

Book report

Syd Birrell:

Ya Can't Let Cancer Ruin Your Day

The James Emails

Essence Publishing, Belleville (Canada), 2005

Syd and Pam are the parents of three lovely children: Rebecca, James and Ben, who live in Peterborough, Canada. They believe to have been extremely lucky when Pam's breast cancer was treated successfully and life could turn to normal again. But then four year old James develops strange symptoms that forces the family to see the specialists at a children's cancer centre in Toronto, where neuroblastoma (stage IV) is diagnosed. Knowing that the chances for long time survival with this kind of disease are still very low the family is happy that the child recovers quickly after the intensive treatment and seems free of disease. The blow comes 18 months later with a relapse. The therapy given is meant to control the tumor as much as possible while maintaining a high level of life quality.

And as one of the children says: just because you have cancer does not mean you stop having a good time - the family sets out to do all kinds of interesting and fun things together. They go on an overnight train ride to Montreal because they have always wanted to travel in a sleeping car. They get invited to be part of a famous TV-show for children and enjoy every bit of it. They are having a wonderful vacation at their cottage, receive a telephone call from Tom Hanks (who has also written a forward to the book), are taken to a flight simulator, take part in all kinds of events (such as James participating in a soapbox race) whenever the health situation of James allows the activity. Though the situation has become unpredictable from one day to the other, the family is trying to live life to the fullest – always including the two siblings.

Life has become a roller coaster: from treatment to time off, planning events, getting pain control, trying something new, such as experimental treatment with high hopes and disappointment. James dies a year and a half after the relapse was detected. Meanwhile the family has decided to do something for research in finding the cure for neuroblastoma and they decide to establish a foundation, with the initial fundraising the James Foundation (of which Tom Hanks is the Honorary Patron) can already grant two research scholarships.

James's father Syd writes emails – often daily - to family and friends and all who are interested in the fate of James, thus keeping all of them updated. As he says, this writing, putting events and emotions into words, has been very therapeutic for himself. He is always straight and honest about his observations and feelings and feeds it with a lot of humor. And he does not stop the email-flow after James' death as to him dealing with the grief and the remembrance is part of James' and the family's story. This book is a compilation of those emails – once in a while enriched with an answer or a commentary by one of the recipients. Though it is a very sad topic with a sad ending, the story gives a lot of hope and is a fine example of the meaning of life in the presence of death.

Gerlind Bode