

Otago Daily Times

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Ultimately life-affirming accounts of dying

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Two books dealing with real end-of-life stories are not the sob-fest you might expect.

Naturally there are poignant moments in Kate Gross' memoir *Late Fragments, Everything I Want To Tell You (About This Magnificent Life)*, written for her 5-year-old twin sons before she died from bowel cancer last Christmas Day at the age of 36.

But essentially it is a celebration of life.

Gross packed a lot into her short life, including working in a high-profile job at No 10 Downing Street for Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and later playing a leading role in the Africa Governance Initiative, a charity working to rebuild essential structures of government in Africa.

There is much wisdom in this well-written slim book and I loved the no-nonsense way Gross imparted it.

Here she is on how she wanted to be treated by visitors: "Of course you're sad that I'm dying, but I just don't need to hear you snuffle snottily that you're so devastated that I'm going to leave my children motherless. Hold it together; go cry on someone else."

How does such a young woman come to terms with her lot?

Her attitude echoed that of my late husband (who also died far too young from bowel cancer) on this: "While I don't have a choice about cancer or dying, I do have a choice with how I live with it and how I die."

It's a book I hope will be read by more than just those who might be dealing with a terminal illness in the family.

There is also a handy bibliography of works which influenced Gross if readers wanted to explore further the works of some of the authors she quotes.

Australian writer Michele Gierck's *Fraying: Mum, memory loss, the medical maze and me* deals with the end of a long life, that of her mother, a feisty 88-year-old who is fond of a



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Everything I Want
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Gierck's mother's memory is failing and the story tells how she moves from living independently into care and ultimately dies.

This might sound dull, but I found myself keen to find out what happened next as Gierck helped her mother through multiple assessments and various setbacks.

While this is an Australian story, it is probable many of the experiences, good and bad, will resonate with people here facing similar situations with elderly parents.

The relationship between the women is not always easy but the love between them shines through. Here's Gierck's description of her mother greeting her on a hospital visit: "The joy of seeing her daughter is so effusive, so genuine, that for a few moments I forget all the medical rigmarole and allow myself to be enveloped in my mother's intense delight".

A helpful information section at the end of the book includes what Gierck would have done differently and what she wouldn't change, along with conversations worth having long before you need to (about the type of care you might want and who you would like to make decisions for you etc).

• **Elsbeth McLean is an *ODT* columnist and former health reporter.**



FRAYING
Mum, memory loss,
the medical maze
and me
Michele Gierck
NewSouth Books

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