



The Brand New Catastrophe

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Raucous family memoir meets medical adventure in this heartfelt, hilarious book exploring the public and private theaters of illness.

After a tumor bursts in Mike Scalise's brain, leaving him with a hole in the head and malfunctioning hormones, he must navigate a new, alien world of illness maintenance. His mother, who has a chronic heart condition and a flair for drama, becomes a complicated model as she competes with him for the status of "best sick person." *The Brand New Catastrophe* is a moving, funny exploration of how we define ourselves by the stories we choose to tell.

The Brand New Catastrophe Details

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Author : Mike Scalise

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From Reader Review The Brand New Catastrophe for online ebook

Eric Atkisson says

Strangely riveting, humorous, and often poignant memoir of the author's experience with a rare pituitary disorder called acromegaly. The details of how his illness affected his relationships with others--especially his mother, but also his wife, friends, and co-workers--made the book a more intimate and roundly satisfying read. Glad I read this one.

Hannah says

An amazing memoir- the voice of the narrator is extremely compelling. I found myself laughing and questioning societal norms all at the same time. A little disconcerting...in the good way. 10/10 will definitely read again (probs this summer) and recommend to all readers of good books.

Vincent Scarpa says

(Review forthcoming, but: Mike Scalise is hysterical, brilliant, and an indefatigable quester.)

Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich says

I had the pleasure of reading an early copy of this book-- and it is somehow funny, heart-rending, and oh-so-true all at the same time. Scalise's memoir isn't just a story about a medical catastrophe, it's a story about how we make stories out of all our catastrophes, and how we understand the over-the-top things that happen to us. (Plus family. It's also about how we understand family.) How can a memoir about a brain tumor be funny? Honestly, I don't know how he did it-- but it IS funny, and somehow also teaches us about being human; living in our dangerously mortal bodies; and adapting to the way life changes our very ideas of who we are. Also, the sentences are stunningly intricate and wry and very, very smart.

Buy this book. You will have a damn good time reading it.

Erin says

A fantastic memoir! Scalise is a phenomenal storyteller, and I felt lucky to have a glimpse into his family's life.

As someone else who's spent a lot of time in hospitals and with doctors, he manages to make real all of it.

Erika Dreifus says

Terrific read. Check out this Q&A with the author: <http://wp.me/P4x0h8-bH6>.

Kiana Cook says

I bought my copy of *The Brand New Catastrophe* after attending one of Mike Scalise's readings (which I highly recommend; he's very entertaining), which he subsequently signed. The inside cover now reads, "Hope you don't hate this." (We also had a very awkward conversation during the signing where I mentioned that I review books and I'm pretty sure he flinched at that statement, probably imagining me destroying his life's work on my Internet blog.)

As it happens, I did *not* hate *The Brand New Catastrophe*—and I'm not just saying that because I exchanged two sentences with its author. But I very easily could have, because I generally dislike memoirs. I'm more drawn to fiction for its escapist nature, and sometimes memoirs have a really self-indulgent air that makes me think, "Yeah, well what makes *your* life so special that it's worth me reading about it?" There are exceptions to this, of course, and Scalise's is one of them. I think the main reason it works is because it steers clear of the expected self-pitying, self-righteous tropes a book like this could easily take on. It's very dry and witty, almost too much so at times—the prologue is possibly the weakest part of the novel because in its authoritative "how not to tell a sob story" approach, it almost veers back into that self-indulgent "look at how all-knowing I am" attitude of your average memoir. But this attitude fades as the book progresses and, if we're being completely fair, I suspect the main reason that I find this tone obnoxious is because it's actually true. We all like to martyr ourselves and tell sob stories that make us out to be brave, or act like life-altering events were no big deal because then other people will see us as brave and experienced and above things like self-pity. It's annoying, yes, but it's something humans do—and Scalise acknowledges this hypocrisy (and even vain competitiveness) while making no excuse for it. And, thankfully, Scalise never employs that awful soap operatic trick that makes his illness out to be something that changed him for the better or taught him the meaning of life or whatever. He treats it for what it is: something that happened to him, that continues to play a huge part in his everyday life, and is frustrating and inconvenient but still an undeniable part of his existence.

The whole book is also peppered with entertaining anecdotes and tangents. Luckily, Scalise's life is filled with people who *are* interesting for complete strangers to read about: his stories about his relationship with his father or his friend Jeff Stibner are particularly funny (the PowerPoint presentations from the father are so ludicrous that the fact that they aren't fiction pretty much justifies this memoir's existence in the first place), and his exploration of how his relationships with these people changed in the years after his diagnosis is compelling and thoughtful. It's also rewarding to watch how Scalise progresses throughout the course of his novel, from a dry, quipping twenty-something to a more self-aware, less self-centered man fifteen years later; there's one passage near the end of the novel talking about how he began to live his life in constant apprehension as a result of his disease and how he missed his recklessness as a high schooler, and it sounds cliched when I write it here but it's actually one of the better passages I've read this year.

So, I guess to put it shortly: this is a very readable and amiable novel, pleasantly casual and clever without ever being pretentious. It muses about how illnesses and big (often bad) events in our lives shape us, and how we in turn choose to tell these stories. And, more to the point, how these stories can become *the* story of our lives, the one we always tell to others, and seem to sum up most of who we are (or at least for a certain

amount of time, until that life event is later replaced by another life event). But the point of the book (I think) is to emphasize how we need to balance between embracing these catastrophes as parts of who we are while not making them the be-all end-all of our existence—and, while writing an entire memoir about this experience might make it seem like this is the be-all, end-all of Scalise's existence, that wasn't the impression I received as I moved through the book. I see *The Brand New Catastrophe* as less of a disease book and more of a story about navigating life and the trials of family and adulthood, with the diagnosis serving as a backdrop and framing device. But that's my take on it—and whatever way you choose to view it, it's a smart, thought-provoking read, crafted with a great amount of consideration and care.

4 stars.

Robbie Maakestad says

A hilarious yet harrowing story that goes beyond the standard medical memoir; it frames the story with a focus on how to tell medical stories.

Jen Hirt says

Acromegalics! Everything you wanted to know and then some. And if you get tired of the ruptured brain tumor narrative, there is the quirky illness competition between Mike and his mom. Scalise is a funny and smart writer who is not your parents' "drama in real life" medical-scenario-in-Reader's-Digest writer. Thank god. Toss out all your illness memoirs and just read this.

Sabeeha Rehman says

Brilliant! Mike has been diagnosed with a rare brain tumor at age 24. This is a story of the emotional and physical trauma he endures, but more so, an insight into medical practice and its impact on the psychological well-being of patients. Every doctor should read this book. This book should be required reading for medical students. Doctors don't know what their patients endure, and what difference a caring attitude can make. It is funny, poignant, and remarkably honest.

Chris says

I'm not sure whether I would like Mike Scalise in real life. I know I would've found his 20-something self obnoxious, a "class clown" type who tries to frame his illness narrative for the entertainment value. (In his defense, though, his story is genuinely amusing in parts! Dr. Sunshine, indeed.) But he, like his illness, comes to some equilibrium as the book progresses--his condition becomes less acute, as does his drive to "perform" its story for others.

But throughout, he tries to make meaning from his decade-long condition, and in a fresh way. There is no talk of "overcoming" his condition, no assurances that it's "made him a better person", like so many disease memoirs and blogs do. He's not out to demonstrate that it's possible to live well with this particular thing

wrong with you. His condition just *is*, and it's something he has 1) had to learn to live with, and 2) had to learn to interpret, both to himself and to others. The recounting and interpreting is often a delight to read, because of phrases like, "...whose face now was a dubbed-tape version of the one she fell in love with..." So, I often enjoyed his company on paper, anyway. :)

Sarah says

So much self loathing.

Rebecca Scott says

Working with PEN/Faulkner has introduced me at a lot of great books; it's especially enjoyable when I get to know the authors first. In person, I always appreciated Mike's intelligence and dry wit, both of which were evident in this book about his disease journey. (I just vomited a little, but that's the best phrasing I can muster now.) So much of the book resonated with me as a person with a chronic illness. Mike, I applaud your candor. And, lord help me, you've inspired me to take a stab at telling my own tale.

Four and a half stars. (Goodreads! Give me some half stars to work with!)

Eric Mueller says

Had to pick this up after seeing the author at a reading. This was such a good read! It has something for everyone: illness memoir, family stories, finding a job after college, existential crises, masculinity, long-term romance, aging friends, and love in many forms. I had fun reading this.

Also, I could totally geek out about the form of this. If memoir's goal is to, "read like fiction" nowadays, this is a well paced, visual tale that kept me as engaged as any piece of media can these days. The story is a meandering one as opposed to one written in a straight line, and it allowed me as a reader to adapt to different scenarios in a way the main character might have.

Teacher friends: if you're looking for a nonfiction book (or just accessible prose) for intro or advanced classes, there is a lot to talk about here.

Nancy Hildebrandt says

Always interesting when an awesomely good writer is able to describe a medical condition in a way that helps you really understand what it feels like to have it.
