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The Two Kinds Of Decay: A Memoir



Synopsis

A Spare and Unsparing Look at Affliction and Recovery that Heralds a Stunning New Voice The events that began in 1995 might keep happening to me as long as things can happen to me. Think of deep space, through which heavenly bodies fly forever. They fly until they change into new forms, simpler forms, with ever fewer qualities and increasingly beautiful names. There are names for things in spacetime that are nothing, for things that are less than nothing. White dwarfs, red giants, black holes, singularities. But even then, in their less-than-nothing state, they keep happening. At twenty-one, just starting to comprehend the puzzles of adulthood, Sarah Manguso was faced with another: a wildly unpredictable disease that appeared suddenly and tore through her twenties, vanishing and then returning, paralyzing her for weeks at a time, programming her first to expect nothing from life and then, furiously, to expect everything. In this captivating story, Manguso recalls her nine-year struggle: arduous blood cleansings, collapsed veins, multiple chest catheters, the deaths of friends and strangers, addiction, depression, and, worst of all for a writer, the trite metaphors that accompany prolonged illness. A book of tremendous grace and self-awareness, *The Two Kinds of Decay* transcends the very notion of what an illness story can and should be.

Book Information

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Picador; 1st edition (May 26, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0312428448

ISBN-13: 978-0312428440

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.4 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 32 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #54,764 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #50 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Immune Systems](#) #143 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Medical](#) #1805 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Memoirs](#)

Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In 1995, when Rome Prize-winning poet and fiction writer Manguso (Sister Viator) was a junior at Harvard, she suffered the first attack of a rare autoimmune disease called CIDP, which would turn her body against itself. CIDP attacks the myelin coating of the peripheral

nerves. The result is increasing numbness, followed by paralysis spreading from the extremities inward, until the sufferer can no longer control his or her breathing, and dies. In short, lyrical chapters—•the book free-associates between memories, while sticking to a rough chronological order—•Manguso recounts the harrowing indignities of her treatments, frequent relapses, descents into steroid-induced clinical depression, crucial college sexual experiences had and missed, and trips back and forth between schools, hospitals and her parents' Massachusetts home. What makes this lightning-quick book extraordinary is not just Manguso's deadpan delivery of often unthinkable details, nor her poet's struggle with the damaging metaphors of disease, but the compassion she acquires as she comes to understand her pain in relation to the pain of others: suffering, however much and whatever type, shrinks or swells to fit the shape and size of a life. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

—“Manguso has produced a remarkable, clear-eyed account that turns horror into something humane and beautiful. —• —• —• The New York Times Book Review —“Moving . . . a fiercely truthful memoir of illness. —• —• —• The Boston Globe —“Here is not a day-by-day description of this grueling time, but an impressionistic text filled with bright, poetic flashes. . . . Many sick people learn to live in the moment, but the power of Manguso's writing makes that truism revelatory. —• —• —• The Washington Post Book World —“Manguso's slender volume is written in a spare, no-nonsense style that can be chilling but makes you cheer for the author. —• —• —• New York Post —“Manguso writes this account from the far end of the illness, looking back on it from a position of physical strength, biting ferocity, and unsentimental wit. —• —• —• Bookforum —“A series of brief, elliptical vignettes composed of sentences as spare as they are unsparing . . . Manguso pushes beyond the familiar confrontation between doctor and patient to explore the linguistic confusion at the heart of the power struggle. —• —• —• Slate —“[A] stunning story . . . Manguso's deadpan tone works equally well in service of the painful and funny moments, or when the two meet. —• —• —• Time Out Chicago

Reviewers have cited examples by which they were affected. Mine: the honesty. Yes, "spare", "brutal", "direct" as others described, but what I read was simple narrative, uncloaked in additional verbiage. I don't know that writing seemingly without caution is common; in retrospect, I'm surprised she did it and got away with it. I heard anger, cynicism and sarcasm spoken not to develop a story

line but as though straight from the mouth of a friend in a hospital bed reacting to pummeling. I reveled in it.

This memoir challenges stereotypes of other illness memoirs, which usually portray the writer as heroically overcoming an illness through steadfast courage and persistence. Here, we get a more realistic look at what it is like to live day-to-day with a chronic illness, including fascinating details about the physical self-care tasks the author learned to perform. Highly recommend!

A neuropathy patient shares her memoir from the real world of the patient in words beaming with the raw honesty of unpolished realism, humor inspired by places, people and experiences while spreading realistic hope which neuropathy patients will appreciate. Whatever type of "pod" people (neuropathies assumed causes) you have been invaded with, you will identify with many of her experiences while learning to laugh at life's ironies. Sara brings great humor to her writing, humor springing out of the frustrations and successes of modern medicine and the complex skilled and unskilled humans who come to the place we live. Hope in people explodes as Sarah writes of a touching episode of the developer of a new medical machine and during his visit she shared the wonderful things the machine was doing for her and when he left the room bursting with unspoken joy over his invention, he returned giving her a banquet of flowers. I cried happiness. She ends the book with "This is suffering's lesson: pay attention. The important part might come in a form you do not recognize." If you are a neuropathy patient struggling as we all do with the experience, reaching for hope somewhere and the loss and gaining of meaning, you will love this book. LT.COL.

EUGENE B RICHARDSON, USA RETIRED NEUROPATHY PATIENT WITH CIDP AND AUTONOMIC NEUROPATHY FROM EXPOSURE TO AGENT ORANGE IN VIETNAM 1968.

Not that this author is an incompetent writer, she isn't, but I found the book to be very clinical, written without emotion, and the author herself to be somewhat unlikable. Would not recommend.

Sarah Manguso, afflicted at age twenty-one (in 1995) with a Guillain-Barre-like syndrome called CIDP, wrote *The Two Kinds of Decay* after seven years of remission from her illness. (p 2) "For seven years I tried not to remember much because there was too much to remember, and I didn't want to fall any further behind with the events in my life." Of the disease, the reader learns (p 19) "The condition may resolve spontaneously, relapse and remiss indefinitely, or progress and terminate in death." Talk about an uncertain future. In this succinct, simply-written story of a life, Ms.

Manguso tells all: of her initial symptoms (numbness in her feet); treatment (and mis) including hours spent undergoing apheresis (p 10) "the process of separating blood into its components" and the painful procedure of having a permanent line surgically implanted in her chest (the apparatus shown on the cover); interactions with hospital staff, friends, family and complete strangers; the effects of the various treatments on her body; and just plain living with a rare, rotten, debilitating condition. Of a doctor, who tries to quantify her high level of suffering, she writes (p 83, 84) "he didn't understand yet that suffering, however much and whatever type, shrinks or swells to fit the size and shape of a life." Near the end of the book she shares (p 171) "Having spent my twenties expecting to die, I turned thirty and arrived in the afterlife with nothing left to do." She's done a lot since then, notably: running, writing, living and loving. She ends with a line explaining the title (I won't spoil it) and shares what she learned from years of agony, (p 183) "This is suffering's lesson: pay attention." The nine sentences that follow are equally excellent. Also good: *Lucky Man* by Michael J. Fox, *Mountain Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder and *There is No Me Without You* by Melissa Fay Greene.

Amazing memoir. There were several tough medical scenarios to read thru, but the reader braves them because the writer did. One can only admire the courage and strength it took to live with her condition, then marvel at the skill it takes to relive all of that in writing.

This is an unsentimental and unapologetic memoir of illness. The poetry here left me breathless. The disease Manguso describes is a terrible one, but she weathers it gracefully. The time line is not a linear one - events in the book take place as if they are just foggy memories and not a plotted story - a realistic and satisfying take on the memoir narrative. Every word is carefully placed, like an IV or a scalpel. Manguso is a surgeon-poet, wasting nothing. Very precise, very beautiful, very painful. I've read this book twice now. It was recommended to me by a stranger at a party when I revealed my own recent diagnosis of kidney failure and an autoimmune disease. The book makes me feel hopeful - if she could do it, I can do it. It makes me feel courageous. It offers solidarity in the way few others can - without pity, without tears, without fear. And yet, the book makes me cry. The story of an illness could be trite. Manguso avoids cliché and does not tell us she has learned to be a better person, that she has found God, or even that she is bitter. She tells us simply that illness forces one to live in and for the moment. While she doesn't herald this epiphany as a triumph, I certainly do.

This book was very quick read, but yet was very powerful. What she chooses to include in her memoir was an interesting way of discussing her experiences with disease. She does not have self-pity; that is inspiring.

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