



WALKING IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH

• WORDS ROISIN DWYER • PHOTO ANNA KERSLAKE •

A beloved teacher in north Dublin, **MARY McCARTHY** was diagnosed with terminal cancer having already written a novel about that very subject. In a moving interview she explains how she has learned to see the positive in a bleak situation.



“Originally the doctor said I had about 18 to 24 months but after the latest scan he said I'm doing so well that it might be longer. I told him I couldn't last longer as I'd already written about it in the *Independent*, I have to die!” laughs Mary McCarthy.

Hot Press is seated with the author in her Glasnevin home across the road from the school in which she taught English and French for 34 years. Her attitude to her diagnosis of terminal cancer in March this year has unnerved many, who attribute her cheery disposition to some sort of denial. In reality, Mary's acceptance is rooted in her having dealt with her illness in advance of the medical pronouncement. In a prototypical case of the truth being stranger than fiction, eight years ago she began a book (her fifth) about a woman who receives a similar prognosis.

“My oncologist is convinced I am so good because I went through all the stages with my character Emer while I was writing the book. I think that is very true,” explains Mary. “Now having said that I am pretty pragmatic anyway!”

Despite this being explained to consecutive interviewers, the majority are still bewildered by her upbeat manner. As someone who has the honour of being one of her former English pupils, I am not at all surprised at her demeanour.

Mary is one of those teachers you don't forget, I recall her classes with great fondness. She instilled a great love of her subject in all who passed through the school by provoking discussion, challenging accepted norms and encouraging independent thought with the help of Lear, Heathcliff, Macbeth, Gradgrind and a host of others she brought so vividly to life.

We chat and laugh our way through an evening

which is part interview, part catch-up. I depart over three hours later having enjoyed the few glasses of vino Mary insists I consume. It would be rude not to!

Mary's book, *After The Rain*, is not just the story of Emer's illness, but also a story of the complexities and rewards of family and friendship. Rather than being the tale of woe one might expect, the work is strikingly uplifting and, as was her intent, is in essence a celebration of life.

“I started writing in 2004 after my brother Niall died of cancer,” she explains. “We were very alike. He rang me the day he found out to tell me he had secondary cancer and he said, ‘Mary I'm fucked.’ I replied, ‘Well at least you won't get Alzheimer's.’ He said, ‘You said exactly the right thing!’”

In writing the book, Mary dealt with the loss of her brother, and its pages have provided solace for many others who have had similar experiences.

“I met a girl, a former pupil, in the post office, who told me her father had died of cancer,” says Mary. “She said she had not accepted it until she read the book and now she felt very peaceful. I said, can you give me that for a quote?! That is exactly why I wrote the book. Actually I did want to call it *Shit Happens*, but I thought *After The Rain* was more evocative!”

Mary has been getting quite a bit of media attention since her diagnosis came to light. Her former college friend, Gabriel Byrne, has also been very supportive and has been recommending the author to Oprah amongst others. Mary herself maintains an active Facebook page where she updates friends and fans on her activities. She has also started a page Facebook Against Bullies, a subject she feels very passionate about.

“I have just known so many lovely people that have been bullied,” she notes. “It's rampant, not just in schools in the workplace too. As I'm not teaching anymore I wanted to do one more thing before I pop my clogs. It's to give people the opportunity to post and speak out about the subject.”

“The nicest part about this illness is that I realise the amount of fantastic people I have in my life,” she adds. “I always thought I would like to have a sudden heart attack but I'm really glad now because it does give you quality time with people and you can say things that you mightn't have said. I'm not wasting time on stupid things. The way I'm living now is the way we should live all of the time.”

After The Rain is out now through Poolbeg. Mary's page on bullying, Facebook Against Bullying, is on Facebook.