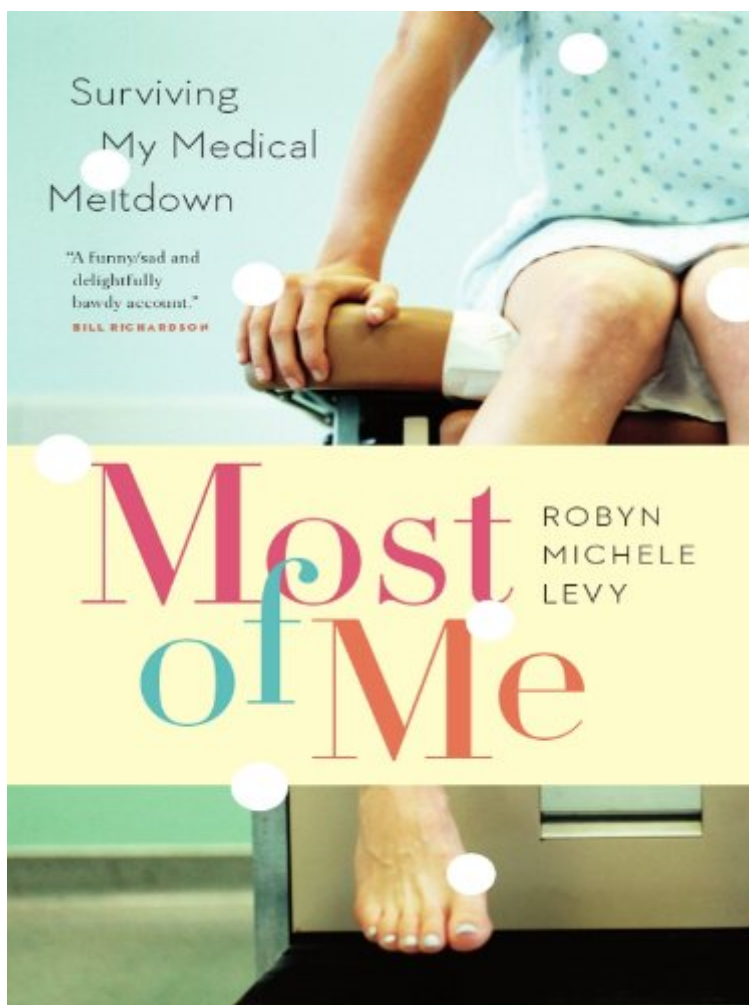


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Most Of Me: Surviving My Medical Meltdown



Synopsis

The imaginative, hilarious, and moving memoir of a woman coping with multiple diseases. At forty-three, Robyn Levy was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and breast cancer. With irreverent and at times mordant humor, Levy chronicles her early, mysterious symptoms of Parkinson's (a dragging left foot, a frozen left hand, and a crash into a downward dead dog position), the devastating diagnosis, her discovery of two lumps in her breast, her mastectomy and oophorectomy, and her life since then dealing with her diverse disease portfolio. Levy is accompanied on her journey by a fantastic cast of characters, including her Cry Lady (who always makes appearances at inopportune times) and perky Dolores the Prosthesis, as well as her loyal dog and a convoy of health professionals, family members, friends, and neighbors. Both heartbreaking and hilarious, *Most of Me* offers a unique glimpse into a creative mind, an ailing body, and the restorative power of humor and fantasy.

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Customer Reviews

I loved this memoir. I read it in two sittings, sneaking off to finish it when I had things I was supposed to be doing. I laughed out loud several times while reading it. And I learned a lot--about things every woman kinda wants to know but doesn't really want to ask because you're not quite sure what you're getting yourself in for when you ask about cancer procedures. And I knew nothing about Parkinson's disease, and painlessly and humorously, I learned a great deal. Robyn Levy is a marvelous writer, laugh-out-loud funny, clear, and astute.

This is a wonderful book. I found this memoir of illness engrossing, well-written, clever, and often very amusing -- no small feat given the subject matter. Robyn Levy has a gift for smart turns of phrase and offbeat insights. The book works well at another level, as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of the daunting double assault of Parkinson's disease and cancer. I imagine that the writing of this book must have served the author well, creating space around difficult and frightening experiences. Finding courage in herself, she encourages us. We are all, of course, vulnerable to similar affronts to the body and mind. Close friends and compassionate physicians can help us, as they did Levy, but I hear her telling us that a sense of humor is also a great gift, a welcome companion, and a guide.

In "Most of Me," Robyn Michele Levy ruefully shakes her head. Here she is--a woman with a devoted husband, Bergen, a young daughter, Naomi, and a producing job with Radio 3 of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. When she was just thirty-eight, Levy had noticed some unpleasant changes--"bouts of depression, flashes of anger, hurtful accusations, petty resentments." Why had she become "so moody, so anxious, [and] so volatile"? Her relationship with Naomi was rocky and deteriorating. By the time she was forty-one, Robyn was concerned about her insomnia, inability to concentrate, aches and pains, stiffness, and fatigue. She started dropping things and occasionally stumbled on the stairs. She tried therapy to alleviate her melancholy, stating, "I don't want to kill myself. I just want to be dead." When her GP failed to pinpoint the reason for Levy's "foot dragging, arm numbness and immobility, body aches and pains, muscle and joint stiffness, [and] mind fuzziness," he referred her to a neurologist, who eventually gave her the devastating news: "You have Parkinson's Disease." Thus began Robyn Michele Levy's self-described "medical meltdown." On the one hand, she was relieved that she at last knew the origin of her symptoms. On the other hand, Parkinson's (which her dad was battling, as well) is nothing to sneeze at. It is an incurable neurodegenerative disease that can gradually rob its victims

of their mobility and even their ability to communicate clearly. Since Robyn's disorder was in its early stages, she was not yet a candidate for medication. However, she was an emotional and physical wreck who leaned on her husband and faithful friends to help pull her together. As if this were not enough to bring her low, Levy made another discovery that was equally if not more traumatic. She had two lumps in her breast; could she add cancer to her "repertoire"? With savage and self-deprecating humor, piercing honesty, and even occasional bouts of profanity, Levy rails at her fate. She comes up with amusing puns, faux obituaries, and fantasies to relieve some of her pent-up stress and frustration. Gradually, Robyn adjusts to the new normal: rounds of doctor's appointments, surgery, lots of pills, and close monitoring of her condition. She learns to live in the present, appreciate Bergen and Naomi, reconnect with her siblings and pals, and celebrate whatever joy happens to come her way. Levy admits that she is a crybaby who bawls at the drop of a hat; her tear ducts get a huge workout in this book. Nevertheless, Robyn Michele Levy grows to realize that she can be brave, resilient, and accepting, no matter how sharp reality's bite may be. She emerges from her ordeal stronger, wiser, and more focused on life's essentials. Although some of her body parts may be missing, the best part of her--her ability to love--is still there.

Sometimes, laughter is the only way to deflect despair. Robyn Michelle Levy knows it from personal experience. Her memoir *Most of Me* is simultaneously amusing and poignant. From the first word, the story pulled me in and never let go, and the pages practically turned themselves. But it was a harrowing read, too, because of the subject matter: a serious, life-altering illness. Or rather two of them at once. With poise, candor, and self-deprecating humor, Levy writes about her medical plight. At the age of 43, she was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's. Eight months later, while still reconciling her debilitating affliction, she added breast cancer to her list of maladies. So far, she has won both battles. Her memoir covers several years before and after her diagnoses. The book starts with 'before,' when the author struggled with her deteriorating health and bouts of depression without knowing why. Her immediate family--husband and teenage daughter--were often on the receiving end of her black moods, and afterwards, she was swamped by remorse. Then the bomb of Parkinson's exploded in her face. Throughout the book, Levy is relentlessly honest, as she chronicles her seething cauldron of emotions: anger and guilt, shame and acceptance, terror of impending diapers and determination to survive. She also details the support and affection she received from her friends and family during her arduous medical journey. In a way, the book is a tribute to her loved ones, although the writing never slides towards melodrama. Funny asides and droll observations keep the narrative balanced on a tasteful line between mushy and tragic. One of

the grimmest problems the author faced after each of her two diagnoses was how to tell her thirteen-year-old daughter. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that Levy's father was diagnosed with Parkinson's a couple years before. She writes: "We're in the same sinking boat now: daughters coping with parents who have Parkinson's. Under these circumstances, how can anything be OK? How can we get through this together, when I'm falling apart?" Tears sprang to my eyes when I read those and similar lines. But more often than not, a morbid joke was only one step behind. Laughter and gentle self-mockery permeate the book. No dysfunction of the writer's ailing body is off-limits to her irreverent keyboard, even when breast cancer piles on top of Parkinson's. In her bleakest moments, humor sparkles, as she describes her recovery after mastectomy; outlines her wrestling with the question: chemo or no chemo; or tells us about naming her prosthetic breast Dolores. "If I don't laugh I would cry," she writes. The same applies to me, as a reader. If I didn't smile so often while reading the book I would've cried too. Books about illnesses are always emotionally draining, and this one was no exception. I wanted to protect myself from the author's pain, but even more I wanted to understand how she found the strength to deal with her "diverse disease portfolio." I read the book, and grinned, and chuckled, and learned from Levy's courage. Definitely recommended to anyone.

by Olga Livshin for Story Circle Book Reviews reviewing books by, for, and about women

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