

Review of

S.L. Wisenberg's *The Adventures of Cancer Bitch*

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By Stephanie Susnjara

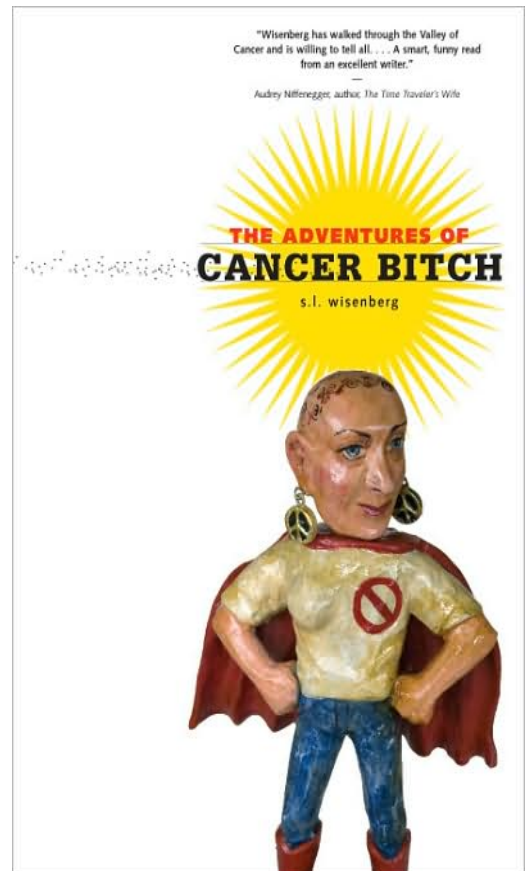
In 1996, I worked as a researcher on *Say It! Fight It! Cure It!* a documentary on breast cancer made for Lifetime Television. The title, based on the battle-cry slogan of the National Breast Cancer Coalition (NBCC) captured how breast cancer activism had become a political movement. In my work, I met and talked with activists, support groups, patients, and their families, doctors, and scientists, all dedicated to the fight against breast cancer. Many felt breast cancer had reached epidemic proportions, with one in eight women experiencing invasive breast cancer.

Since then a myriad of books on breast cancer have been published—memoirs, reference books, and social histories—a clear symbol that the epidemic has not abated. There is a bit of good news, though, according to the American Cancer Society: breast cancer death rates are going down, probably due to early detection and improved treatments.

S.L. Wisenberg's *The Adventures of Cancer Bitch* is not your typical illness memoir. In the forward, Wisenberg writes, "My friends say I shouldn't call this book Cancer Bitch because, they say, I am not now and was not ever a bitch during surgery and chemo. But I thought my blog should be called Cancer Something, and Babe was too young and Vixen was already taken. So I became the Bitch."

Her journey is peppered with engaging research—from literary, social, and medical sources—which she uses to define her own wisdom: "I agree with Barbara Enrenreich in her essay 'Welcome to Cancerland' that there's too much treacle out there about breast cancer—positive attitudes what my cancer taught me...but we do not need breast cancer to remind us of our mortality or to remember to savor each moment. That's what we have therapy and meditation and religion for."

I fell in love with the Bitch, her scalpel-sharp wit, and searing take on the breast cancer industry, where multinational corporations continue to join the breast cancer activism movement ("hop on the Pink bandwagon"). I loved her even more when, after she lost her hair to chemo, she decorated her head with henna designs and the slogan U.S. Out of Iraq.



The book is arranged diary-style, and in her January 27 entry, Wisenberg writes, “I love pink M&Ms. I eat them every day. That’s all I eat. If I eat enough of them my cancer will go away. Won’t it? Isn’t that the promise? In the U.S., we like our health and our donations sugar-coated. If I eat M&M’s and go on the Avon Walk and if I sell Pink Ribbon Cupcakes and Support the Cause Brownies then I will be in the pink... What could be more natural for us girls. We are made of sugar and spice. Even our cancer cells are nice. Because they’re pink, like us.”

Wisenberg succeeds here by avoiding genre clichés and facing breast cancer with real fear, but also fresh humor and insight. As a breast cancer survivor and a memoirist, her story soars above the pink ribbons and products that sometimes create an unsettling cloud over those in the trenches.

Stephanie Susnjara is a freelance writer and editor based in Katonah, New York. Her essays have appeared in the anthologies, *Women Who Eat: A New Generation on the Glory of Food* (Seal Press/2003) and *Our Roots are Deep with Passion: Creative Nonfiction Collects Essays* by Italian American Writers (Other Press/2005), as well as other publications. She received her MFA in creative nonfiction from Goucher College in 2000.