confrontational-make-your-heart-race. There was no escape from the proximity of the poet, or the power of those straightforward words. When Geoff began reading it was 'punch on' and the 'punch off' as he delivered his final word could silence a room with stunned relief or the recognition of a blunt truth. So to see him as the father of a young daughter suggested a tenderness beneath this tough exterior, glimpsed once in a poem about domestic violence, but now fully realised, adding another layer to the image.

Goodfellow is well known for his working class, straight-talking poetry, famously delivered on building sites and in prison. Two of his great strengths are the no bullshit honesty of his poems and his ability to home in on seemingly ordinary, yet surprisingly poignant details. So it is not surprising that when faced with the challenge of battling that c word, he would slowly peel away the euphemisms like a soiled bandage and expose the raw wound of cancer for what it is.

In writing about illness there is the question of whether the work is, for the writer, a form of therapy or coping mechanism, or the expression of a wish to create something to leave behind; and whether the work is for an audience facing a similar illness, to reveal what might lie ahead, to share reflections and ways of coping, to tell the reader that they are not alone. Perhaps it is all these things but it comes with the responsibility of sharing a difficult passage with a potentially vulnerable readership and trying to instill a sense of hope while maintaining honesty.

Randy Larcombe's photographs document Goodfellow's treatment and rehabilitation with images that equal the honesty of the poems, providing a visual dimension to the work. In fact, an exhibition of Larcombe's photographs and Geoff's poems was held as part of the project to raise cancer awareness, with proceeds being donated to a cancer charity. Adding a further revealing facet to the work is Grace Goodfellow's story, which is placed near the end of the book so that the linear reader will have already digested the poems and images before encountering this poignant telling of the cancer experience from not simply the perspective of a close family member, but also that of a teenage daughter facing the uncertainty of her adored father's cancer.

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*Dad slapped his thigh three times. I walked over slowly, and sat down.  
And that's when I knew, my year would not be beautiful. (96)*

*Waltzing With Jack Dancer* contains 25 poems and 25 colour images. There are images of Goodfellow undergoing chemotherapy and MRI, being fed via a nasal-gastric tube, sitting in a hospital waiting room and beginning rehabilitation exercise at the beach. There is also a photo of him undergoing surgery and post-operative images showing the large scar that now curves from throat to ear. It is a brave undertaking to have exposed this intimate and debilitating journey in words and images. All too often people do not want to see or hear about the inside view of life with cancer. There's often a fear of saying the wrong thing, or not knowing what to say, so people keep their distance. There's also a 'desire' to remember the cancer patient as they were, but this is a protective behaviour; it reveals a deep fear of facing the ravages of cancer, of watching a once healthy person visibly shrink and deteriorate. What do you say to this person? What can you *do*? The answer to the second question is *nothing*, all you can do is watch and wait, so it seems like a hopeless situation and the easy way to deal with this is to remember the person in good health and keep one's distance, which is a sad but perfectly human response. How must this feel to the patient who loses the interest and support of people who once were friends? The answer to the first question may also amount to 'nothing' – what *can* you say when you can't promise a recovery, when you can see but not *feel* their pain, when trying to instill hope might easily be giving false hope? And for those friends and relatives who *do* stand beside the cancer patient, there are times when they know that their presence is a comfort, and times when they cop the brunt of anger and wonder why they remain. All these complexities of the cancer experience are captured in the book.

The starting point is the realisation that a diagnosis of cancer is 'No Small Matter'. In this first poem, the poet remembers watching his father die of the disease and recognises the strength that he himself gained from the experience.

i took from him the strength | to challenge myself daily  
& since his death | i've swum in the sea twice a day...

...i've grunted & groaned | & counted & sweated  
through tens of thousands | of sit-ups & push-ups  
ached until my stomach | was a washboard

yet still | i got tapped on the | shoulder. (1-2)

There is no authoritative explanation for cancer. Perhaps it was those Rothmans Plains he smoked at age five, or doing the Chinese drawback and 'feeling the smoke drift up [his] nostrils' (3). Or maybe the 'sixty to eighty cigarettes | a day for fifteen years', the chemicals and harsh sunlight encountered while working on building sites, with no protection (5). Suddenly, post-diagnosis, there are invisible limits. The daily summer activity of swimming a kilometre in the ocean becomes a topic of consternation. On discharge from hospital, he has forgotten to ask if there are any

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limits he should apply to his daily routine. Now the world looks different.

... walking down to the beach | that first morning | i felt scared |  
not knowing any boundaries (9)

Goodfellow confronts his new uncertain self but nevertheless finds determination to fight cancer. Addressing the cancer, he tells it

i'm here to tell you | i'm going to fight you every inch | of the way (10)

And fight it he does! Ultimately this collection is a survival narrative. It reaches some very low points and expresses a range of emotions. It is both blunt and tender, and its honesty is amplified in the accompanying photographs. This is one man's cancer experience documented for those who wish to know. It should not be taken to stand for all cancer experiences, which are as individual as the people who endure them. Nevertheless, *Waltzing With Jack Dancer* encourages its readers to take a look at the inside experience, to do away with euphemisms and see cancer for what it is, but it also holds out some hope that the battle can be fought and won. Sadly, though, this is not the outcome for many cancer patients and this project aims to raise awareness of the disease.

**Debra Zott**