The Illness Memoir: An Annotated List
Thomas Larson

Authors Writing of Their Illness:

- *Drinking: A Love Story* Caroline Knapp. A bible-like memoir that plumb’s the alcoholic’s lowest lows and not much else, to stand beside Bill W’s Big Book.
- *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* William Styron. An absorbing, analytic, and reflective essay that mulls and testifies to his long depression and his slow recovery.
- *Intoxicated By My Illness* Anatole Broyard. Short essays and talks and fragments showing the author at his bemused best, reviewing the shock and strangeness of his prostate cancer diagnosis.
- *Autobiography of a Face* Lucy Grealy. Some three dozen surgeries on her jaw over her young life, an incredible probing of the inner life of one who didn’t ever want to be seen or see herself.
- *Girl, Interrupted* Susannah Kaysen. One of the finest hybrid memoirs ever about a girl’s cathartic hospitalization for being a crazy teen and her ingenious surviving to tell the tale.
- *Prozac Diary* Lauren Slater. Once immovable, she found Prozac and it utterly transformed her into a woman and a writer. The healing power of drugs.
- *This Wild Darkness: A Memoir of My Death* Harold Brodkey. His final insights as he’s dying of AIDS, a book with few, if any, comparisons as to the radiant clarity of his last days.
- *The Two Kinds of Decay* Sarah Manguso. She suffers from an extremely debilitating blood disease that wipes out her immune system, and she must undergo apheresis—bloodletting—for several years. A brilliantly generous and affective memoir.
- *Shot: Staying Alive with Diabetes* Amy F. Ryan. A marvelously readable, gripping, and intelligent book about the author’s denying having diabetes and then her embracing it, through the joy of marriage and the travails of pregnancy.
- *The Adventures of Cancer Bitch* S. L. Wisenberg. The longtime Chicagoan, author of *Holocaust Girls*, and Northwestern writing instructor couches this tale in the familiar lay of a diary—the year-and-a-half in which she was diagnosed with cancer, endured chemo, lost her curly tresses, threw up (but not much), and got through.
- *Hearing Voices* Eric Coates. A disturbing descriptive analysis of his schizoaffective disorder, which came over him from nowhere and eventually receded after many hallucinations, well-told here.
• *In the Shadow of Memory* Floyd Skloot. Essay series about traumatic brain injury or TBI, in his case a virus. Analytical and moving.

• *Mortality* Christopher Hitchens. At once, a clinical analysis of his worsening cancer of the throat giving way to the slow dawning that his dying must be his, and owned by him.

• *The Mother Knot* Kathryn Harrison. Harrison finds the means to break the spell of her mother, who haunts her unmercifully and makes her physically ill, anorexic, and depressed, threatening her own motherhood and marriage. A 16,000-word masterpiece.

Authors Writing of Another’s Illness:

• *The Mercy Papers* Robin Romm. A memoir in which the “wound” of her mother’s long bout with breast cancer and her death over three weeks is intensely dramatized; Romm is merciless on herself as the wining, recalcitrant daughter.

• *Tuesdays with Morrie* Mitch Albom. A portrait that turns out to be as much about Mitch and his unfocused life as it does Morrie’s wasting away, not without his pearls of wisdom.

• *One Thousand Names for Love* Diane Ackerman. Her husband’s story of an aphasic stroke and Ackerman’s devoted, some say overbearing, caretaking.

• *Hurry Down Sunshine*: Michael Greenberg. A family-systems classic. The Greenbergs are held hostage during their daughter's psychotic breakdown while their attempts to help her point out how nearly impossible it is, without drugs, for loved ones to do anything more constructive than endure their own guilt and frustration.

• *Blue Nights* Joan Didion. The story of her daughter’s demise on the heels of her husband’s sudden death from cardiac arrest in 2004.

• *A Three Dog Life* Abigail Thomas. Powerfully short and unflinchingly honest memoir of Thomas’s husband’s traumatic brain injury and she does (with dogs) and doesn’t (he can’t remember her) heal from its life-change.