

ABOVE THE DIN: Diary of the HepC Wonder Drugs

AUTHOR LABAR LASKIE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THIS BOOK?

It wasn't really a book in the beginning. At first writing, it was a daily blog. I didn't want to be alone during my treatment for hepatitis C. So I wrote and posted all my experiences relating to hepC, from diagnosis in 1999 to the treatment that finally cured me in 2014. I mined each entry from a diary I'd kept for 15 years, a chronicle of events, treatments, physical activities, and miscellaneous thoughts. Writing was also a way for me to jettison the whole disease episode, draw a line under it and move on with my life. I didn't think at the time it would ever be a book. The payback for me was more immediate. I wanted friendly feedback.

Q. WHEN DID YOU WRITE THIS BOOK AND HOW LONG DID IT TAKE?

My treatment was a three-month protocol – 84 days – and I wrote/blogged for 84 days, from May 20 to August 11, 2014. After that, I put it in a drawer and forgot about it. Every once in a while, a blog reader would send a comment and I'd think about publishing it in a more permanent form. It was out on the Internet for about seven years, until just before the book publication. It got hits from all over the world. I edited it to make it more organized for the print version, but essentially it's the same. I also engaged Lona Powell to illustrate the diary, as many of the images I'd used on the blog weren't mine – they had been “borrowed” from elsewhere.

Q: HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR ILLUSTRATOR, LONA POWELL?

We met on Facebook! We both own the same tiny (they're about 10' by 10') fiberglass RV – it's called a Scamp. Lona was isolating herself in her Scamp trailer after she had been abroad at the very start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Her trip companion had been a friend (her husband had remained stateside) and she was leery of passing something contagious to her husband when she arrived home. So she stayed in her Scamp for two weeks. Lona is quite an artist and a journaler as well and every day she would draw a one-page “diary” about life in the Scamp and post it to the Facebook Scamp page. It was great stuff – witty, clever, beautiful, philosophical – everyone loved it. She actually kept her isolation journal going for an entire year.

I wondered if she'd be interested in illustrating my *Diary of the HepC Wonder Drugs*. It was the pandemic. We were all under “house arrest,” so to speak, with not much else to do. I shot her an email and she answered back in a few days and said, “Sure, why not?!” And here we are.

Q. WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

It's for other people with hepatitis C, or their families and friends, or anyone with a chronic illness – not necessarily hepC. The thought processes, personal experiences and medical dilemmas that I went through are pretty universal to anyone dealing with disease. There's also enough general interest in the book to appeal to lovers of memoir. That's a pretty wide audience in itself.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS CONT.

Q. WHY IS THIS BOOK NEEDED?

I think it's necessary for patients and consumers of medical health care in general to know that it's in their own best interests to dig deeper into whatever the illness/disease they're dealing with. I'm a believer in and user of the best treatments that Western medicine has to offer. But all too often, the first advice you get is not the best. I think the book shows, if anything, that my own persistence and perseverance served me well in the end. It isn't easy to say no to a doctor who has training and medical expertise that says "you should do such and such" and your own opinion is, maybe that's not the best way for you. It does happen sometimes.

I also think this book is needed because it treats serious subject matter in a lighthearted way. Most of the books I've read about hepC are pretty heavy stuff and hard to get through. I wanted to offer something that was helpful, informative, but also a pleasure to read. You can't say that about most medical books. People that would never pick up a technical book about hepatitis C might be more inclined to read *Above the Din* because it entertains as well as teaches.

Q. WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT YOUR READERS GET FROM ABOVE THE DIN?

I hope most of all that they come away with some hope and inspiration. Not everybody is going to run off and treat their illness with extreme sport or Chinese herbs or whatever. We're all unique and one size does not fit all. But everybody has options. Maybe my experiences will plant some ideas in people's heads, give them the courage to abandon things that just aren't working for them, inspire them to try something new. That's the best I could hope for. That and a few good laughs. Even in the darkest of times, life can be both ridiculous and hilarious.

Q. HOW DID YOU COMPILE THE MATERIALS FOR THIS BOOK?

Besides my own experiences, most of the current event materials dropped in my lap. In 2014 when the wonder drugs were just coming on the market, the news was full of stories about their cost, efficacy, clinical trials, etc. As far as the research goes, at every stage in my illness – every new test, every new term – I looked it up and educated myself. I'm just the sort of person that needs to know things, even if they're bad. I'd rather know what's going on than not.

Q. TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR LIFE NOW, AFTER HEPATITIS C.

Physically, I lead a pretty normal life. I still take a lot of vitamin C...maybe it's my security blanket. Every six months I have to have an MRI to make sure my cirrhosis isn't morphing into liver cancer. There's only a slim chance of that happening, but it's there. I also get blood work every six months just to, again, monitor the liver and make sure there are no remnants of hepC floating in my bloodstream.

I'm careful to eat well – I can't tolerate a lot of fatty foods. I also don't drink or smoke. Drinking especially would be really bad for my cirrhotic liver. But the abstinence decision was one I made for myself a long time before I knew I had liver disease... so I don't feel like I'm missing anything.

I feel I'm in good shape now that the hepC is out of my system. Like anyone else in their 70s, I have to keep moving to stay healthy. I have no limitations to speak of. When my husband and I vacation, we take extensive hikes or bike rides hundreds of miles long. I keep up, although I really hate going uphill. I guess it comes from living in flatlands for so many years. But life is good. No complaints.