

LIVING FOR TODAY

Author Mary McCarthy explains why the glass will always be half full

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Things happen to us all but from them we learn and that's what life is about: learning and living to our best abilities



I always had a strong sense of the ironic! I started my novel *After the Rain* in 2004. The main storyline concerns a woman with terminal cancer. Eight years later – March 2012 – I get the same news! I have different symptoms from my character, Emer, different medical treatment, different background and family and story but the prognosis is the same. I am going to die from this. It may

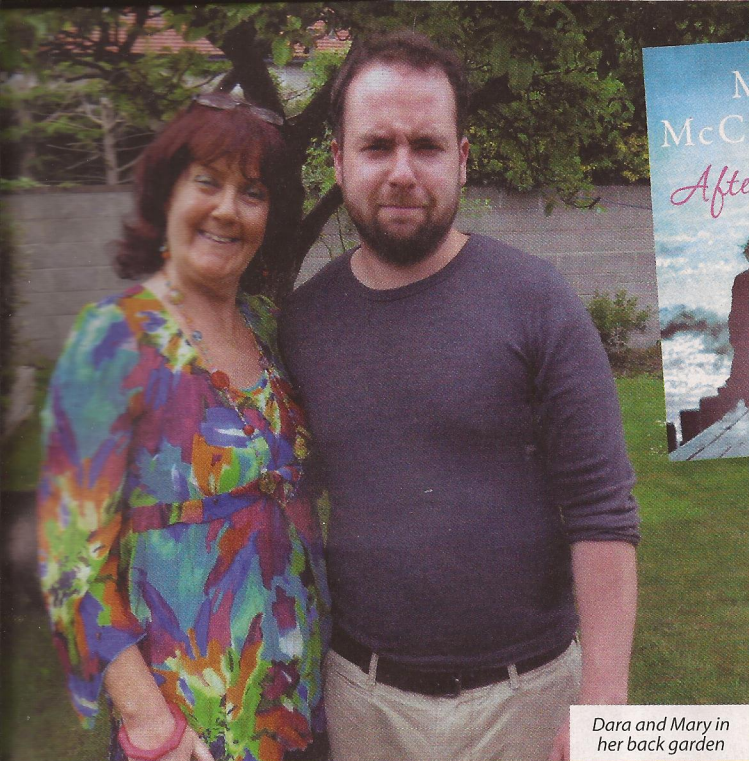
happen in about two years' time. Could be sooner or later but it's going to happen.

Does this depress or frighten or anger me? Not at all. I'm 60 now and I've had a nice life. I will not develop Alzheimer's like my Mum did. That was truly a tragedy and one I found unbearable to witness and to deal with. A lovely, funny, kind woman lost her memory, her vocabulary, her sense of time and place and her bubbly personality. For

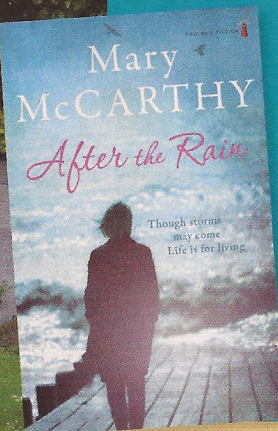
the final few years she recognised nobody. A stroke robbed her of speech and mobility but her strong heart continued to beat. She was bedridden for the last five years and never spoke again. Her illness lasted 17 years. It was a nightmare – a living death. I prayed, for my son's sake – and my own – that this wouldn't happen to me. It hasn't. Thanks goodness it never will now.

I have secondary cancer cells in the lining of my lung. They found no

primary cancer and no tumour. I have been on chemo since April. Chemo will not cure me but it will prevent fluid building up on my lung again and, hopefully it will prevent the cancer from spreading for as long as possible. My last scan showed it was contained. The next scan will be mid September. I am wiped out after the chemo sessions but I get good days as well. I am not depressed, in shock or denial. I am not angry either. Bad



Dara and Mary in her back garden



REAL LIFE

By Mary McCarthy

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strumming away and singing my favourite songs. The auld breathing isn't great these days but I still have a bash on my good days. No more barre chords for me though – just strumming simple ditties!

Read! Books can transport us to exotic locations, introduce us to wonderful characters and places, challenge our perceptions of the world, frighten the wits out of us or fill us with awe. Read my book *After the Rain*. It may alter your view of dying. It definitely altered mine!

Have a dog. They are so full of love

and loyalty. I couldn't live without my beautiful Benni and I have met some fabulous new friends because of him.

Lastly, keep your sense of humour! Everything has a funny side. My sense of humour can be a bit dark but it is funny. I have to go to the dentist next week and I want to ask him will my crowns burn in the crematorium or will there be a rattle in my urn! This dentist is used to me and my idiosyncrasies! Keep laughing, folks!

***After the Rain* (Poolbeg, €9.99) is available now**

things happen to us all but from them we learn and that's what life is about: learning and living to our best abilities.

I have met wonderful people on this particular journey and my friends and family are unbelievably kind and supportive and are there for me always. My son, Dara, is obviously very upset. He will return to live with me in a few weeks' time. He is working in Rome but had intended to come back to Dublin at the end of this year so the timing is good.

I have already lost two brothers and five friends to cancer. I guess I was just next in the queue. I am not scared of dying but I am squeamish about needles so chemo is a bit of an ordeal! My only fear would be long protracted suffering but the oncology team in the Bon Secours, Glasnevin, are truly remarkable people: kind, gentle and great listeners. They are treating me and not just the disease. I am so lucky to be with them.

I taught English and French for 34 years and loved it but I took early retirement five years ago – at least I got a few enjoyable years of freedom after a lifetime's work.

I'm sure the students got sick of listening to my "words of wisdom" but if anyone asked me now – that I'm facing my own mortality – what are the secrets to a happy life, I would have to reply that that would largely depend on attitude and priorities and would be different for everyone.

Here are some of the things that I think helped me to be happy:

Family and good friends are vital. Surround yourself with people who energise you – life's too short for toxic people.

Be kind. It costs nothing to be nice or polite either. A kind word from you can make a person's day.

Be positive [sounds like my blood

group!] but be realistic too. Know your limitations and be content with your lot. As my son always says: "It's not a competition."

Be creative – it helps your sense of self big time. Bake a cake, make jewellery, tend your garden, crochet a scarf, paint a picture – anything that makes you tick. In my case it's writing – and it's very therapeutic.

It's good to talk – it really is. You have to listen too, of course. There is nothing I enjoy more than a good chat. Brilliant. It's why I love being a woman!

Realise that time is the most precious gift we have. Enjoy your time and share it with others. I'm getting the chance to meet and have decent conversations with the people I love and have loved. I can say what I want to say before it's too late.

Listen to constructive criticism but remember anything anyone says to you is more about them than about you – it took me 40 years to realise that! No need to be arrogant just learn to trust yourself.

I love films, particularly murder mysteries. I did a diploma course in forensic psychology a few years ago. It was highly enjoyable learning all about the mind of a serial killer. Not for everybody, I guess! Anyhow, do what you enjoy.

Music is magical – it really is. I love listening to classical, blues, jazz and of course the 60s music is my favourite, particularly the Beatles! I used to play piano, violin and harp at school [the mother thought I was Shirley Temple – a daughter after four sons!] After retirement I started learning the guitar. I thoroughly enjoyed the lessons but had to give up this year because it clashed with hospital visits. My teacher (patience of a saint!) thought I was good but I knew Eric Clapton had nothing to fear. In any case I loved



Mary offers a list of how to keep happy in life