

BOOK REVIEW by Ellen B. Ryan

The End of Your Life Book Club

Will Schwalbe Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2012

Imagine that you have a devastating cancer diagnosis in late life and that your adult son accompanies you to chemotherapy sessions – where you discuss the book selected for each such meeting of your two-person book club. What mixed emotions would arise? – fear, sorrow, and determination, yes; but also love, gratitude, pride, intellectual excitement, and anticipation.

Active as a publisher and journalist, Will Schwalbe narrates his story of creating a book club with his mother to guide their discussions during treatment sessions and other visits after her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. During the last two years of her life, mother and son shared their lifelong love of books while looking back on her life, planning meaningful events, and dealing with medical and end-of-life issues.

Throughout this unusual memoir, we learn about Mary Anne Schwalbe – her past as daughter, mother, indefatigable humanitarian (especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan), initiator and leader of social profit agencies, and ever-curious traveller. We also learn of her intentions to maintain these roles within her limited future. She continues with some speaking engagements, returns when quite ill to London for nostalgic and family reasons, and decides to raise funds for a library in Afghanistan.

Earlier when she had read Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, she had urged everyone to read this novel which gives a human face to the Afghan people. Now reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, she was even happier with the focus on women, with whom she had worked most and who she anticipated would be the salvation of Afghanistan. Discussions of mother and son drew out three kinds of fateful choices in the two books: "the ones characters make knowing that they can never be undone; the ones they make thinking they can but learn they can't; and the ones they make thinking they can't and only later come to understand, when it's too late, when *nothing can be undone*, that they could have." Will realized that his Mom had taught her children to hedge their bets: "When you couldn't decide between two things, she suggested you choose the one that allowed you to change course if necessary. Not the road less traveled but the road with the exit ramp." When Will commented that the books they read the first summer all seemed to address fate and the effects of the choices people make, Mary Anne replied intriguingly, "I think most good books share that theme."

After they had shared a few books, Will suggested that it was like being in a book club. When Mary Anne declared that he did not have time for a book club, he responded, "If we're reading the same books, and talking about them, why can't we call that a book club?" Shortly after this proposal, Mary Anne was ready with her list – some new books to read but also rereading beloved authors – Jane Austen and some poets (e.g., T S Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop). "New and old. Mom always kept these in balance, constantly introducing her childhood friends to people she'd just met, always adding a stopover in a new place on a journey to a more familiar city or town, reading the latest authors in counterpoint to her favorites."

The appendix contains the 100+ books and poems discussed in the book club. The list includes the following: Alcott's *Little Women*, Dante's *Purgatorio*, Barbery's *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, *The Holy Bible*, Connelly's *The Lizard Cage*, Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Anne Frank's *Diary*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, Lamont's *Traveling Mercies*, Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Obama's *Dreams of My Father*, Pausch's *The Last Lecture*, Robinson's *Gilead*, Sendak's *Where the Wild Things*

are, Shakespeare & Shaw, Stegner's ***Crossing to Safety***, Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings***, Weisel's ***Night***, and Wouk's ***Marjorie Morningstar***.

During the months of illness, Will realized both he and his Mom were grieving the loss of her taken-for-granted years ahead. As well, they realized that she would not see her grandchildren grow up and that the youngest would not even have a memory of her. Will concluded that "when you're with someone who is dying, you may need to celebrate the past, live the present, and mourn the future all at the same time." Yet he realized that he could share his Mom's favourite books when the children were old enough. "The littlest ones would never see the British Isles through her eyes, but they could see it through the eyes of the writers she admired."

For a long time after his mother's death, Will would feel guilty over something he had not told her during one of the book discussions. Yet, he eventually grasped that "the greatest gift of our book club was that it gave me time and opportunity to ask her things, not tell her things." His Mom had also showed him "that books can be how we get closer to each other, and stay close, even in the case of a mother and son who were very close to each other to begin with, and even after one of them has died."

As you can see, this moving tribute to a mother who believed in the power of books is also an engaging tribute to a caring son who grew in wisdom through his book club of two. In reading and discussing this book we can all learn much about Writing, Aging and Spirit.