

## **Defending Andy: One Mother's Fight to Save her Son from Cancer and the Insurance Industry**

Marilyn Azevedo  
Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications Inc., 2001

### **Reviewed by Barbara Schwartz**

In *Defending Andy: One Mother's Fight to Save her Son from Cancer and the Insurance Industry*, the reader bears witness to an emotional and heartfelt story of courage, strength, and self-doubt. The reader engages in the struggles that a mother undertakes while attempting to find herself in order to assist in her son's arduous battle for his life. It is not a story about a child with cancer but about the effects of a child's battle with cancer on his mother.

Azevedo's first five chapters set the tone for the journey. Immediately, her sense of insecurity is revealed in her discussion of herself and her family. We learn about her father who was never pleased with her accomplishments; her life as a young wife and mother forced to live with her in-laws for several years; as a nurse with guilt-plagued experiences; her supportive, yet often left out, immediate and extended family; and her private fears. As a nurse who works with cancer patients, she is unable to draw upon prior knowledge to generate effective solutions or action plans. Perhaps it is that knowledge that affects Azevedo's ability to proceed in a self-assured manner. Her struggle to accept her son's condition is weakened by her poor self-esteem, yet she is able to arrange appointments with multiple doctors, drive to appointments, ask relevant questions, be supportive, and follow through with all the doctors prescribe.

Chapter 11 describes Andy's efforts to lobby in Washington, D.C. for better health insurance coverage, but only four pages provide specific information on how to work with insurance companies. Chapter 27 details how the family must fight the insurance company to pay for an experimental treatment. Azevedo shares the situation with the community which comes to Andy's aid through donations to pay for the treatment. Sadly, when Andy takes a turn for the worse, the protocol will not allow him to receive the treatment. Later, the insurance company cites Azevedo as being a key instrument in changing the processes for accessing insurance claims.

The book describes Andy's struggle to live as a teenager and his mother's struggle to live a productive life. In a direct voice, Azevedo shares Andy's journey through life and his acceptance of his death; she is not able to communicate her acceptance of Andy's situation, however. Although Azevedo admits that she "feels a sense of failure," Andy is immortalized through his mother's story of struggle and courage. Unfortunately, Azevedo does not reveal how to save someone from the insurance industry.

*Defending Andy* is a worthy study into the human psyche. All the reader can do is wish Azevedo well in her search for peace and self-acceptance, and continued success in her attempts to help others in similar situations.

## **Embalming Mom: Essays in Life**

Janet Burroway  
Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002

### **Reviewed by Jane Satterfield**

*Embalming Mom: Essays in Life*, a recent volume in the Iowa Series in Literary Nonfiction, tracks one woman's journey through the personal, aesthetic, and historical upheavals of the mid- to late twentieth century life. Beginning with the witty, insightful self-portrait in "I Didn't Know Sylvia Plath," (like others of her generation, the writer observed the youthful Plath's ascendance at a careful distance, ultimately following in her footsteps to a *Mademoiselle* internship, a Cambridge Fulbright, and beyond), Burroway's experience forms a vivid backdrop to her analysis of female passage through pre- to post-feminist eras.

As a teenager, Burroway reports, she possessed two conflicting "visions" of herself: artist and self-effacing mother. What she did not understand, however, "was that the choice might never be made, that my life could unroll, or lurch, or cascade, with the tension between them constant." While each of the sixteen essays included in this collection bears the stamp of this knowledge, each remains stylistically distinct. The title essay, for example, is an imaginary dialogue between the writer and her mother. "Changes," a collage essay, explores the effects of ageing on the female mind and body. Whether reflecting on the ambiguities of raising a "Soldier Son"; describing the beauty of the American landscape; negotiating ideology with daily life; meditating on her collection of photographs or tenancy of an English garden, Burroway avoids sensation and stereotype while celebrating the rewards and challenges of a life lived as writer, lover, wife, mother, and stepmother.

Essayist Philip Lopate once observed that the essay's "capacity for processing doubt is part of what makes it so stimulating and tonic." A narrator who resists wearing learning on her sleeve and is open to self-contradiction, Burroway's insights are seamlessly interwoven with "trash talk that can take the mickey out of its own best brag" ("Trash Talk"), as when her "own presumptions bang me on the forehead crude as a stepped on rake" – a literal reminder that "gaining perspective is a process never finished" ("Of the Beholder"). Burroway's essays are stimulating and tonic indeed, making *Embalming Mom* a valuable contribution to the essay tradition.