

OFF RADAR: ‘Skin: A Memoir’

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By Dana Wilde

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At the cancer center the suffering was heart-withering. Fear filled the waiting areas and hallways like an ether. Organ, limb, bone and muscle pain whelmed your subconscious like a blizzard as soon as you stepped through the door. This was all bad enough. But what I never found any place to put was the sheer number of people afflicted. Week after week for months we went for the chemo treatments, then day after day for weeks, the radiation. In between, the surgery. Every day there were faces we had never seen. Days when the waiting area was practically full of patients and their helpers, some of whom we’d recognize, but most of whom we never saw again. I had not thought cancer had undone so many. I can hardly believe it now, even though I saw it with my own eyes for nearly a year of hell.



“**Skin: A Memoir**” by Kate Kennedy; Littoral Books, Portland, Maine, 2020; 100 pages, illustrated, trade paperback, \$20.

Our experience with the ordeal of cancer is reflected starkly in Kate Kennedy’s memoir “Skin,” which documents her own harrowing struggle. Her book opens with a short prelude recounting a dream she had, before she fell ill, of a woman with a glowing but disfigured face; it later haunts the ordeal she will endure. The narrative then begins, in medias res, on an August day when she is anticipating with fear, dread and determination the start of her radiation treatment for “desmoplastic melanoma, a sub-type of lentigo maligna melanoma. Very aggressive. Very rare. Mine, characterized by perineural invasion, tracked along tiny nerves in my cheeks.” She will endure multiple surgical invasions of her face, with ancillary raids on other parts of her body for reconstruction tissue. Her radiation treatments require a specially made high-tech mask and equipment that reminds her of nuclear weaponry.

Five main threads are traced: her actual experience of having a dangerous cancer; facts about the disease and its treatments; the experience of her husband, Nate, who contracts a mysterious illness along the way; her family and friends, including her circle of writers and the fellow patients she comes to know in the waste-land of the waiting rooms; and finally –

the backdrop to everything – the persistent beauty of nature. Compiled, apparently, from a “day book” Kennedy kept throughout the ordeal, the narrative rolls back forth between her medical visits, her gardens and her domestic life.

The story is told in an extremely exacting literary style that evokes a feeling of disturbing matter-of-factness. The thesis punch, in my reading at least, comes in two terse sentences about midway through the book. Following a short section observing her discomfort about Nate’s sacrifices, about the war metaphors commonly used in association with treatments, and about the tactlessness of cancer-victim obituaries, she writes: “Though I was well loved and cared for, the cancer trek was a lonely one. I didn’t know anyone with my rare type or anyone with a facial melanoma.”

This, in a way, is the gist of it. Like Nate, I too watched it unfold with a relentless, overwhelming sense of helplessness, had my own crashes under its weight. But there was nothing I could do. Try to make everything as comfortable as possible, and fail every day. Every day, the trek was lonely for her. And every day, there were scores, and hundreds, and thousands more doing it too, all lonely, all suffering, all trying, like Kate Kennedy, to find flowers anywhere they could.

Kate Kennedy, of Cape Elizabeth, is the author of the novel “End Over End” and a collection of historical essays, “Maine’s Remarkable Women.” “Skin” is available from local book sellers and [online](#).

Off Radar takes note of poetry and books with Maine connections the first and third Thursdays of each month. Dana Wilde is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. Contact him at [\[email protected\]](#)

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