

Advance praise for *The Adventures of Cancer Girl and God*

“Having had melanoma in my thirties, I am so grateful for this piercingly honest, encouraging, real, and straightforward book. Courie offers her readers the open invitation to tell the truth of their experience of cancer, and to carry that experience into sustained prayer through reflection and journaling. Highly recommended.”

—Mary C. Earle, author of *Days of Grace: Meditations and Practices for Living with Illness*

“Anna Fitch Courie writes with a brutal honesty that’s refreshing and disturbing all at the same time. As a ‘cancer boy’ myself, I was there with her through every sentence of her book. There is no redemptive quality in having cancer. It’s not a God-induced opportunity to witness to our faith. As Anna writes, it just plain ‘sucks.’ So, cancer can never give us a hyphenated identity, because our full identity, as Anna attests, is already grounded in the God who wonderfully created us and more wonderfully redeemed us in Jesus Christ.”

—The Rt. Rev. Scott Anson Benhase, Bishop of Georgia

“There is so much to love about *The Adventures of Cancer Girl and God!* Imagine a memoir that is also a retrospective, accompanied by a playful workbook where the reader is invited to reflect on his or her own life alongside the author. Anna takes our hand and guides us through every nook and cranny of her diagnosis—from denial, to anger, to gratitude, to denial, to faith, to denial, to joy. Along the way, we reflect with her on our closest relationships, on our own anger or sadness, on our favorite swear words and deepest prayers. I found reading this book was like reading through the Psalms; all human emotions are present, and are of God. Honest, raw, and courageous, the author’s story is at once intensely personal and universal. Her experiences along her journey, even when solitary, remind her to reach out to those around her, and to God. You will find yourself journeying beside her and cheering her on, while leaning more deeply into your own life and faith.”

—The Rev. Cricket Cooper, author of *Chemo Pilgrim*

“In *Christ Walk* Anna Fitch Courie invited us all on a journey, a Lenten walk with Jesus. Now she takes us on a hero’s quest, with an honesty and tenacity like no other. Whether you have felt betrayed by your body, gone through the illness of a loved one, or simply strive each day to be a follower of Jesus, *Cancer Girl* inspires, challenges, motivates, and empowers all of us toward a closer relationship with God.”

—The Rev. Benjamin Gildas of *Priest Pulse* podcast

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Foreword

As this book goes to press, it is estimated that over 1.6 million people will be diagnosed with cancer and over 600 thousand will die of cancer this year. As shocking as the numbers are in aggregate, they do not tell the whole story because the entire story is composed of millions of individual stories, with each representing a unique person, their family, friends, and everyone with whom they interact. The ultimate reach of these diseases that we collectively call cancer is millions of people at any one time. And yet, each patient, though surrounded by loved ones and support systems, is still alone in their feelings in a way that others cannot quite comprehend.

In this book, Anna Fitch Courie gives us some insight into the effects that cancer has at the personal level. Beyond the statistics, this book allows the reader to see up close the thoughts and fears, challenges and concerns that are all but universal as each person faces their disease. Thought-provoking, frank, and uncompromisingly honest, the words on these pages reflect the truth as faced by a woman confronting this difficult ordeal. And though we in medicine are beginning to have great success in many areas where we battle cancer, the hard and frightening work of these battles is being waged by Anna and millions like her who must confront this enemy.

This book will have familiar tones for those who are facing or have faced such an ordeal themselves. As such, it can serve as a valuable resource for those patients who are looking for answers in areas where even the questions are not easily formed. Sharing in Anna's journey can provide a comfort to other patients in knowing that they are not alone in their questions of medicine, life, and even faith.

For caregivers, family, and loved ones, this book serves as an indispensable guide to let us see beyond the diagnosis, beyond the treatment options, beyond the prognosis. Indeed, through Anna's generosity and sharing, the reader sees the person who must deal with all the issues that this disease brings. Though her journey is personal and

unique, Anna's questions, struggles, and even answers will resonate with others who have trod their own difficult paths. This universality of emotions gives these words applicability in other lives.

The book is not always easy to read—the subject matter is difficult and frightening by definition. But the struggle that Anna wages ultimately is ennobling and gives the reader a sense of hope even in the dark times. I recommend this book to all who are personally or peripherally confronted with cancer as a means to share in the humanity of these experiences and better understand what each patient faces in their own personal struggle.

Dr. Ben Emanuel
Anatomic Pathology & Clinical Pathology
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Prologue

I am a nerd. I love epic stories. I love fantasy, science fiction, action, and adventure. Upon reflection, it is not necessarily the genre itself that calls to me—it is the plot formation where the good guy (or gal) wins the battle. I like heroes and heroines. I like good versus evil, and I love “happy endings.”

When I sat down to write *The Adventures of Cancer Girl and God*, I wanted more than anything to be the hero of my own story. I want desperately to win out over cancer and beat the snot out of this evil disease. That wasn't in the cards I was dealt. I have a type of cancer that is chronic. I don't get to get rid of it. It's a part of me. My wellness depends completely on how well I take care of myself and manage my disease on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes I rock my cancer world, and other days, it gets the better part of me. Through my journey, I've learned tricks for dealing with living with disease; one of those tricks is visioning how I want to see myself.

I picture myself in a cape, powerful and fierce. It brings a smile to my face to think of smashing cancer cells under my feet. It is a *positive* vision of where I wanted to go on my journey and it keeps me fighting the good fight. I want *you* to find a heroic vision of yourself as well.

Most heroes have superpowers. My superpower is my faith in God. I would not be here to tell you this story, and attempt to provide you with a vision of hope for your own journey, without God. In ways I cannot begin to articulate, or even fully comprehend, God has blessed my life and given me the strength to see illness in a different light. My hope is to help others see their illness or disease differently too. It is incredibly difficult to be hopeful in the middle of crisis. It is uniquely challenging to find grace in the midst of death, illness, and disease. I feel fiercely that grace is there. Grace is an amazing superpower. I believe you have that superpower too.

My story originally unfolded on my blog: www.christwalk40day.blogspot.com. Many of the feelings I expressed there were written in real

time, as my cancer story unfolded. I have since gone back to those writings to both remember how I felt in that moment and provide clarity as to how I feel now, in the hopes that I might turn it into a lesson for others. If I help one cancer patient (or another person struggling with illness and disease) feel that they are understood, and hold true to the fear, the anger, the anxiety, and the personal growth that can occur because of illness, then every word in this book was worth writing.

There are parts of the story that are incredibly raw. Breathe through them.

There are parts of the story that are my own only. You may not feel the same way. Be with me in them.

There are parts of the story that have yet to be completed. Pray with me through them.

I will do the same for you. We do not take journeys in a vacuum. You are not alone. I am not alone. So please, join me on my quest of health, faith, fitness, humor, and healing, as Cancer Girl and God go on a journey together.

With love, —*Anna*

DAY

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I Am So Very Angry with God

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps. 22:1)

How I Felt . . .

I just found out I have cancer. My body, as usual, has betrayed me. An angry fire lives under my skin and I fight the tears that try to leak out. I am hot. I am cold. I am sweating. I shiver. I feel like I may throw up.

I am so pissed right now. I will ask your forgiveness for my crudity later, but this is a raw wound. I am angry, furious with God, furious with my body, and furious with life.

What did I ever do to deserve this? I do not understand how living a clean life, following the Good Book, and trying my damndest leads me to this. I try so hard. I have more questions than answers. I am in a stage. I hate being in a stage. I am a statistic. I hate being a statistic.

I do not want cancer. Moreover, with all apologies to my friends with cancer, I do not want to be labeled a cancer patient. I can say with 100 percent confidence that I am sure they don't or did not want to be seen as patients either. This cancer business is seriously inconvenient.

I do not want a litany of doctors or visits. I have been there, done that. I lost my hearing when I was twelve to an autoimmune disease; I have had multiple surgeries and been through many autoimmune disease therapies. I've lost my hair, been in the hospital on holidays, had my body scarred, and gone through the rehabilitation phase. Been there, done that. I hate being sick. I hate the experience of being subjected to the medical arena. I do not want this journey that is set before me. I do not want this season.

I want a normal life. I want to raise my children. Grow old with my husband. I want to travel and eat good food. I want to see my

grandchildren and watch my kids graduate from college, get married, become successful. I want a normal body. I have had an abnormal body my entire life. I hate my abnormal body.

I do not want to hear that I am a warrior, or a conqueror, or how tough I am. I am more comfortable with a drama-free life. I am ok with the status quo. I am ok with the boring.

I feel utterly betrayed by God. In part of my brain I realize how silly this is but this is how I feel. I feel like I have done something wrong and I'm being punished for some unknown deed.

I am pissed. My cheeks feel like frying pans are sitting on the hard shelf of my cheekbones and my head throbs. I am not ready for this. I have follicular lymphoma. As far as cancers go, it is probably the “right” one to have. It is treatable, but noncurable—what does that mean? It is malignant, but nonaggressive. What does that mean? It sure feels like an aggressive intrusion on my life. That does not make me want it more. I wish I could turn back the clock and not pick up the phone when my surgeon called. I am not ready for this.

But I will be. Let me grieve. Let me get angry and let me find my fighting spirit. I will win this war against cancer. I will find my spiritual equilibrium. I will see the glass half-full.

But until then, I will grieve and I will be angry.

God? Why have you done this to me?

What I Learned . . .

Finding out you have cancer sucks. It does not matter what form it is, how aggressive it is, where it is located, or how far it has spread, or not spread. The word “cancer” in and of itself is a horrible, hate-filled, fear-filled word. The word “cancer” can literally steal the breath from your body. Cancer is probably one of the number one words that people never want to hear from their doctor.

Cancer happens to so many people, and yet each experience is unique. The approaches to cancer treatment are manifold and very specific to the type of cancer you have, what stage it is at, how symptomatic you are (or are not), and a myriad of other factors that need to be understood with thorough conversations with your doctor. The



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Humor

He will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouts of joy.
(Job 8:21)

How I Felt . . .

Every time I look at my husband, I want to apologize for this mess we are in together. When I start apologizing and falling into the “I am so sorry” and weeping mode, he gets sincerely annoyed with me.

First off, it’s probably a little demeaning when I apologize for something I cannot control. It’s also probably a little insulting since he takes his marriage vows very seriously. Sure, I bet he would like to take this from me, but he has vowed “in sickness and in health” and has not wavered. My husband is my rock. I know I am never alone with him by my side. In some ways, his journey is more difficult than mine. As my priest reminded me, Treb now has to pick up the pieces of what I physically cannot do and remain steadfast when I am too emotionally drained to deal with more. He has had to take on my household chores, the kids, telephone calls, answering multiple e-mails, and going to the grocery store. All of these are things he hates to do—especially talking on the phone and going to the grocery store. Not that we keep count, but the dude will have so many kitchen passes by the time this is through that he will be able to trade them in for a boat that he so desperately wants. *Grin.*

All of this leads to a litany of “I am so sorry” in my brain. The first time I said it, he swatted me with the kitchen towel as he was doing dishes. The second time I said it, he gave me the evil eye. And the third time I said it, he told me every time I said I was sorry he was going to go out and buy himself a new X-wing miniatures figure.

You see, my husband loves to play tactical board games. His newest favorite is the Star Wars X-wing miniatures game. He may be a

little obsessed and before all this started, I was getting perturbed with the frequent packages from Amazon with a new ship for his collection.

So, I really need to be careful with my “sorry” comments. In one way or another, they may come back to bite me. The last thing I need is an entire room filled with Star Wars figures. If I am weak and start the apology nonsense again, at least he will be getting something he enjoys out of my moment of self-pity.

The Force is strong with that one.

What I Learned . . .

It is important to find humor even in the pitiful moments of this journey. I really was saying “I am sorry” every time I turned around. I felt so bad about all the pieces Treb was picking up as I was miserable. While you may want to apologize every time you turn around too, you may have a loved one who gets as equally annoyed at the apologies as my husband does. Instead, think about your blessings each time you want to apologize. I counted my blessings as a litany during this journey to remind myself of how much God has given me. Instead of all the things I wanted to be sorry about, I forced myself to start thinking of all the things I was blessed with on my journey. So many things could be so much worse.

I am blessed by my husband.

I am blessed by my children.

I am blessed by my family.

I am blessed by my friends.

I am blessed by my colleagues.

I am blessed by my writing.

I am blessed by my readers.

I am blessed by my doctors.

I am blessed by my nurses.

I am blessed by a strong body.

I am blessed by a strong mind.

I am blessed by God.

