

# The Young Ones

## November 2006 Newsletter

... [extract of review from this newsletter]

### *Armed with Chocolate Frogs: Living with Advanced Breast Cancer*

In our August newsletter we reviewed *Heartsongs in the Key of C: Women Writing About Early Breast Cancer*, a collection of creative writing from women from rural Victoria. That writing project triggered a second, this time women with advanced breast cancer from around Australia 'attended' writing workshops by teleconference. The book from that writing project *Armed with Chocolate Frogs: Living with Advanced Breast Cancer* has just been published. It was launched at BreaCan on 30 November. Tess Moloney, the book's publisher, writes about why and gives us an overview of its contents.

I was 37 when I was diagnosed with early breast cancer, and 10 years on, the major ongoing impact is the continuing loss of women I know. I published *Armed with Chocolate Frogs* because when I first saw the manuscript I thought it was a stunning, gut-wrenching collection of writing, because I wanted to be part of breaking the silence around advanced breast cancer, and in acknowledgement of six friends who I have lost.

The collection takes its names from Lee-anne Hazeldene's humorous and deceptively simple piece 'The Chocolate Frogs'. Lee-anne observes her doctor's practice of giving chocolate frogs to encourage and reward good service from other medical services and health professionals. By adopting this practice, Lee-anne quickly cottons on to the currency – chocolate frogs – in her new environment. It is an example of what I have seen many women faced with cancer do – learn fast, come up to speed and arm themselves with their newly acquired knowledge and use it to their advantage.

*Armed with Chocolate Frogs* is an eclectic mix of short pieces – prose and poetry – from 20 women, each of whom has advanced breast cancer. With a chapter a piece and bio notes at the end, it's possible to get a sense of the writer and her issues and approach to her illness. A wide variety of situations, emotions and responses are covered. There's often immediacy in the writing. Every reader will have her own favourite pieces, those that echo, jolt, remind, persuade, inform, amuse. Here's a selection of mine that also serve to demonstrate the range in the collection.

In 'Before BC' Veronica Macaulay-Cross writes about conflict with her daughter and her wish to be alive to see her grow up. It begins:

*"You're a loser," yells my sixteen-year-old daughter. 'Just shut up!'*

*I feel the knife twist and turn in my heart, which shelters my reconstructed breast. (This breast sits up, firm but nippleless, while the other droops, soft and warm.)*

*'How can you say that to me, after all I have been through?' I yell through her closed door.*

*'Oh, you've been talking about dying for six years!' she shouts ..."*

'Hair raising' by Mary MacGregor is a classic tale of hair loss, wig shopping and regrowth that lots of us will identify with.

"What!...Bald? I have just spent \$150 on a colour and cut and you are telling me that I am going to lose it all in a month?"

Browyn Taylor's 'Lemon butter' is about the pleasure on being home from hospital and undertaking a domestic task.

Judy Shepherdson's 'April Fool's Day' is about her decision on her five-year anniversary of diagnosis to get a tattoo and, upon finding out why, the tattoo's artist's offer to give her a free tatoo on her 10-year anniversary.

Sometimes the title of a piece conveys a great deal as with Mary Dewhurst's 'This is what I want to tell him'.

Anne Pennington in 'Not afraid of dying', Carolyn Johnson in 'Undone' and Maria Water in 'The challenge' deal directly and honestly with their life-limiting disease.

Lesley Wilder's 'The envelope' is totally gripping as she sits in the car and sneaks a look at her test results while her husband is collecting the takeaway.

In 'In the bones' Jenny Morrison conveys her shock that she didn't know that breast cancer could travel to her bones.

In 'Little fish' Jenny Muller is initially fearful of her stepson's response to the death of his goldfish because of his exposure to her own illness and his loss of his mother from breast cancer some years earlier.

In 'Playboy centrefold' Pat Mathew's gives a rundown on her numerous scars and figures she has left her run too late.

Julie Pallot's 'In the unit' is her observation of a new patient's initial anxiety and process of settling into the routine and rhythm of a chemo ward.

Having read and reflected on every piece a few times as we prepared the collection for publication, I admit that each piece is really a favourite.

Women with advanced breast cancer repeatedly give the feedback that they want to hear from and about other women with advanced breast cancer. *Armed with Chocolate Frogs* catalogues lots of different experiences, some funny, some sad, and conveys a strong sense of the women writing. Not all the writers survived to see its publication but we can still listen to their words and learn from them.

It will find many audiences: women with advanced; their family and friends; women with early breast cancer; anyone interesting in reading about personal responses to serious illness. It can be ordered through bookshops or directly from Kate Carey Productions: (03) 9370 6497; [katecarey@overthefencepress.com.au](mailto:katecarey@overthefencepress.com.au) or online at [www.overthefencepress.com.au/katecarey](http://www.overthefencepress.com.au/katecarey). RRP \$24.95 ISBN: 0 9775529 1 8.

Tess Moloney