

This book is beautiful. It's raw, it's honest, but most of all—it's inspiring. Stacy shares the truth behind her journey, and I feel incredibly humbled that she found comfort in my words, as much as I have now found comfort in hers. This book connects us all. It's not only for those that have been through breast cancer but for anyone that just needs a reminder that they are braver than they think ... and Stacy shows us exactly that. A truly amazing read.

—*Sally Obermeyer, Australian television host*

Breastless, by Stacy Nottle, witnesses the potency of taking a life-threatening experience, in this case, breast cancer, and harnessing it as a springboard into psychological growth. In particular, it reveals how powerful the use of reflective writing is in making sense of one's life leading to the construction of a life-affirming narrative. There are many aspects in this beautifully written book that will speak to diverse readers including those who have been to boarding school.

—*Christine Jack, PhD, educational historian
(Charles Sturt University), author of Recovering Boarding School
Trauma Narratives: Christopher Robin Milne as a psychological
companion on the journey to healing (Routledge 2020)*

I ADORED this book. I was with Stacy through every frightening, funny, reflective, and powerful step of her journey; at the same time, I was on my own journey of self-reflection and discovery. This is a wonderful tool for people who are going through or have been through cancer but regardless of a person's circumstances, I think it is a great read for just about anyone.

—*Sue Dymond, author, CEO/Founder of iDareU (a charity
supporting people with a disability and their families)*



Raw Organic Emotions—ROE—that's how I see this book. I've cried, done a WTF, smiled, and LOLed. You brave woman for putting all that has been, is, and will be for you, down in words. How honoured I feel.

—*Hayley O'Dempsey, a fellow breast cancer survivor*

Stacy and I have a great deal in common, having shared the boarding school experience, and I found this part of her novel very affirming and, at times, quite painful. Reading Stacy's novel was a little like swimming in a lake or a dam ... at times, warm and welcoming, so that I could lie back and float away, sharing the joy of a long walk in nature, listening to the birds in the trees; then, sharp and cold, like hitting a cold patch which brings you sharply back to reality. I am fortunate that I have not shared her experience with breast cancer but am so grateful for her honesty. It helps us grasp the complexities of emotions, as many of our friends and families navigate this path in their individual way. Stacy's voice comes through strong and clear, as she realises that an essential part of her road to recovery is learning to love herself.

—*Thérèse Eddy, Founder of Open to Success and Higher Education Coach*

Breastless captures you from the 'punning' title and again from the introduction onwards. This book is more than just an insightful overview of a cancer survivor's journeys in her physical, emotional, and mental realms. It explores the role of our basic needs (survival, freedom, power over others, belonging, and fun.) It investigates how Stacy can become OK with being herself and learn how to exert control over 'the committee in her head'. It allows us to learn how not to treat cancer patients (or indeed anyone) through observing what she has experienced. And more.

To pick up on all its nuances, Breastless needs to be reread several times. Beautifully written, in an objective style that neither drowns us





in pain, or pity, nor avoids the hard stuff. Clever use of metaphors, analogies, song titles, and dark humour. Vivid snapshots of parts of her life significant to her growth in understanding. Stacy's words bring understanding and respect for her and her story. We quickly realise what a big life she continues to live. A very rewarding read.

—*Meg Phoenix*

I LOVED *Breastless*. It is addictive, like chocolate, and I read it in two days. Now I want to go back and read it more slowly and savour every minute. I think I might have purposely 'deleted' my own experience of having cancer because I kept reading bits that made me go 'oh yeahhhh, I remember that'. Stacy's honesty is a real treasure. She not only gave us the story of this time in her life but her backstory as well so that by the end of the book, I felt I knew and cared about her. This is what makes it such an easy but fascinating read. And then, the quotes added another element.

The chapters about her experiences at boarding school were amazing. Stacy would have terrified me back then, so it's weird that I just loved her in the book. How did she manage to be so brave? I also loved how she talks about the 'committee in her head'; which got me thinking about my own 'committee'. All day, I have been listening to them and laughing.

—*Loma Tonnochy*

Breastless allows you to step inside the head of a breast cancer patient and go along for the ride. Stacy searches for the answers of how & why and takes you on her journey of self-discovery. A great insight into the cancer world & well worth the read.

—*Kate Gale, author, speaker, and breast cancer survivor*



I LOVED this book. As a fellow cancer patient, there are so many parts of Stacy's story that I can relate to. I had some teary moments while reading about and feeling what Stacy has been going through. Her incredibly perceptive self-awareness has made me stop and rethink some of my past 'stories'... her 'Brain Committee' is a real thing that so many of us can understand, along with the idea that 'if you go around pretending.... we'll know you're faking it' which touches very close to home for me. I congratulate Stacy on her ability to 'bare' herself to the world, in such a truly open and thoughtful way.

—*Leanne Penberthy, teacher and cancer patient*

BREASTLESS

STACY NOTTLE

Breastless

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Dedication

To the three people who stayed close to me while I was in that awful fog—my husband, Richard, my mum, Fay, and my friend, Judy. You held the lantern and helped me find my way back.



Disclaimer

This book is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians. The reader should regularly consult a qualified medical doctor in matters relating to their health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

This book is intended as an overview of my journey with cancer. The approaches, treatment, and techniques were relevant for my situation, and my thoughts and opinion.

Readers may find some material could cause distress.

Please note that some names have been changed to protect personal privacy.



Foreword

I slipped into the darkened room to find the patient I was looking for. Stacy was lying quietly on the bed contemplating all that had happened and all that was yet to come. Her breast cancer diagnosis had rattled her in ways she was yet to come to terms with.

As the breast care nurse, I had come to see her to offer guidance and support. Support that this very capable, strong, and independent woman didn't even realise that she needed.

'I am okay,' she said to me, almost dismissively, in a way that said there were more important things for me to be doing.

So, I sat down and gently talked to her about what had led her to being in the bed in front of me. We ended up talking for some time, and each day she was in the hospital, I would visit, and we would talk.

Stacy struck me as a gentle, openly honest, incredibly intelligent, and genuine person. This story about her breast cancer experience reflects these strengths. You will laugh and you might cry, but you will see how a cancer diagnosis can bring out interesting responses from the most surprising places.

It has been a privilege and a pleasure to be a part of Stacy's breast cancer experience. Enjoy the book!

Bronwyn King

Specialist Breast Care Nurse



Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who got into the water and helped lift the life raft that kept me afloat when I could no longer swim for myself—family, friends, colleagues, communities, medical workers, researchers, charities, acquaintances, strangers. It was a cast of thousands.

Thanks to my doctors who kindly consented to my using their names in this book.

Thanks to my beta readers—Judy Rafferty, Fay Cooney, Ellie O’Connell, Melissa Huestis, Jennifer Fordyce, and Bronwyn King—who read the rough draft of *Breastless* and convinced me it was worth publishing.

Thanks to Judy Rafferty for taking the cover photo. (The photo was taken after my first two rounds of chemotherapy when I still had a few eyebrows.)

Thanks to the entire team at Ocean Reeve Publishing. When I finally made the hard decision to publish *Breastless*, I went in search of the right publisher for the job. Because of the personal nature of the book, and because I intend to publish more books in the future, I wanted to be fully involved in the process and learn as much as I could. When Ocean offered assisted independent publishing, a hybrid between trade publishing and self-publishing, it seemed like a perfect compromise. Thanks to Ocean for delivering on his promise to keep this project as joyful and

stress-free as possible. Thank you to my publishing manager, Marisa Parker. It has been an absolute joy working alongside you to ensure I ended up with a product I am proud of. Thanks to Joshua Clifton, my marketing mentor and guru, who has guided me so adeptly through the baffling world of marketing and social media. To the entire team of superheroes at Ocean Reeve Publishing, thank you. You are an inspirational team.

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About the Author

In no particular order, here is a list of some of the things Stacy loves:

- Books and stories. Inspiring quotes. Words.
- Belonging. Family. Friends.
- She finds people interesting.
- Walking. Walking and talking. Long rambles across magical landscapes. Maps.
- Beauty, symmetry, and patterns in nature. Mathematics. Design. Trees.
- Her imagination—so she can leave the mundane world whenever she chooses.
- Gorgeous creations. Gorgeous creatures.
- Writing. Space. Dogs. Laughter. Winter mornings. Good ideas. Adventures. Dessert.


Stacy grew up on a station in western Queensland where, from an early age, she paid attention to her arid landscape where the changing seasons meant so much more than a change of clothing. At age six, she went away to boarding school in Cunnamulla, and later to Toowoomba, where she discovered the world of people—complex, confusing, intriguing, surprising people—and she began to pay attention to what they did and how they interacted. She studied science at university and has worked as a

shearers' cook, waitress, scientific research assistant, high school mathematics and science teacher, and careers counsellor in an all-boys boarding school. For thirty years, Stacy has also participated in the sport of orienteering, as a competitor and a coach.

She is a member of the Queensland Writers Centre and is active in the Queensland writing community attending workshops, writers' groups, and festivals, which have connected her with mentors and allies that have helped her along the way. A cancer diagnosis in late 2015 gave her the impetus to start doing something with her writing. Her debut novel, *After the Flood*, was published in 2019 by Black Phoenix Publishing Collective. *Breastless* is her second book.

Stacy is married to Richard, has three grown children—Bridget, Glennie, and Jack—plus Snorkel, Envy, and Redbird (the horses), Theo (the dog), and Orla (the cat).

Contact the author:

 www.stacynottleauthor.com

 @StacyNottleauthor

Introduction

I'm a breast cancer survivor. Do you know what that means? Are you a breast cancer survivor like me? Or a survivor of some other kind? Perhaps you are in the middle of treatment and not sure if you will live or die. Perhaps you know someone else who is fighting the good fight—a loved one, a friend, a colleague. You might have seen us breast cancer survivors in the media; the sea of pink, women supporting women. Did you hear how beautiful, amazing, strong, and brave we are?

It's the truth: we are beautiful, amazing, strong, and brave. Not everyone would agree, but it doesn't matter. They're entitled to their opinion. What matters is that we believe it. I certainly didn't back when I was starting out on my breast cancer survival journey. I didn't think positively about myself at all, and I was terrified of all the clichés.

When I found out I had breast cancer, my whole world changed. Outwardly I appeared to be much the same person, but inwardly the shock of my diagnosis and subsequent treatment completely undid me. I was no longer the sane, busy professional who tried hard to please the people around her, nor did I want to be. As my identity crumbled, I went looking for new answers to old questions—Who am I? What do I want from my life? I took a long, hard look at my baggage.



I decided to write this memoir after presenting at a breast cancer conference in October 2017. My presentation was titled ‘We lose ourselves in books; we find ourselves there too’, and the response to my words was remarkable. All around, people were nodding and smiling, and sometimes laughing. They were connecting with me. They were sharing in my experiences. Every person who listened to my talk that day had their own unique story, which is most likely very different from my own, yet we had this common understanding that was very powerful. It was comforting to know we weren’t alone in our struggles, that someone else understood.

In *Breastless*, I share my breast cancer story as honestly (and brutally) as I can in the hope that you’ll be able to nod along and say, ‘Me too’, ‘I understand’, ‘That’s how I felt.’ While I describe the physical aspects of my treatment, my primary emphasis is on what was happening inside my head—what were my thoughts and emotions as I travelled that dark road?

As the title of my conference talk suggests, I lost myself in the experience of cancer and found myself there too. I learned how to live well in spite of my difficult circumstances, and I learned how to have a lovely, sustaining relationship with the most important person in my life—myself.

This is not a “how-to” book. It is not my wish to instruct you on what to do if you find yourself in a similar situation. Your experience will be different from mine and you’ll need to find your own way. I have, however, described some of the things that were helpful for me, and maybe you will find them helpful too. I’ve also included a booklist at the end with titles of the books I mention.

I named the book *Breastless* because ... I have no boobs. It consists of a collection of stories, reflections from my past, and





quotes—lots and lots of quotes. The book is more sectionalised and less free-flowing than most books; it is the kind of book you can pick up and put down according to your state of mind. I have used this kind of structure because this is how I read when I was in the middle of my active treatment, in small doses. I would read a bit, then allow my mind to drift away and ponder on what I had read. I hope you find the quotes pertinent, poignant, uplifting, and insightful. Perhaps some of them will even help guide you on your own journey.

Each of the ten chapters is named after a piece of music. Whenever I want to reflect on my journey or remember some of the things I have learned, the music takes me there.

Many great people who mean a lot to me are not mentioned in the story. This is not because I do not love them dearly but because their connection to me did not fit with the theme of each chapter. Where I deemed it necessary to avoid hurting someone, I have used a pseudonym instead of the person's real name. Dr Brendan Baragry, Dr Eric Donaldson, Dr Paul Vasey, Dr Winnie Wong, and Dr Peter Schindler are the names of real doctors. Each has generously consented to me using their name in this book. I am not a medical expert and I do not claim to give a medically accurate account of everything that was said or done to me. I can only record what I remember, from my perspective. With other health care professionals such as the breast care nurses, I have used only first names. My friend Prue's husband, Tim, also kindly consented to me using her real name and sharing my connection with her. Sadly, she is not alive to give her own consent.

Whether you have been given a cancer diagnosis, are supporting someone who has, or have picked up this book for some other reason, you are welcome here. I hope you enjoy reading my story.





Baggage

'Do you have any idea what led to you getting cancer?' I asked a friend.

'I was completely and utterly overwhelmed with grief,' she replied.

Her grief came first. Then her cancer.

It's a common tale. Our baggage precedes our cancer.

After my cancer diagnosis, I figured out that in order to give myself the best chance of surviving, I needed to take a long, hard, uncomfortable look at my baggage. Here is some of the baggage I share in "Breastless".

I was ...

Two when I thought I was going down in water,
Five when I pushed a boy off a slippery slide,
Six when I was forced to eat fish paste sandwiches,
And seven when I refused to apologise.

Eight when I got hair bobbles,
Ten when I guessed the number of jellybeans in the jar,
Eleven when my father showed me the meaning of friendship,
And twelve when I rode a wild brumby.

Thirteen when I learned how to inhale smoke without
coughing,
Fourteen when I hung out with the cool group,
Fifteen when I called a nun a ‘fucking bitch’,
And eighteen when I got worried about having
a flat chest and big feet.

Twenty-five when a young man embarrassed me in a shoe shop,
Twenty-seven when I was given a patchwork quilt,
Twenty-eight when I got cracked nipples,
And thirty when I took a self-defence class.

Thirty-eight when a teenage girl told me she’d been raped by her
father,
Forty-five when I noticed that my sister’s voice was changing,
Forty-six when I took my sister to a faith healer,
And forty-seven when I chose to have a big life.

Forty-nine when I cried for my sister,
Fifty-four when I walked the Larapinta Trail,
And went to “Cuspers” for the first time,
And found a thickening in my left breast ...

This is my story.



1

Pachelbel's Canon

By German Baroque composer, Johann Pachelbel

Going Down in Water

*'Begin at the beginning,' the King said, very gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.'*¹

—Lewis Carroll

I'm not sure if this is a true memory because I was only two at the time. I was sick, and Mum took me on an aeroplane to Brisbane to see a doctor who specialised in allergies.

'When you see the wheels come down,' Mum said, 'you'll know we're going to land.'

I was sitting on her lap, forehead pressed against the aeroplane window, and far below I could see tiny trees and buildings and roads and cars. Then ... *wow* ... *OH, WOW!* ... we were flying off the land and over this extraordinary expanse of water. I could never have imagined so much water. It was incredible.

And then the wheels came down!

'Landing in water!' I began to shout. 'Landing in water!'

After a moment's confusion, Mum started laughing at me and the other people on the plane began to laugh at me too. Unlike me, they all knew the flight path into Brisbane Airport took us over Moreton Bay.

What's a two-year-old to think when adults are laughing at her?

I hadn't intended to be funny.

The Circus Begins

The circus arrives without warning.

No announcements precede it.

It is simply there, when yesterday it was not.²

—Erin Morgenstern

I'm not sure what drew my attention to the thickened tissue in my left breast—a slight itch, perhaps? Or intuition? My touch was not more than a soft brushing of fingers over skin, but I immediately suspected something wasn't right. There! Above and to the left of the areola. I prodded more deeply into the breast tissue and pulled my fingers back towards the nipple. I pressed my fingers into my armpit and dragged them towards the middle of my chest. It felt corded, like tightly wound guitar strings. Repeating the process on the right side, my breast tissue rebounded like a trampoline mat.

I dropped my feet onto cool floorboards, pulled my nightie over my head, and studied myself in the mirror. My breasts looked normal—but when I raised my arms, I could see my left nipple was puckered, as though someone had put a tiny stitch into the side of it.

I got ready for work.

Since 2006, I have worked as a teacher and career counsellor in a large, all-boys boarding school, and am very grateful to belong to this wonderful community. I love that I have a job where I get to hear the stories and worries, aspirations, and dreams of my students, and I've always tried my best to guide and support them. When a parent places their child into the care of a teacher and a school, they put incredible trust in what we do, and I work hard to honour that trust. I always try to act with kindness and professionalism. I try to go above and beyond and not let anyone down. I guess you could say that when it comes to my job, I take myself pretty seriously. I take the lives of my students seriously.

When I noticed the “thing” with my breast, it was early November 2015, and I was busy taking myself seriously. I tried to pretend there wasn't really a “thing”. I went to work each day and kept myself busy ticking off all the important items on my to-do list. It wasn't easy. You see, these troublesome voices started taking up space inside my head and their constant jabbering made it hard to concentrate. *Take time off work and go see your doctor,* they said. *Calm down and stop panicking. It's probably nothing. What if it's not nothing? What if it's serious? It could be really serious. You could die. Early detection, early prevention. You're too busy to deal with something like this right now.* The voices were difficult to ignore.

By Monday 23 November, the older boys had finished school and gone off to celebrate, the younger boys were winding down for the year, and I'd run out of excuses. My mind was prickly with fear. I phoned for a doctor's appointment. My usual GP wasn't available, but a Dr Baragry could see me at 5 pm that afternoon.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked as I walked into the room.

‘Umm ... I think I've got a lump in my breast,’ I said, although it wasn't really a lump. More a thickening.

After a quick examination, he agreed that my left breast did, indeed, appear abnormal. He phoned Queensland X-Ray to arrange a biopsy, but the next available appointment wasn't for six weeks. I was alarmed and relieved to hear Dr Baragry tell them the matter was urgent and ask if they could fit me in sooner. I didn't think I could cope with six more weeks of not knowing. The next day, someone from Queensland X-Ray called to say they had an earlier appointment at their Russell Street Centre.

When I arrived for the biopsy, I was upbeat and jovial—no point jumping to conclusions, right? The staff at Queensland X-Ray were polite and professional but I'm sure they saw right through my swagger. I was scared and they knew it.

The mammogram technician kept up a cheery chatter while she moved me around and pancaked my breasts between clear plastic plates on a mammogram machine.

'I had a mammogram a year ago,' I told her. 'Everything was fine.'

Next, I was taken to a darkened room and asked to lie on a narrow bed for an ultrasound.

'Could I please have an extra pillow?' I asked.

The sonographer had a reserved approach and wasn't inclined to chat. She tucked the extra pillow under my head without comment, then sat on a stool at my shoulder.

'I'll have a look first,' she said. 'Then I'll get you to show me where you think the lump is.'

She put a small amount of gel onto my skin and began pressing something called a transducer against my breast whilst examining images on a screen. Then she left the room before I got a chance to show her where I thought the lump was.

Next, a man entered and introduced himself as a radiologist. He explained that while Dr Baragry had requested a fine needle

biopsy, he now felt a core biopsy would be more appropriate because it would provide more breast tissue.

‘Do you consent?’

‘Umm. Yes. Okay.’

It wasn’t okay. I wasn’t ready for a change of plan. I wanted more time; more information. Some reassurance, perhaps. But everyone seemed pressed for time and I was already jumping the queue by six weeks.

He injected a local anaesthetic into my breast, and after a few minutes, was ready to begin the biopsy. Once again, the sonographer pushed her transducer against my breast so the radiologist could see the location of the suspect tissue. I closed my eyes and rolled my head to the side. Strong pressure, a loud click ... then, a searing pain. *Abh. Fuck!* This was repeated three more times. *Ow. Ow! Ow!* I clenched my teeth and curled my toes.

‘I think I’m going to vomit,’ I said, and was quickly told to sit up, given a vomit bag and wet cloth to hold against my forehead. I concentrated on my breathing, tried to slow it down.

Once my nausea began to subside, I told the radiologist, ‘I’m sensitive to adrenaline.’

He frowned. ‘I didn’t give you adrenaline.’

‘I’m making my own.’

I spent the next two days trying to control the voices in my head. I was in constant conversation with myself, counselling myself not to jump to conclusions, not to dwell too much on it, not to worry, not to think about all the people I know who have died from cancer. To stop imagining how I wanted my funeral to be.

Friday 27 November was diagnosis day. My appointment with Dr Baragry was not until 11.45 am so I went to work at the normal time. As I walked from the carpark to my office, my

attention felt surreal—pin-point sharp. I noticed the chirping and trilling of the birds; the splendour of the trees; beyond the shade, the luminous glow of well-watered ovals. It was a beautiful day. Beautiful, but with a weird slow-motion energy. All the students had packed up and gone home for the summer and the lethargy of their absence seeped into every space. The staff had a zillion and one things to finalise and organise but struggled to find the oomph to do any of it.

At 11.20 am, I said a quick farewell to my closest colleagues, Marian and Josie, and pretended not to notice their worried frowns.

At 11.55 am, I entered Dr Baragry's room. The patient's chair was side on to the doctor's desk which meant my back was against the wall. Dr Baragry swivelled towards me.

'Bad news, I'm afraid.'

I'm Okay

Usually we walk around constantly believing ourselves.

'I'm okay,' we say. 'I'm alright.'

*But sometimes the truth arrives on you and
you can't get it off.³*

—Markus Zusak

Dr Baragry must have expected an emotional response to his words—'You have breast cancer; gongs and cymbals, please'—but I felt strangely unaffected by what he was saying as if I was a spectator to a drama that had nothing to do with me. I asked a few questions such as whether he could tell from the biopsy results if it was a primary cancer, and he answered yes, the primary cancer was breast cancer.