



## Book Review

**Rearranged. An opera singer's facial cancer and life transposed**

Written by Kathleen Watt, Heliotrope Books, New York, 2023

*Rearranged* is an autobiographical account of a woman's experience of cancer and its treatment. The cancer is first diagnosed as a chondrosarcoma, and later as an osteosarcoma of her maxillary sinus. One of the things that makes this book especially interesting is that Kathleen Watt is a member of the Extra Chorus of the New York Metropolitan Opera, wheeled out for the largest shows. She works between times, but her love of the opera leaves these other jobs barely-mentioned.

The other interest comes, not because she is a diva, but because her vocation naturally requires her to be super-sensitive to her appearance and facial function. Accordingly, the book opens with anatomical images of the facial structures relevant to singing. She has the language of phonetics at her disposal, explaining them precisely to describe making sounds. She uses a wealth of artistic metaphors for illustration and emphasis. Understandably, her singing also guides her treatment decisions.

This sensitivity also highlights what she doesn't know. The tumour had completely obliterated her sinus and turbinates before presenting as a lump on her gingiva, originally misdiagnosed as an endodontic problem. A professional singer noticing symptoms when the disease is this advanced indicates just how insidious it is, and explains late presentation in so many cases. It's telling

that even after receiving information about the nature and size of the lesion that she still does not realise just how big its impact and that of the treatment will be. She later recognises this "shelter from full comprehension" and changes to wholly own her disease care by explaining them in educational detail.

The book avoids falling into a New York stereotype with lay psychology, especially surprising because Ms Watt has a history of treatment for depression. In contrast to the details of treatment, her emotions are rarely articulated and so the account is not explicitly internal. Her feelings are present though, implicit in the interactions she recounts and in the memories (from before the disease) and events she relates. These things communicate a sense of being prey to something sinister, of fear, of turmoil and of loss.

All of this makes *Rearranged* authentic and revealing. Ms Watt is perceptive, intelligent, inconsistent and playful. Yet she remains positive and optimistic throughout. She has stories of remarkable unprofessionalism, but also of tingling patient-centredness. The book should be required reading for all trainees in specialties dealing with cancer. There is also much in here for any reflective healthcare professional.

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