

A Conversation With

Gail Konop Baker

Author of

CANCER IS A BITCH:

Or, I'd Rather Be Having A Midlife Crisis

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Q: How would you address those who are reluctant to read another cancer memoir? Or a book about cancer in general?

A: Good question! In fact when I asked Sara Gruen if she would read the manuscript for endorsement she told me she wasn't sure she wanted to read about breast cancer and I told her that, believe it or not, the book is more about how the diagnosis served as a catalyst for me to examine my midlife, my mothering, and my marriage more intensely. About how it woke me up to the moment, helped me see how much I had been taking for granted and inspired me to do all the things I'd forgotten to do. A day later Sara Gruen e-mailed and said she'd read the book in one sitting, thanked me for encouraging her to read it, and sent this blurb: "Don't let the "C" word scare you—**CANCER IS A BITCH** is smart, funny, hopeful, and as much about life, families and self-discovery as the cancer that prompts it. I loved this book: Read it!" So I guess I would say: don't let it scare you.

Q: How does your book differ from, say, the recent spate of popular cancer-oriented books, such as *Crazy Sexy Cancer*? Why should people read your book and hear your story?

A: I really enjoyed *Crazy Sexy Cancer* but it was more tips on how to deal with cancer. (Great tips, mind you!) My book is more of a journey into the mind of someone going through a major crisis, which everyone has gone through or will go through. So while it is universal it also is extremely personal. This book was culled from my private journals so there is a level of intimacy and honesty that I didn't even originally plan to share. My book doesn't tell you how I coped (or didn't cope): instead it takes you on a rollercoaster ride from despair to triumph. Reading it is both emotionally thrilling and cathartic. And the themes of motherhood and marriage and what it means to be a woman in the 21st century are universal. My book also addresses the psychological fallout that a person lives with even after a "good" breast cancer diagnosis, and I don't think that's been written about or is even talked about all that much. And with millions of women diagnosed every year, the mental aspect affects a lot of people.

Q: What inspired you to write such an intimate book on such a touchy subject?

A: I wrote this book because I couldn't write anything else. The last (unpublished) novel I'd written was about a woman who finds a lump in her breast and wonders if she's lived a meaningful life. I completed it just before my routine mammogram in 2006. My agent hated it, and I ended up with a breast cancer diagnosis. So I was at a crossroads personally and professionally. I spent most of my time Googling breast cancer and nutrition and alternative medicine sites. I wanted to know what had caused this: Why me?

When I wasn't doing all that productive stuff, I wrote all my craziest most private thoughts in a journal my husband gave me, vowing never to show it to anyone!

Eventually, I wrote parts of the journal into an essay I titled **CANCER IS A BITCH** and sent it to a couple of writer friends who were like, wow, you should do something with this (although you might want to take the swearing out). Soon after that, I read that LiteraryMama.com was looking for columnists and on an absolute whim, I pitched them a column based on the essay called Bare-breasted Mama and they took it, swearing and all! Immediately after it went live, I started receiving e-mails from readers thanking me for being so open and honest about my journey (both men and women, people who'd had cancer and not had cancer). That feedback encouraged me to keep going, even though it often hurt to relive this and write about it, and I felt very exposed putting my experience out there. Around the same time, I "broke up" with my first agent and started pitching new agents again (for my breast cancer novel). One of them wrote back to say that while he loved my voice, he wasn't taking on much fiction. Again, on a whim, I pitched him the idea of spinning the columns into a memoir. And he said yes!

Q: What are some of the most ridiculous and memorable things that happened to you on your journey from diagnosis through treatment to recovery?

A: They're all in the book! One of them was when I was in pre-op and they were poking long fishing-line-like wires into my boob and the technician was talking about her vacation to topless beaches in Europe and all I could think was when I was in Nice a few months before and I hadn't gone topless and now I never would. Another was when my best friend came over before I had surgery and I was thinking, how can she want to be friends with this "damaged" me? and she said, "If you have to shave your head, I'm shaving mine in solidarity." Luckily I didn't need chemo, but that depth of friendship just blew me away. And another friend had an affair *for* me. She wanted us to embrace life.

Q: What words of wisdom or encouragement would you offer those diagnosed with breast cancer?

A: It's hard. And unfair. First I'd just acknowledge those two things. The word CANCER rocked my foundation, flipped my world upside down like nothing else. It's normal to feel crazy, and don't beat yourself up thinking you did something wrong (I did that for a while and that was a waste of energy). Then I'd just encourage them to mother themselves and accept mothering from others. Eat organic food and exercise. And sex: have it! I have one scarred breast (from several lumpectomies) and it took me a long time to feel attractive and sexual again. I think if you can find the energy, sex is important. It's life affirming. It reminds you that you are still a woman. And still beautiful.

Then maybe figure out what you've been putting off, and stop saying no to the things you really want to do. I started training for a half-marathon after surgery, and I started writing a column, and then I wrote this book, and then after I completed that I went to yoga boot camp teacher training. These were all things I'd wanted to do over the years but hadn't. Mostly because in the past I tended to over-think everything, and by the time I was done thinking something through, I would have talked myself out of it and missed the opportunity. So I really try not to do that now.

One last thing. Don't be afraid to talk about it. That was my biggest hurdle. I didn't want to burden others with my crazy thoughts. And now you can buy them on

Amazon! But seriously, I decided to expose my thoughts, my life, my everything including my bra size because I wanted to make it okay to talk about cancer openly and honestly so others diagnosed, or those who love someone who is diagnosed, would feel less alone.

Q: How do you deal with writing about your life? Do worry about exposing yourself? Your family? Your friends? Where do you draw the line?

A: The best thing about switching from fiction to memoir is that everything is fodder. And it has taught me to pay closer attention to the world I live in. There are so many interesting and funny and poignant things happening in my very own life—in all of our lives. I also learned from writing fiction to look for patterns and the interesting and unexpected way things connect, and I try to incorporate that in my work so it feels layered and multi-dimensional. But at the same time, what I leave out is just as significant as what I put in. I'm very careful when writing about others, especially family and friends. In fact, when I was writing fiction I often exposed "truths" about others I would never dare expose now that I'm writing memoir. I'm not out to expose anyone but me! So in some ways writing memoir has me to be more compassionate about my family and friends.

Q: What are some of your inspirations as a writer, and how do you think this comes across in your own writing?

A: I was an English major so I'm always falling in love with writers and books. My first loves were *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut and then *Catcher in the Rye* and then *The Great Gatsby* and then *Anna Karenina*. In that order exactly. Ever since I can remember, I would get on compulsive kicks with writers. First read everything they'd ever written, and then every book about them. I remember doing that with Sylvia Plath when my kids were little, and then that got too depressing and I moved on to Grace Paley. Loved Grace Paley. The year before last I had a major thing for Ian McEwan. Last year it was Nick Hornby. I recently read Donna Tartt's *A Secret History* and totally fell in love with her writing.

But everything influences me. Seriously, food, music, bad TV, overheard conversations, fights with my husband, stupid things I say to my kids and worry I can't take back and imagine them discussing in therapy in 30 years, the position of the sun. Since I started my writing life as a poet, almost as important as the story I'm telling is the way the words sound, the rhythm and the beat. The way all that comes across in my writing is that I throw it all in and see what happens. And always, always looking for that one defining moment that crystallizes everything.

To schedule an interview with Gail Konop Baker, contact Angela Hayes, Goldberg McDuffie Communications, 212-446-5104, ahayes@goldbergmcduffie.com