

ALPHABET

By Alison Michell

In August 2002, just before my 56th birthday, I was diagnosed with advanced colorectal cancer. A first round of surgery removed a section of bowel, and an ovary to which the cancer had spread. Several lymph nodes were affected and scans showed secondary tumours in my liver. Six months of intensive chemotherapy/ allowed, three days every fortnight, with good results. In April 2003, surgeons were able to remove the diseased sections of my liver. A blocked intestine required another operation two weeks later. After a long convalescence I have regained my strength, and my hair, although not quite all my previous energy. At the time of writing, my cancer is in remission.

My journey so far through this land with no maps has taken me to many places I would not otherwise have had the chance to visit, has tested my endurance, and has shown me a kaleidoscope of unforgettable events, people and emotions. It continues to be a life-changing experience.

I am more grateful than it is possible to put into words to the surgeons and oncologists who have saved my life; to the hospital and district nurses who looked after me; and to my family and friends who are supporting me in the biggest challenge I have ever faced.

My name is Alison, and this is my Alphabet.

Alphabet

A is for August, the month when all the trouble started. A is for Appointments and for Anxiety. A is for Anaesthetic, putting me to sleep for the Anterior section, where my innards are parted, and for the Anastomosis which joins them back together. A is for unexpected Adhesions, best avoided. A is for Atropine, deadly poison in the wrong hands, a fierce injection which counters side-effects but paralyses my tongue. A is for a disappearing Appetite. A is for the Abutilon with perfect Apricot blooms in my garden ... and A is for Attitude, so important in dealing with what follows.

B is for a Body sorely Bruised but showing great powers of recovery. B is for Bottoms and Bowels, not parts people like to mention. Nor do they like to talk about Blockages, which produce Bile, better out than in. B is for Blood, taken for testing and put back to boost strength. B is for Breakfast, my best meal of the day and for Booze, now allowed in moderation. B is for Baldness, luckily temporary. B brings me Bad moments, but more often a Bright side too ... and B is for another Birthday, a day I thought I would not see.

C is for Cancer. The hardest words begin with C, like Colorectal, the seat of my problems, and Chemotherapy. C is for Complications which mean another operation and, inevitably, another Catheter. C is for Constipation, unfortunate effect of chemotherapy, and for Colonoscopy to check what is going on inside. C is for Convalescence, for the fresh sea air in Cornwall, and for Cricket, hot sunny days at the Oval. C would be for Cure if they could find one. C is for the Challenge confronting me ... and for the Courage I need to face it.

D is for Diagnosis, the moment of truth that stuns me to silence and leaves me Daunted. D is for the Doctors who save my life. D is for Drips and Drains, and for Drugs which make me Dizzy. D is for Diarrhoea, and for Dignity, impossible to maintain. D is for Dying, but not for a long time. D is for Doubt and Depression sneaking up on me in the night ... and for the Determination with which I meet the next Day.

E is for Endurance and for Encouragement. I need both when faced with Enemas. E is for Epidural, a great post-operative painkiller. E is for E-mail, keeping me in touch with family and friends. E is for my Eyelashes which

fall out and for Eyebrows grown pale and skimpy. E is for Energy in short supply ... and for all the Extraordinary things there are for me to learn.

F is for Fluorouracil (known to its friends as 5FU) and Folinic acid, two of my chemotherapy drugs, and for my Fear the first time they give them to me. F is for the weekly chore of Flushing the tubes going into my body. F is for Fingers swollen like sausages, and for Fatigue, a deep and debilitating tiredness. F is for Food, forbidden at first, then not wanted, and for the Flowers filling my room with colour and Fragrance. F is for my Family, for Fun, for the power of Friendship ... and F is for the Future I hope I will have.

G is for hospital Gown, gaping and uncomfortable. G is for de Gramont, who gave his name to my cocktail of drugs, not shaken or stirred, travelling into my bloodstream down the Groshong line in my chest. G is for the Generosity of those who care about me, for the Good days and for the Garden where I can sit under a tree to dream ... and G is for God: but where is God right now?

H is for Hospital, with gleaming theatres and terrible food. H is for the meticulous Hands of my surgeons, for the Hysterectomy removing womb and ovaries, for the partial Hepatectomy taking Half my liver. H is for Hallucinations brought on by a rogue drug. H is for Husband who is not Here. H is for Health which I long to rediscover, and for Healing. H is for Help freely given and gratefully received. H is for Hair, which falls out, and for the Hats I need to keep my Head warm. H is for Hope which keeps me going, for the Happiness I find in unexpected places ... and H is for Hugs.

I is for Irinotecan, another chemotherapy drug which makes me feel sick, for Injections which sting and for scary Infections. I is for the Intravenous food which comes in a pink plastic bag, meals on wheels. I is for the Inspiration I draw from others who are living with cancer, for new Ideas and Interests filling my mind ... and I is for Instincts I am learning to trust as they show me what is really Important.

J is for this strange Journey through a land with no maps. J is for Jaunts I plan with care and enjoy with gusto . . . and J is for the Joy of a summer morning.

K is for Knitting, that most soothing and useful of pastimes ... and K is for Kindness which is all around me.

L is for Laparotomy, to explore my inner workings. L is for Lumps in my Liver, removed by clever surgeons, and for Lungs closely monitored. L is for Lumens, the tubes protruding from my chest. L is for Letters full of Love, for the chance to Learn unexpected Lessons, and for Laughter. L says I am Lucky to be alive ... and so L is for Life, for Living every moment.

M is for Malignant, and for Metastases spreading my cancer to new places. M is for Morphine which leaves me dazed, and for Modesty, now a thing of the past. M is for Music to soothe and uplift, for the soft Monkey who keeps me company. M is for Massage, and for Matilda, kindly district nurse. M is for Mother watching anxiously over her child long grown-up ... and M is for Marmite, a good strong flavour for a palate on strike.

N is for Nurses armed with Needles, for Numbness across my abdomen where Nerves have been cut. N is for long Nights, for Nausea, for my Nose which bleeds, for Nails which flake. N is for getting back to Normal, but I don't know how ... and N is for Now, the time to do all the things I want to.

O is for Operations where I am cut and pasted, for Oxygen blowing cold through the mask. O is for Oncology which helps to keep my cancer at bay ... and O is for Optimism in facing the future with all the Opportunities it brings me.

P is for the Patience I am struggling to master. P is for a racing Pulse, for Pain, for Pills to control it, and for the Pump which allows me home while the drugs do their work. P is for Procedure, hospital euphemism for something unpleasant, and for the Polish to brighten my nails. P is for the gentle exercise of Pilates. P is for Priorities, changed beyond recognition as I find myself at the front line. P is for staying Positive, for the Prayers kind people say for me ... and P is for Paradox: how else to describe this newly discovered richness of life when my life itself is under threat.

Q is for Queries, there is so much to ask. Q is for Quiet periods of reflection. ...
and for the Question-mark hanging over my future.

R is for Results, the clock standing still till the tests come back. R is for Remission,
or for Recurrence, toss the coin, heads or tails; so R must also be for
Resilience as I ride the Roller-coaster. R is for Rigor when fever takes
hold, and for the Research of scientists who look for Reasons. R is for
Renewal of health and friendships, for Rest and Recovery. R is for
Reading, what luxury to have time for books ... and R is for Roses which
have bloomed this year in my garden as never before.

S is for Surgeons working their Scalpels on my body with great Skill. Some finish
off with Staples; others leave neat Scars on my Stomach with invisible
Stitches. S is for Symptoms, for Scans to highlight lurking Secondaries, for
the Sigmoidoscopy which makes my eyes water. S is for Saline giving me
vital fluid, and for Suppositories, no need to say more. S is for the Strange
Sweet Smell of chemotherapy, unlike any other, cloying in the back of my
throat. S is for the Stamina I need to cope with Side-effects. S is for the
Stairs where I sit when I'm Sad, and for my Spirit which cannot be
quenched. S is for Statistics; the numbers are Stark when S means Stage 4,
the worst place to be on the cancer charts, for there is no Stage 5. But
remember that S can be for Survivor too. S is for Sleep, elusive at times,
so Sustaining when it comes. S is for Swimming to Stretch my muscles,
for the Sunshine of Summer. S is for Sons whose Support keeps me
Steady ... and S is for the Scarves I knit with bright Stripes.

T is for Tumours and Tests, for Treatment and Tubes, for Toxins poisoning my
Tears. T is for Tough days, for Transfusions when my blood gets too thin.
T is for a Temperature spiking as a sign of Trouble. T may be for
Terminal, but I am not going there, not yet. T is for Taste which changes
so that nothing has the right flavour. T is for Trolley, a Tumbril taking me
to the guillotine. T is for Thanks, for letting me create a beautiful Tapestry
... and T is for Time, more precious to me than ever.

U is for Ultrasound, more fun when you are looking at your Unborn baby ... and U
is for the Understanding which develops slowly as I learn to embrace
Uncertainty.

V is for Vomiting, unpleasant while it lasts. V is for pretty Vests to wear, for Visitors who brighten my days. V is for Venice, my holiday treat when I am feeling better ... but V cannot mean Victim, for I shall never be one.

W is for Worry and for all the Waiting. W is for Websites with too much information. Is W for Why me? Or for Why not? There's no answer to that. W is for Water to quench my thirst and for a Walk in the park to raise money for charity. W is for learning to Want what you get. W is for Writing, letters and diaries and stories ... and W is for Wig, my stylish friend to boost morale.

X is for X-rays, for good news or bad. X is for Xmas, time for celebrating with my family and decorating the tree and ... and X is for kisses at the end of a letter.

Y is for Yellow, colour of hospital blankets, of daffodils and freesias. Y is for the extraordinary Year during which all this has been happening ... and Y is for saying Yes to all that life has to offer.

Z is for Zips, which won't do up after operations ... and Z is for Zzzzz, for all those naps and the pleasure at last of being back in my own bed at home.

ABOUT THE WRITER



Alison Michell is 59 and lives in South London. She has two sons: one has just graduated and is about to start looking for a job; the other is in his third year at Leeds University, studying Italian and playing lots of rugby. When cancer was diagnosed three years ago, she discovered that this was the start of an interesting - and ongoing - journey. Surgery and chemotherapy have brought remission, punctuated by frequent checkups and scans. After a busy career in the civil service and, more recently, in a financial services trade association, she has decided that there is more to life than commuting to a City office every day. Instead she keeps busy with family and friends, with her house and garden, and of course with writing. She has taken part in a sponsored walk to raise money for cancer research, and more recently held a coffee morning to raise funds. Since winning the Glyn Harris Award Alison has begun an MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmith's College, University of London.