

The Review Books

CELLMATES: OUR LESSONS IN CANCER, LIFE, LOVE AND LOSS

ROSE CLARK

Saraband, 2013

PB, 216pp, £9.99 978-190864317-9

Compassion, or lack of it, in health care has been prominent in the news recently. This short book puts compassion under the microscope. It is a searingly honest, compelling account of a man dying from cancer, written by his partner under his instructions, and based on a stash of her letters and notes that he had found and which had given her comfort to write. It gives a harrowing description of his, and their, battle with aggressive disease and the thread through it is of a love story with raw emotions laid bare; frustration, anger, love and, at times, laughter.

It makes valuable, and sometimes difficult, reading for doctors about what really matters to people facing such a challenge. The 'repeating nightmare' of the treatments and operations is graphic and the intensity of the pain is vivid and awful. It is not always controllable, or controlled. The doctors are not always caring and kind. Many are, and the Edinburgh oncologist who communicates with compassion and candour is hugely appreciated. He is quoted in the introduction, 'Reading the book has helped reinforce some of the reasons why doctors such as myself do the job ... it can make a difference to people's lives'.

One of the aims of Rose Clark, the author, was to encourage people in similar situations to seek help earlier, to trust that there are services out there who understand and can offer real support. Maggie's Centre proved invaluable. As the head of Maggie's Centre, Dr Elspeth Salter, says, 'This book should be on the reading list for all those involved in cancer care'.

The unrelenting progression of the disease and the intensity of the suffering may engender unease and apprehension in the reader. The couple's response to it arouses, more strongly, respect and admiration for the human spirit.

Lesley Morrison,

E-mail: lesley@ljmorrison.fsnet.co.uk

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp13X665404

The Review Theatre

PRIME SUBJECTS

Helen Mirren is back as The Queen in *The Audience*

The Audience is by Peter Morgan, whose credits include *The Queen*, *Frost/Nixon*, and *The Last King of Scotland*, and is directed by the excellent Stephen Daldry (*Billy Elliot*, *The Hours*, *The Reader*). It is based around the hundreds of private, 20-minute, Tuesday evening meetings at Buckingham Palace that the Queen has had with a dozen prime ministers, from Churchill to Cameron, over the last 60 years. We also meet Eden, Thatcher, Major, Brown and, briefly, Jim Callaghan (although Blair is notably absent, as are Douglas-Home and, sadly, Macmillan) making for a breezy evening of light-touch constitutional history.

I was fortunate to book tickets for a very early preview of the play. The writing is often, but not always, excellent. The opening interview between Major (JM) and Her Majesty (HM) is superb. For example JM: 'I only wanted to be ordinary'. HM: 'In which way do you think you have failed Prime Minister?'. The Queen describes the 8 minutes of her Christmas broadcast as the limit of human endurance and, when Major admits to having only three O-levels she replies that she has none and 'What safe hands the country is in, Prime Minister'. Harold Wilson is chippy and aggressive at first, but becomes, it seems, her favourite. He is very funny at Balmoral, where he shows off his photographic memory and, when his early Alzheimer's has become apparent, HM extends the rare honour of offering to dine with the Wilsons in Downing Street.

Indeed, the mental health of prime

ministers is quite a major theme — Brown's OCD and depression 'They're giving me something, I'll be alright' — Eden twitching, taking uppers (or were they downers?) before going into discuss Suez after an over-running photographic session with Cecil Beaton, and, of course, Churchill, beginning to unravel as he approaches his 80th year.

Goodness knows how much of this is true. The Queen tells Cameron that Philip couldn't stand Tony Blair, and she can barely bring herself to look at Margaret Thatcher. She seemed to get on much better with Brown and Wilson than with the Tories, and apparently has some difficulty with the democratic legitimacy of the post-election coalition government, as well as the resignation of the Pope. She is, of course, the still centre of the whole piece, and only loses her composure when Major suggests decommissioning Britannia to save money, when she becomes incandescent. She comes close to overstepping the mark when a very slippery Anthony Eden reveals his ill-judged plans for Suez.

Helen Mirren is, once again, very good in her regal role, and is supported by an excellent make-up and costume department. If you are looking for some undemanding political nostalgia and a few reminders of milestones in 20th century history, this isn't a bad way to spend an evening. And the corgis are adorable.

Roger Jones,

E-mail: rjones@rcgp.org.uk

The Audience is at the Gielgud Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London until 15 June 2013.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp13X665413

John Major (Paul Ritter) and The Queen (Helen Mirren) in *The Audience*.



Photo: Johan Persson.