

paradigms of cancer activism in the San Francisco Bay area during the 1990s. The first group comprises women's personal narratives about their treatment journey, foregrounding individual agency, dignity, and survival. Ideologically linked to "Race for the Cure," established by the Komen Foundation, they connect breast cancer to displays of normative femininity, inspire hope and trust in science and medicine, and promote biomedical research and early detection. The second group consists of multicultural narratives focused on identity politics and community rather than faith in the medical and scientific establishment. They correspond to the type of activism exemplified by "Women and Cancer Walk." Overtly feminist, they critique systemic problems, mobilize anger, and promote social services and treatment activism. The last category includes environmental narratives that show a causal connection between cancer and an exposure to pesticides, toxins, and radiation. These narratives are akin to "Toxic Tours of the Cancer Industry," in their political crusades against chemical, pharmaceutical, nuclear, and other corporate polluters, against environmental racism and lack of regulation and cancer prevention. To what Dr. Susan Love summarizes as a "slash, burn, and poison" approach, they juxtapose "research, activism, and writing" as a "trio of weapons."

Deshazer finds examples for each type of memoir in Katherine Russell Rich's *The Red Devil*, Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's *Cancer in Two Voices*, and Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*, among others. She also sheds new light on Rachel Carson's story by examining her unpublished cancer letters. She ends her assessment by stating that authors of environmental narratives like Steingraber or Terry Tempest Williams attempt to redefine cancer as a human rights issue.

Overall, *Fractured Borders* is a great place to become acquainted with

women's cancer literature. Solidly researched and engagingly written, the book also performs a function of witnessing and testimony, not only for Deshazer's friend to whom it is dedicated, but for all those women whose fascinating texts she helps to bring to light.

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### **BRIGHT-SIDED: HOW POSITIVE THINKING IS UNDERMINING AMERICA**

Ehrenreich, Barbara  
New York: Henry Holt & Co.,  
2009

#### **REVIEWED BY BRENDA BLONDEAU**

If positive thinking is all that is required for each of us to achieve happiness and good health then why are so many people unhappy and/or in poor health? Are individuals lax in their efforts, or are there other reasons why we experience health concerns, precarious employment, unsuccessful relationships, spiritual difficulties, economic insecurities and political turmoil? In her latest book, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (2009), Barbara Ehrenreich addresses each of these issues, successfully challenging the widespread notion that if we would simply subscribe to the "cult of positivity" we could satisfy all of our wants and needs, and we could all lead healthy, happy and productive lives. Ehrenreich provides a timeline to explain the religious and political roots of the ideology of positivity in a colonial and capitalist American history. She draws upon personal and academic expertise as a researcher, as a woman who was diagnosed with,

and treated for, breast cancer, and as a cellular immunologist as she addresses the problems inherent in this ideology. She exposes and demystifies many of the "pseudo-scientific" claims—the logical and scientific fallacies—advanced by the gurus of positive thinking, while showing how a whole industry has developed to guide the newfound disciples. She highlights the improbability of individuals effecting change on any broad scale as she ponders the political impact of a doctrine that focuses on individual agency/responsibility while ignoring the external factors which impact their lives and the importance of group activism which could result in positive, lasting change for many people. And, while she writes of situations specific to the United States, the notion that there is a certain power in positive thinking is also widespread in Canada; thus, Ehrenreich's book becomes an important document in both countries.

Ehrenreich's discussion of her experiences as she was diagnosed with, and treated for, breast cancer provides evidence of the inherent contradictions and of the damaging impact of relying only on positive-thinking when dealing with breast cancer. She notes the linguistic restrictions, as we can refer to 'survivors' but not 'victims', and as we have no label for those women who do not survive. This extends to the notion that positive thinking will either eliminate any risk of having cancer, or it will greatly aid in its cure. So, once diagnosed, the often—although not always—unspoken understanding is that cancer is somehow a sign of personal failure to act or think in a particular manner. She acknowledges her aversion to the feminization and infantilization of the "pink ribbon culture" (21); she discusses the blogs which provide much-needed information couched within many of the intimate, infinite details of the lives of women 'survivors'; she provides quotes from women who describe their cancer as a "gift" or a "rite-of-passage" because

of the resulting changes they made in their lives; and she identifies the “ultrafeminine theme of the breast cancer marketplace” (23) in which endless items are sold to promote the positive thinking that will help women retain or regain their cancer-free status. Unfortunately, as she notes, this focus on seeing only the positive can be quite damaging. It denies women the right to express their anger or their fear; it makes them responsible for unsuccessful treatment; and it removes the focus from external factors that have an impact on their health. And, as she so poignantly notes, “Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a ‘gift,’ was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before—one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and to blame only ourselves for our fate” (43/4).

As Ehrenreich claims in *Bright-Sided*, she is not advocating that we forego happiness or joy in our lives; rather, she challenges an ideology which posits a doctrine of self-reliance and responsibility for all of our personal difficulties, to the extent that external factors become seemingly insignificant. This, she claims, limits individuals’ pursuit of higher education and/or technical training; it removes the responsibility of those in political office to meet the needs of constituents; and it increasingly isolates individuals as they increase their inward focus while following the “cult of positivity.” Arguably, the basic premise of this book may not be new to critical thinkers; however, Ehrenreich presents a timely argument in an accessible manner to a mainstream audience who may not have been exposed to discussions of colonialism, capitalism, and the need for political activism, but who will certainly have been overexposed to the plethora of self-help literature in which, often, the main directive is to

‘think on the bright side.’ Thankfully, Ehrenreich provides a viable and politically astute alternative to the promise of positive thinking.

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## HEARING THE STREAM: A SURVIVOR’S JOURNEY INTO THE SISTERHOOD OF BREAST CANCER

Diane Lane Chambers  
Conifer, CO: Ellexa Press.

### REVIEWED BY ALLAN BURNS

Like everyone else who receives a cancer diagnosis, Diane Chambers was initially shocked and scared. She knew only two people who had battled breast cancer: her grandmother and a judge in whose court she had worked as a sign language interpreter. Both had died. Despite daily flashbacks to her grandmother’s tragic experience with disfiguring surgery, horrendous lymphedema in both arms, and burns from radiation, Diane accepted her diagnosis and began making decisions about what route to take with a competent team of doctors. She chose the only treatment that made sense for her: a mastectomy and reconstruction.

Six months later, as treatment and recovery began to fade like a bad dream, Diane began recovering her life. She had worked as a sign language interpreter since 1977 and published an acclaimed account of her experiences, *Words in My Hands* (Ellexa Press, 2005). But she soon learned that after cancer there was no going back to “life before cancer.”

There was only “life after cancer,” and she quickly discovered it is not such a bad thing. She forged powerful bonds with a sisterhood of survivors—all people who had been through emotions and physical changes similar to her own. From Kim she learned the issues facing young single women with breast cancer. From Pat she learned how older women cope with diagnosis and treatment and from Sue how the mother of a baby struggled to save her own life. From Charlie she came to appreciate what men have to go through when diagnosed with a “female disease.”

Above all, from the extraordinary Harriette Grober, who had been on chemotherapy for an unprecedented nine years, she learned about a determination she had never imagined and how to be thankful and happy in each moment. She also learned to take Harriette’s advocacy as a model and became involved herself in raising levels of political and social awareness about the disease. Currently, Diane is an active member of the National Breast Cancer Coalition and the Association of Breast Cancer survivors and regularly participates in workshops, symposiums, and webcasts on cancer.

*Hearing the Stream*, the fruit of all she has experienced and learned as a cancer survivor, is an inspiring book that weaves together her own story and those of five others, thereby providing multiple perspectives on a complex disease that can be as different as the individual people who acquire it. As Dr. Tim Byers of the University of Colorado Comprehensive Cancer Center says, “Accounts such as this of the human toll of breast cancer motivate me as a researcher—and should motivate us all—to redouble our many efforts to reduce further and someday eradicate this disease.”

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