

Foreword

Alexandra Minna Stern, Ph.D.

Howard Markel, M.D., Ph.D.

In the final pages of this book Kathy Conway writes, “During my illness I searched for narratives that would structure my experience and offer me a vision of the future in which breast cancer would end.” *Ordinary Life* is a testament to this search: a poignant memoir that nevertheless pushes against the limits of the illness narrative genre. While telling the emotional and painful story of her cancer diagnosis and treatment for first-stage breast cancer, Conway raises profound questions about what stories illness narratives can convey, whether they are transformative for the author or reader, and the expressive capacity of language.

Ordinary Life is an exquisitely written book that leads the reader through Conway’s encounters and relationships with nurses, doctors, and the larger medical system. Conway does not hesitate to share intimate dimensions of her interior life—her marriage, children, friends, family, apartment, and psychoanalytic practice. But under her seemingly unadorned and candid description of the everyday, Conway captures a depth of experience that is palpable and at times quite raw. Her message is amplified by the devastating diagnosis, successful treatment, and eventual forgetting of an earlier cancer, Hodgkin’s disease, at the age of twenty-six.

When it was first published a decade ago, *Ordinary Life* was well received for these very reasons. Critics found Conway’s unconventional approach to the cancer memoir and her refusal to tell a story of inevitable personal growth or human triumph over adversity to be refreshing. For many readers and for other cancer patients, her book

provided relief. Not everyone's cancer story had to fit the peculiarly American story line of positive self-regeneration. Instead, in retrospect, cancer could be the agonizing, uncomfortable, and frightening experience that it had been. One of the truly original literary moves of *Ordinary Life* is that, even as Conway rejects well-trod autobiographical templates in which to fit her narrative, she struggles out loud to make her story part of an integrated narrative.

Ordinary Life remains a subtle and powerful counter-memoir that we are delighted to reissue and include in our book series Conversations in Medicine and Society. With about eight published titles, our series is bringing diverse books—from medical history, illness memoirs, and physician's stories to health policy monographs—to a broad audience. *Ordinary Life* contributes to this list by offering a unique and valuable perspective on living through cancer. One of the reasons we were so eager to reissue *Ordinary Life* is that it is a memoir replete with conversations. By creating her own storytelling style, Conway engages in soft-spoken yet fierce conversation with some cancer memoirists. At the same time, *Ordinary Life* demonstrates the importance of conversation, be it with a spouse, friend, child, physician, or stranger, in the navigation of cancer treatment. Finally, not one to shy away from frank self-reflection, Conway asks a great deal of herself in this memoir, searching for an original set of coordinates that she can recognize as authentic to her experience.

Ordinary Life prompts readers to reflect on the stories they tell about themselves when they are ill or suffering from a physical malady. We hope you read this moving memoir about cancer in the inquisitive and determined spirit in which it was written.