

A Series of Catastrophes & Miracles



A True Story of Love,
Science, and Cancer

MARY ELIZABETH WILLIAMS

A new day, a new account of someone facing down a frightening illness. Wry sense of humor? Check. Smackdowns of idiots who talk about "the gift of cancer" or wonder what you might have done wrong to "deserve" skin cancer? (Like someone asking, "Did you tan?") Check! Tears? Laughter? Insight into the effect on both the person and their circle of family and friends? Check, check and check. That blase feeling was perhaps my attitude when approaching this memoir of illness. But like the best such memoirs before it, author Mary Elizabeth Williams makes the eternal story of illness and staring death in the face feel fresh and new yet again because it's specific, well written and engrossing. She begins with a spoiler alert (she lives! and wrote a book!) and yet there are twists and turns aplenty because illness and death pay visits to family and friends and neighbors with numbing regularity. Most fascinating here is the fact that Williams -- through dumb luck -- was part of groundbreaking immunotherapy that had sensational, game-changing results. She was lucky to be in it and we are lucky someone on the inside has written about the experience of being in a clinical trial in such a compelling style. Now I know she'd kick my ass if I called her a cancer survivor (you don't "survive" cancer because in most cases there's always the chance it will recur), so um I'll just shut up and say she wrote a good book. -- Michael Giltz