

The Woman at the Washington Zoo: A Beautiful, Brutally Honest Story About Life and Death

On January 16, 2005, Washington D.C. lost one of its most seasoned and honest writers of *The Washington Post* and *Vanity Fair* to liver cancer. Marjorie Williams was born in 1958 and blessed many readers with her beautiful, powerful, writings prior to her death in 2005. Her husband, journalist Timothy Noah, compiled several of Williams' greatest pieces and created *The Woman at the Washington Zoo: Writings on Politics, Family, and Fate*, highlighting his wife's political profiles, personal essays, and her struggle with cancer for everyone to have the opportunity to read.

The PEN/Martha Albrand Nonfiction award-winning book is divided into three parts. As Timothy Noah put together his book in the fall of 2005, he mainly formed the book in a chronological order, beginning with the political profiles Williams created while working for *Vanity Fair*, then progressing into Williams' personal stories and memoirs about her battle with cancer. Throughout the story, the writings become more personal as she discusses issues in Washington, to issues about family, marriage, and parenthood, to issues about her own life. By the final part of her writings, the book transforms into a powerful tribute to herself.

Timothy Noah chose the title "*The Woman at the Washington Zoo*," after a poem written by Randall Jarrell in 1956. Through all of Williams' writings, it is evident that Williams portrays a woman at a zoo, observing all of the political animals and social figures in Washington. Also, she observes and takes in a lot of her life experiences and shares them with the readers of her articles and stories.

Throughout her journalism career, Marjorie Williams was blessed enough to profile many political figures throughout Washington since the start of editing job at *The Washington Post*. She interviewed influential individuals from Bill Clinton and Al Gore, to Jeb and Barbara Bush. She wanted to capture the reality of Washington figures, and Timothy Noah chose a wide array of different characters to help depict the true, real Washington D.C.

The second part of the collection of Williams' work entails multiple personal essays, which were her most powerful pieces of work. She wrote about experiences she had prior to her diagnosis of cancer in 2001. Her strong writing is shown through her honest, pure, emotions in her words. In her most notable piece, "The Alchemist," Williams writes an astounding piece about her parents. She writes about how the doctors warned her mother she had a year or two left to live, "I think now that she'd been maintaining her life by the greatest silent effort, and that it was a relief for her to surrender it." This powerful anecdote, which depicts such raw emotion, helps prepare the reader for the third and final phase of Williams' story.

In the third part of the book, entitled "Time and Chance," Noah pieced together Williams' writings after her diagnosis of liver cancer at age 43. Being a dedicated wife and mother of a 5-year-old and 8-year-old at the time of her diagnosis, Williams writes about her struggle to stay strong during her illness. The chapter, "Hit by Lightning: A Cancer Memoir," won a National Magazine Award in 2006 after appearing in *Vanity Fair*. One of her most inspiring chapters throughout the book, Williams yet again shows her intense emotion and powerful voice to convey the pain she experienced throughout her battle with cancer. While she was being diagnosed, "I find myself on the point of

hysterical laughter. How many more people, I wonder, are going to tell me, *Congratulations! You've got lymphoma!!!*" Her brutally honest writing about what it feels like to be dying allows the reader to feel her emotion, physical, and mental pain. She tried her best to "lead as normal of a life as possible," surviving for three years after being told by doctors she only had a few months to live.

The reason Marjorie Williams was such a great writer was because she wrote with such honesty and strong emotions. She had an extremely likeable personality that was exploited throughout her writings. Her smooth tone and original voice make the story enjoyable and easy to read. David Brooks of *The New York Times* wrote, "[Williams] is a woman who was incapable of being a victim." Although Williams was diagnosed with one of the most terrible diseases, the reader is captivated about the life she lived while she was still alive. I think the evidence is convincing because she ties her own emotion and as she is her own source, she uses her past to accentuate her stories. Although Williams is no longer with us, her writings are something that should be read and passed on forever. Her powerful blend of humor and honesty and struggle highlighting everything that the author has to offer to help the reader understand her messages. Her writings about life, illness, and death, educate readers about her experiences and allow many to understand how to observe the ups and downs of beautiful journey called life.