
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 1.11.14

Doris Brett’s memoir *The Twelfth Raven* provokes many questions about health and illness, about friendship, love, family – all the big things – but also about writing as art, as communication, and as therapy.

Brett’s husband Martin is apparently fit and healthy, not yet 60. They are just embarking on a weekend of folk dancing in Frankston, an hour away from their Melbourne home, when he tells her he is ‘having difficulty putting words together’. Brett is a psychologist and knows what this might mean. ‘And so it begins,’ she writes. The first stroke is very mild, but the next morning another major stroke leaves him wordless and partly paralysed, and in a series of hospitals for months.

The most insistent question, for me, is the one that Brett finally poses on page 109: ‘I cannot imagine,’ she says, ‘how one fares without a patient advocate.’ Brett is indefatigable in making sure that Martin gets the best treatment and, importantly, that he believes that he will make a good recovery. She is a formidable researcher and has enough medical knowledge and analytical brainpower to apply what she discovers: having heard about the efficacy of mirror boxes for amputees, for example, she conceives of the idea that they might also help with one-sided paralysis. Sure enough, he recovers almost all function in his paralysed right arm. Finding that the staff of one of the rehabilitation hospitals are mysteriously not available to provide rehabilitation for Martin, she sets about teaching him to speak again, scouring bookshops for picture books pitched at exactly the right level. She doesn’t blame overstretched medical staff for not reading all the latest research, but she doesn’t easily forgive offhandedness, rudeness, inattention and failure to communicate, all of which she encounters in the months of Martin’s treatment and recovery.

There is a fascinating urgency to Brett’s narrative, but the scientific and rational are interlaced with a pull towards folklore and the stories which run through all human cultures making sense of life, illness and death. She also often interprets her dreams after the fact with a confident certainty of their capacity to foretell events she couldn’t have known about in advance – which, I must say, arouses my scepticism like nothing else.

A constant theme in the book is the preeminent need for communication. Martin for a time loses his ability to use words to communicate, and her part in re-establishing that is one of Brett’s major achievements. But equally, she devotes a lot of thought to the importance of keeping up her connection with her friends, none of whom are close by. When her computer mysteriously fails in the wee hours, when she is sending one of her regular updates to her friends, she is ‘cracked through with disconnection. Not just the disconnection of the computer. The computer is also the hospital, the stroke, the precariousness of the future – everything from the last week that is now hitting me with the thwack of a wrecking ball.’

Something rather curious happens at the end of this book. Brett, who has come through ovarian cancer, having brought Martin through a remarkable recover from his stroke, has a test for the gene which predicts breast cancer and decides to have a prophylactic mastectomy. She does all the research, just as she had done for Martin, and finds the best medical team, and describes the whole
process in detail in the last 60 pages of the book. Strangely, Martin seems to disappear. She writes this part of book almost as if she were single – though with anxieties about her a daughter – so it feels rather disconnected from the rest of the narrative, in which Martin was the focus of her attention. The writing loses some of its urgent, lyrical quality – banal expressions like ‘been there, done that’ appear a little too frequently. It’s not that this material isn’t worth writing about, but it doesn’t match the intensity of the earlier parts of the book.

Nevertheless, The Twelfth Raven (the one that stands for ‘joy for tomorrow’ in the old English rhyme) is an important contribution to the literature on several counts – as a resource for others in the same situation, as a warning to be an active patient, and as a moving memoir of single-minded dedication to the well-being of a beloved husband. It is an absorbing, frightening book – after all, which of us would be lucky enough to have such an astonishingly resourceful advocate devoted to our recovery should we become incapacitated? Most people, I am sure, trust medical staff to know what is best, but if there is one clear message from this book it is that you can’t do that.