



TURNING PAGES JANE SULLIVAN

# Darkness brings surprising delights

**EVERYONE'S getting excited about [sic], a new memoir from Joshua Cody, a young American who was diagnosed with cancer, had a gruelling course of treatment and was expected to die. He survived to write his story, due out in November, and it sounds darkly and deliriously glamorous.**

Jonathan Franzen comments: "Writing this rawly self-conscious has no business captivating you, let alone moving you. That it manages to do it anyway is a testament to Mr Cody's talent, honesty and singularity." Not everyone leaves hospital midway through chemo, goes to a bar, does cocaine and then takes home a woman he meets in the street. But others who have encountered pain, illness and disability have found quieter ways of dealing with it and writing about it. Another cancer memoir due in November, the late David Servan-Schreiber's *Not the Last Goodbye*, is more sober but no less acclaimed for its wisdom and courage.

There were quite a few writers in this category at the recent Melbourne Writers Festival and though "inspiring" is an overused word, I found it apt. Who could fail to be moved by Betty Churcher's determination to defy her failing eyesight by sketching the great works of art that had mesmerised

her since childhood? Thanks to publisher Louise Adler, Churcher's thoughts and sketches are in turn preserved in a book, *Notebooks*.

"I discovered that if I drew something, I could remember it perfectly," said the art critic and historian. But it wouldn't work with reproductions: she had to go to the original painting. The National Gallery in London let her in after hours and she sketched works such as Rembrandt's portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels bathing, with her poignant little twist of hair and "good serviceable knees". "I drew almost in a daze," she said. "Then I looked down and thought, 'Good, I'll remember you.'"

Another writer battling failing eyesight was historian David Walker, who decided he couldn't continue with a career that involved reading so many documents but could instead explore the archive of memory, leading to his family memoir *Not Dark Yet*.

We also saw the extraordinary "Aspergian" John Elder Robison, who has written two books about his life, *Look Me in the Eye* and *Be Different*; and Australian journalist Ken Haley, who hasn't let paraplegia stop him exploring the world and producing his second book, *Europe @ 2.4 km/h*.

If it hadn't been for a ruptured spinal disc, Geoff Goodfellow might never have become a poet. He

spent 18 months in traction and had to crawl around on his hands and knees. He kept crawling over his son's book on the floor and finally flipped it over to discover it was a book of poetry. He could do that too, he decided.

Years later, Goodfellow succumbed to the working man's disease, throat cancer: "I was quite terrified but I tried to put on a brave face." He wrote poems from his experiences in hospital and from talking to other men in his ward. His book *Waltzing with Jack Dancer: A Slow Dance with Cancer* includes quite confronting photographic portraits — "to show people what they don't want to see" — and a story by his daughter, which she gave him as a Christmas present. "She's a bit savage on me in a couple of spots but I read it with tears running down my cheeks and said I'd like to put it in my book."

I salute these writers for their unflinching honesty and for drawing us into difficult but often surprisingly delightful reads.

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