



100

Poems to
See You
Through

Bright
Words
for the
Darkest
Hours

Edited by
Daisy
Goodwin



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Emotional support. Solace. Wisdom. Poetry can supply all this and more.

In the face of illness, on the brink of bereavement, in the midst of grief, the right poem at the right time can help. Whether you are the sufferer, or you are watching and waiting on the side, there is a poem here to make your hard time easier to bear.

Dip in and you'll discover gems you love, pearls you'll find inspiring, rocks to give you courage. Even in the darkest of times, you'll find some light. These truly are poems to see you through.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daisy Goodwin is a TV producer and popular broadcaster. When her mother, interior designer Jocasta Innes, was dying of cancer she realised there was a gap for a book to cheer and console people in the darkest hours. She compiled this anthology in response. Her previous books include the bestselling books *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, *The Nation's Favourite Love Poems* and *101 Poems That Could Save Your Life*. She lives in West London.

www.maggiescentres.org
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100 Poems to See You Through



Bright Words For the Darkest Hours



EDITED BY
DAISY GOODWIN



EBURY
PRESS

FOREWORD

MAGGIE'S CENTRES PROVIDE free practical, emotional and social support for people with cancer and their families and friends, offering a programme of support that has been shown to strengthen physical and emotional wellbeing during the course of treatment. Built in the grounds of NHS hospitals, our centres are designed by leading architects to be warm, welcoming and full of light and open space. They are places to find practical advice about benefits cancer patients and their carers are entitled to; places where qualified experts provide emotional support; places to meet other people or to simply sit quietly with a cup of tea.

Great design and architecture is vital to the care that Maggie's Centres offer and so we work with world-renowned architects like Zaha Hadid, Richard Rogers and Norman Foster, who give their time for little or nothing. Their skills deliver the calm, uplifting environments so important to the people who visit and work in our centres.

The first Maggie's Centre opened in Edinburgh in 1996. There are now 19 centres across the UK, as well as help online and abroad, with more developments planned for the future.

Every year 300,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with cancer, facing tough questions, exhausting treatment and difficult emotions that can range from anxiety to loneliness and isolation. These challenges affect not only the person with cancer, but their family and friends, too.

At Maggie's, creative writing is a key element to the support we offer and poetry often becomes a way to explore the thoughts, ideas and emotions that a cancer diagnosis can bring.

100 Poems to See You Through means so much to us at Maggie's, and we hope it can bring solace, laughter and companionship to everyone who needs it.

Laura Lee
CEO, Maggie's Centres

INTRODUCTION

MY FIRST VISIT to a Maggie's Centre was in the spring of 2013. It was a sunny day and as I cycled into the grounds of Charing Cross Hospital I looked up at the rows of windows and thought how much harder it must be to be stuck in hospital when the weather is fine. But that feeling fell away when I walked into a warm terracotta-coloured building tucked into a corner of the hospital's car park that faced the Fulham Palace Road. Designed by Richard Rogers, one of the many great architects who have designed these centres, this building is an oasis of light and serenity in the most unlikely setting. With its natural materials and thoughtful use of space, it is a million miles away from the utilitarian concrete of the hospital proper. It even smelt different: of camomile and honey rather than antiseptic and floor polish. Behind one door I could hear a yoga lesson in progress, in another corner a group of people were drinking tea around a wooden table.

My mother had died the month before and I had spent the earlier part of that year wrestling on her behalf with the many indignities of cancer treatment. Her illness – pancreatic cancer – was swift and ferocious: diagnosis to death was a matter of weeks. There was no time for her to benefit from the soothing atmosphere of a Maggie's Centre, but I know she felt strongly about the importance of beauty in extremis because, together with her partner Richard

MacCormac, she had designed a Maggie's Centre in Cheltenham.

The centres offer emotional support to cancer sufferers: from psychotherapy to the comfort of simply sitting around a table with others in the same position. The graceful spaces and soothing colours make them places of sanctuary. I think poems can offer the same kind of solace. In Coleridge's phrase, 'the right words in the right order' can give a shape to the most complicated feelings. Cancer sufferers and the people that love them are caught up in a tornado of unmanageable emotions; my aim with this collection is to show them poems that might in some small way illuminate, guide, fortify and soothe them through this most difficult journey.

There are poems here to chime with every stage of illness and recovery, hope and despair, life and death. Poets who have had cancer and other dread diseases have written with astonishing candour about all the wrinkles of their sojourn in the vale of ill health: whether it is hair loss or MRI scans, voluble nurses or patronising doctors, small-hour terrors or tiny miracles, there is a poem here that will provide a handhold in this strange new world. Jo Shapcott, Julia Darling, Raymond Carver have spun their misfortune into talismans for their readers. I would not presume to say that any poem can provide comfort but I think they can bring solace. Nothing is more terrifying than the unknown; the poems in this book, I think, provide a map of this unfamiliar territory.

Some of the poems in this book should be read silently, but there are some that demand to be read aloud. One client of a Maggie's Centre said that he found reciting from Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade',

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred

to be his magic bullet in the face of medical unpleasantness.

One of the things that people living with cancer and other serious conditions stress is the wisdom that comes from dealing with a life-threatening illness. For that reason I have included two sections – ‘Small Pleasures’ and ‘How to Carry On’ – which deal with the insights that come from being ill and the change in values the experience can bring about. Jo Shapcott’s poem ‘Procedure’ is a hymn to the hard-won joys of living in the present. I particularly love Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘The Fish’, which touches obliquely on the carapace we gain from experience.

Many of the poems here are for people facing illness, but I have also included poems for those who watch and wait by their side. When my mother lay dying it was difficult to know how to behave. A hundred years ago deathbeds would not have been unfamiliar to most people, but today we are as squeamish about our mortality as the Victorians were about their sexuality. There are some helpful poems here by Julia Darling about the correct demeanour for a hospital visit, as well as others that may offer some help in the midst of grief. I have lost count of the times that I have had emails from the bereaved desperate for the right poem to read at a funeral or memorial service; so I have tried to include a selection here that can be used in times of need.

But while there are, inevitably, lots of poems here that deal with the really tough stuff, I also want to include light with the shade. I think the impulse to find a seam of humour even in the grimmest situation is part of the human condition. However bleak the outlook there is always something to laugh about. The Hilaire Belloc poem about

the unfortunate demise of Henry King from chewing little bits of string – ‘[The doctors] answered, as they took their Fees, there is no Cure for this Disease’ – has been my mantra through many interminable stints in waiting rooms.

No one faces illness or tragedy in the same way. Some readers may feel they need the spine-stiffening resolve of a poem like ‘Invictus’, others will find more relief in the quiet acceptance of ‘Wild Geese’ by Mary Oliver. What is universal is the feeling of recognition that the right poem at the right time can bring. Poems work on many levels; there is the ostensible meaning and then there is that ineffable combination of sound and rhythm that works at another level entirely. It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand every nuance of a poem; the most important thing is to experience it. Reading aloud may feel awkward but there is no better way to get under the skin of a poem. Sometimes phrases will lodge in your memory, baffling you at the time, but later their meaning unfurls like one of those Chinese tea balls that turns into a fully-fledged flower when you add water. Allow these poems to permeate your consciousness and the rewards will come.

The aim of the Maggie’s Centres and this anthology is the same: there is always a place for beauty in the most difficult time. Whether you find inspiration, courage or acceptance here, I hope that the poems in this book will make your particular hard time easier to bear. These truly are poems to see you through.

THE BAD NEWS

ONE MINUTE THE worst thing that can happen is that you can't find a parking space and then, out of the blue, a doctor will take you aside into a private room or the phone will ring in the middle of the night and everything changes – suddenly the ordinary world of parking spaces seems like a vanished dream.

I particularly like the poem in this section by the great American short-story writer Raymond Carver, where he ends up thanking the doctor that gives him the bad news, 'habit being so strong'.



THE HEALTH SCARE

WENDY COPE

I'm living with Uncertainty and Fear.
I need to say their names and make them rhyme.
Two monsters. I can't make them disappear.
I'm living with Uncertainty and Fear.
Though abstract nouns are not a good idea,
And abstract nouns with capitals, a crime,
I'm living with Uncertainty and Fear.
It helps to say their names and make them rhyme.

END GAME

BRIAN COX

The day they said 'your cancer's worse'
I walked away through rows of limes
whose autumn leaves recalled old verse
I'd learnt by heart in better times.

Lawrence came first: his Ship of Death;
the falling fruit like drops of dew
scatters across the hardened earth.
And then there's Keats: a rosy hue
on stubble plains, moss'd cottage trees.

As I recalled these well-known lines
music of verse reshaped my news:
a touch of joy in grievous times.

GETHSEMANE DAY

DOROTHY MOLLOY

They've taken my liver down to the lab,
left the rest of me here on the bed;
the blood I am sweating rubs off on the sheet,
but I'm still holding on to my head.

What cocktail is Daddy preparing for me?
What ferments in pathology's sink?
Tonight they will tell me, will proffer the cup,
and, like it or not, I must drink.