

[A Review of: “Leah Vande Berg & Nick Trujillo, Cancer and Death: A Love Story in Two Voices.”](#)

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Abstract:

A review of the book “Cancer and Death: A Love Story in Two Voices” by Leah Vande Berg and Nick Trujillo.

Keywords: Book Review | Loss | Cancer | Ethnography

Article:

This book should come with a warning label. If you recoil from the kind of writing that, as Ruth Behar (1996) put it, *breaks your heart*, this book is not for you. If you don't want what you read to fundamentally change you as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a person, this book is not for you. But, if, like me, you sometimes *need* to have your heart broken—so it can be healed, and thus become stronger than ever—then I urge you to read on.

I admit it. Whenever I receive a package in the mail that looks like a book, I am like a little kid on his birthday. I'll also admit that when I opened this package and saw the title, I was a little taken aback. “*Cancer and Death*—oh, my!” I thought, “*I'd better take a deep breath and set aside some real time before reading this one.*” I was right. In fact, I would add one more warning to my list: Be prepared for one of those “I can't put this book down” reading experiences. This book, which is really more the love story of the subtitle than a book about cancer and death, had me stuck in my favorite chair for hours.

What you will find in the pages of this masterful book is the evocation of a deep and abiding love—the kind of love that outlives us all, the kind of love we all dream of. Leah, who is dying, and Nick, who cares for his dying spouse-partner-lover, develop, in her final months, what now becomes a touching and poignant public conversation about what is often framed, in our culture, as an intensely private time.

Leah Vande Berg and Nick Trujillo, faced (should I say slapped in the face?) with Leah's diagnosis of stage four ovarian cancer in the middle of her prime, do exactly what I can only

hope I would have the courage to do under such tragic circumstances. Of course, every day throughout their ordeal, they reaffirm their deep and abiding love for one another. And they draw upon the support of their significant others as they face Leah's illness and impending death. But they also decide to write a book about the experience. Not only that, they decide to share the journey with friends, colleagues, families, and students. Now, *that* is true courage in the face of disaster.

The book begins by setting a context for the story. First, they quickly tell of the diagnosis. Then, they return, as the ancients so often did in weaving the great myths, to the stories of their origins, bringing the reader into their lives in a very personal way from the very beginning. They instinctively know that, if we are going to follow them on what appears to be a “dark” journey, we need to know them; we need to *identify* with them. What unfolds is an engaging narrative about two young people who grow up to be academics, and whose paths eventually come together. They fall in love, and decide to spend the rest of their lives together. Little did they know that the narrative trajectory they had hoped for would be cut tragically short.

It will come as no surprise to those who have read their previous work—the work of master scholars and storytellers—that the book is a powerful read. What may surprise you is how they are able to seamlessly weave together not only their two voices but the voices of many others—students, friends, colleagues—into a gripping narrative that speaks deep into your heart long after you have put it down. We are accustomed, as readers, to reading texts that feature a single authorial voice. But Leah and Nick did not settle for single authorship, I think because this is so clearly not a “solo” journey. They author a *dialogic* text, in the best sense of that word.

Along the way, through the ups and downs, through horrible trials, they work hard, as you might imagine, to maintain the fortitude, faith, grace, and passion necessary to walk the long and treacherous road of suffering and redemption. In the end, Leah dies. In the end, this is a book about the complexities of human life—love and loss, hope and despair, joy and sorrow. In the end, love, hope, and joy win out. Again, I warn you: If you choose to read this book, you will be changed. If you are like me, *that* will make you want to share the experience of reading (and talking about) this book with your students, as I have.

Reference

1. Behar , R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston : Beacon Press.