Bald in the Land of Big Hair

By Joni Rodgers

Joni Rodger’s moving memoir Bald in the Land of Big Hair had me laughing so hard I cried and crying so hard I had to laugh. With ever-present charm and wit, Rodgers relates the poignant story of her struggle with cancer. After being diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma in her early thirties, Rodgers’s embarks on a roller coaster of doctors’ visits, chemo therapy, money troubles, and trying to keep her sanity, all the while comforting her grieving family. Rodgers manages to relate the heart-wrenching horrors of chemotherapy—endless vomiting, the loss of all her hair, exhaustion, and excruciating pain, with both humor and sadness. She reflects on the relationships she built with her professional caretakers—some of whom were shockingly insensitive, and others, like Dr. Ro, who eluded a calm sense of professionalism that Rodgers came to rely on for strength. Her struggles with the various machines involved in her treatment become a comedy show and her plethora of witty responses to inquisitive looks at her bald face and head a running joke. But the story of her relationships with her children and husband, reveal the true pain of her experience. In the saddest sex scene I’ve ever read, she explains how her body, so infused with chemicals, began to smell and taste like the yellowish drip running constantly through her port site into her blood stream. She reveals the story of falling in love with her husband, and the strains and strength that having cancer put on their relationship. She tells the heart-breaking stories of fighting with her son who in dealing with his own sense of loss and pain blames his mother for her illness, and her younger daughter who, in dealing with her mother’s pain, insisted on being a part of everything her mother had to endure as a result of the cancer.

But Bald in the Land of Big Hair is not a story about cancer—it’s a story about life. And Joni Rodgers’s life story is so captivating, it was terribly hard to put her book down. Her story addresses every facet of the female experience, from balancing career and family, to the challenges of both motherhood and daughterhood, to following her dreams of becoming a writer in the face of seemingly constant adversity, and through her overwhelming love for her partner, Gary. In the larger context of her whole story, cancer is just another part of Rodgers’s vast experience that makes her the woman she is.