

# Life & Times Books

## Words In Pain. Letters On Life And Death Olga Jacoby. Edited by Jocelyn Catty and Trevor Moore

Skyscraper Publications, 2018, HB, 254pp,  
£15.00, 978-1911072355



### DEATH ON HER OWN TERMS

The Conway Hall library is within the headquarters of the Ethical Society; Conway Hall being the oldest free thought organisation in the world. Trevor Moore, one of the editors of *Words in Pain* came across this book in the library, a collection of letters written between 1909 and 1913 by Olga Jacoby, a woman dying of an unspecified illness, who records in her letters her fear of a long drawn-out death, her decision to adopt four children — an unregulated activity at that time — and her rejection of any formal religious belief, feeling that religion gave insufficient credit to the achievements of science. She writes:

*'... Science is turning on the light, but at every step forward dogmatic religion attempts to turn it out, and as it cannot succeed it puts blinkers on its followers, and tries to make them believe that to remove them would be sin.'*

Prescient, insightful, and startling for that era. The illness while not defined, is recognisable to most of us as mitral stenosis, no doubt in the setting of rheumatic heart disease: there are mentions in the letters of at least one heart operation, and the portrait of Olga (a pastel portrait painted in 1899 in Hamburg) on the cover of the book graphically records the pathognomonic malar flush. It is possible that the surgery was closed mitral commissurotomy, first carried out as early as 1902, though at that time the techniques were little more than experimental.

Following research, Trevor Moore traced the descendants of the writer and liaised with her great granddaughter, psychotherapist Jocelyn Catty, the two of them, as editors, completing any blanks and reordering some of the letters to provide a more readable narrative.

The letters are addressed to Olga's doctor, though research has not revealed his identity. Olga herself is a rationalist and philosopher who documents her strong interest in science: she reads Thomas Huxley and books on social justice referring to this in her letters, and covers her feelings about enduring a gradual terminal illness along with her descriptions and aspirations for motherhood. She powerfully challenges her doctor's deep Christian faith.

A stipulation to her doctor is that the letters are preserved and passed back to her husband after her death, and the letters were first published in 1919, achieving Olga's ambition to be remembered as a writer, thinker, and rationalist with strong views on morality and religion, and most of all, that she would be immortalised.

And Olga Jacoby is immortalised in this book for the following startling reason: she dies at a time of her own choosing by her own hand following an overdose of barbiturates. The document is the first account of what we would now term assisted dying and a vital read for all who are challenged in this era by the polarisation of the current debate.

Olga stockpiled her 'sleeping draughts': her doctor, it is clear, was not aware of his role in enabling her to achieve her intentions, and so, as such, this was not an assisted death. But the book is a poignant and erudite reminder that human nature does not change, and that this is one arena where our governance over ourselves has got harder and not easier in contemporary times.

A book to read and read time and again.

#### Martin Scurr,

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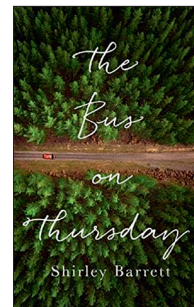
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## The Bus On Thursday Shirley Barrett

Fleet, 2018, HB, 272pp, £14.99,  
978-0708898796



### YOU WAIT ALL DAY ...

There are some writers one reads for the subtlety and nuance of their finely crafted prose. Australian screenwriter, novelist and breast cancer survivor Barrett is not one of those writers. When her 31-year-old protagonist Eleanor is diagnosed with breast cancer her first reaction is 'Whaaaaat?? The fuuuuuu\*\*?' So begins this strange, beguiling, sometimes horrifying and often hilarious story of Eleanor's 'journey'. I use the word 'journey' in inverted commas as Eleanor wryly observes of her breast cancer support group:

*'The theme of the evening was 'My Cancer Journey, and that alone should have given me pause since all journeys have a destination, cancer journeys in particular, and its not a destination anyone had any intention of talking about.'*

Eleanor's sarcastic wit and tell-it-as-it-is character belies a fortitude and sheer gritty determination. Following her lumpectomy she is told by the surgeon that unfortunately the margins were not clear and she will require more surgery and she observes that this:

*'... was pretty much when I realised that these guys haven't got a clue — they're basically just winging it.'*

She tries to escape her diagnosis and a recent failed relationship by taking up a teaching post in a small rural town of Talbingo, New South Wales, far from the urbane Australian landscape she is used

to. Talbingo has a population of 241 — or at least it did before its only teacher Miss Barker went missing — so Eleanor steps into the fold.

What ensues is a novel that is impossible to categorise. *The Bus On Thursday* is part romcom, part horror, part whodunnit, but all-consuming. Eleanor will make you snort with laughter; when describing her breast cancer support group she finds it intolerable to be:

*... surrounded by fifteen middle-aged women in aggressively cheerful headscarves .... there was just way too much laughter and hugging, like cancer gives you licence to be zany. Seriously it was painful.*

She will make you wince with pain; when her date reacts badly to her prosthetic breast, she will also make you realise that, a little like *The bus on Thursday*, life and medicine can be unpredictable, funny, sad and a rocky ride.

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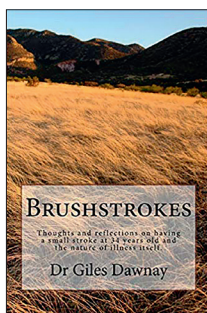
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**Brushstrokes. Thoughts, Poems And Reflections On Having Had A Small Stroke At 34 Years Old**

**Giles Dawney**

*CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, PB, 196pp, £14.99, 978-1533198624*



**RECOVERING FROM STROKE**

Giles Dawney is a graduate entrant into medicine. When he was 34, he suffered an embolic stroke, which presented with expressive dysphasia and facial weakness while he was talking to his wife. He moved swiftly from being a junior doctor to being a patient, going through all the familiar processes and stages of grief. This book is a collection of his poems, thoughts and reflections on the new world in which he found himself. He says:

*'I write for many reasons; sometimes for fun, sometimes to be heard, sometimes to wrestle with something I'm intrigued by, sometimes because I'm scared.'*

As this suggests, both poems and

reflections often come across as streams of consciousness on the themes of the physical and psychological sequelae of his stroke, loss, support, healing, and aids to recovery.

It's a good example of what has been described as 'creative words for health & wellbeing', to quote *Playspace Publications* ([playspacepublications.com](http://playspacepublications.com)).

*Playspace* publishes poetry pamphlets, cards, stories, anecdotes, and essays, some coming from Maggie's Centres in Scotland ([www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)), where free, practical, emotional, and social support is given to people with cancer, and their families and friends.

There is now an established movement of creative writing for therapeutic purposes, with organisations in the UK and internationally. A good example is Lapidus: 'the words for wellbeing association' ([www.lapidus.org.uk](http://www.lapidus.org.uk)).

*Brushstrokes* is written by a doctor, of course, and this brings both particular insights due to our medical knowledge, and special difficulties due to being both patient and a doctor. The book illustrates these tensions very well and also shows us that there is no easy way to move forward after a stroke except through the hard physical work involved in recovery. Adapting to a different sense of self after a major health event like a stroke is challenging.

This is an honest and courageous book.

**John Gillies OBE,**

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