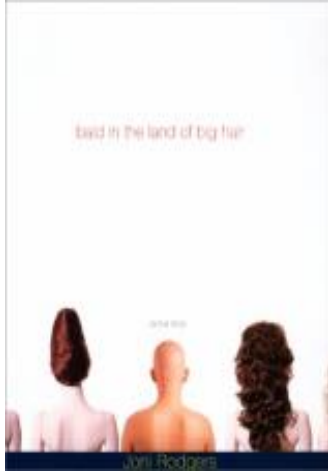


# Bald in the Land of Big Hair: A True Story

by Joni Rodgers

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## About the Book

Joni Rodgers lives in Texas, where big hair is a God-given right. It's essential to any waitressing job, prerequisite for a real estate license, as natural as Naugahyde, and as important as Elvis. But at thirty-two, Joni was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and lost her hair to chemotherapy. It's not fun being a bald girl in the Big Hair Capital of America, but Joni managed to hold on to her sanity -- and her sense of humor. With the same amazing ability to laugh at life, and herself, that helped her survive cancer, Joni now recounts her story -- a deeply affecting tale of industrial-strength drugs, healing herbs, love, sex, prayer, kids, career, and the search for a wig that won't make her look like Betty Rubble.

**Bald in the Land of Big Hair** is the hilarious -- and often heartbreaking -- tale of Joni's journey through the badlands of cancer. From D-Day ["D" for Diagnosis] ("Biopsy is one of those terms that snags on the back of the mind -- like IRS or subpoena"), through the red tape of treatment ("Apparently it was a Christian Science HMO; any kind of medical treatment was against their religion"), through remission ("Surviving cancer is the same as emerging from any of life's refining fires"), Joni tells her story with humor, occasional anger, and unflinching honesty. Yet this powerful, moving story is much more than one person's memoir. It is the story of all of us; of anyone who has faced what seemed the worst that life has to offer -- and won.

## Discussion Guide

1. What do you think of the way Rodgers uses humor in her memoir? How do we use humor to tell stories about our own lives? If this book hadn't been so funny, do you think it would have been as powerful?
2. Why does Rodgers place so much emphasis on the hair loss she experienced as a result of her cancer? Is baldness merely a leitmotif or does it carry a deeper meaning? How would you feel if you were to go bald because of illness? Would you choose to disguise the condition?

3. "For the first time in my life," writes Rodgers after her biopsy, "my life was at the top of my agenda. . . . Women of my generation don't know what to do with that." Do you or women you know feel that they routinely place the needs of others before their own? If so, why? What are the consequences of this kind of selflessness? And why does it take a disease as traumatic as cancer to force a woman to place her own needs first?
4. Rodgers is honest-often explicitly so-about her experiences: the side effects of chemotherapy, her sex life, her relationships with her children and husband, and her feelings towards others and herself. Does Rodgers's straightforward narrative ever make you uncomfortable? Why do you think she was willing to reveal so much about her private life? Are you this honest with others, or with yourself?
5. What do you think of the way Rodgers interacted with her children during her illness? Should young children be shielded from the more extreme realities of a parent's illness?
6. How did cancer effect the Rodgers family as a whole? What are the psychological ramifications of cancer for children, parents, and the extended family? How might dealing with cancer strengthen a family, and how might it tear a family apart?
7. Cancer profoundly altered Rodgers's spiritual life. She evolved from being a "fair-to-middlin' Christian" to being angry that God had deserted her, to realizing that God was closer to her than ever. "When we can't confine god in a framework of human characteristic, we shroud God in mystery, because the idea of God actually being accessible to us, well, that would mean we are accessible to God. And that's a terrifying concept." What does Rodgers mean by this? Why do we tend to put so much space between God and ourselves? How did Rodgers's suffering change her faith in God?
8. Rodgers writes about an incident in which a young man turns away from a water fountain she has just used, as if her illness were contagious. How does this scene illustrate the stigma and prejudice attached to long-term illness? How do you think you would react to drinking from the same water fountain as a visibly sick woman-or man? What did this incident teach Rodgers about other kinds of prejudice and her own deep-seated feelings about those less fortunate than she?
9. Rodgers decided against radiation after her chemotherapy and included in her healing process visits with a shaman and a naturopath. How would you react if a loved one decided against traditional treatments for his or her cancer? Whose decision should this be?
10. Why do you think Rodgers devoted so much attention to her infatuation with her editor? What do you think the infatuation was really about? Where did the feelings come from, and why were they directed at her editor?
11. Rodgers writes about a friend of hers whose metastatic breast cancer went undiagnosed-despite her insistence that she was sick-and who ultimately died from the disease. "There are far too many cases like Shannon's, partly because many of us are easily dismissed and sometimes even intimidated by our doctors, partly because many of us have been taught to dismiss ourselves." Do you agree with this statement? How does our society discourage women from focusing on own their physical and emotional health? What can, and should, be done to change this?

**12.** Think about your own experiences with cancer in relation to the author's: how she handled her treatment and its side effects, her fears and anger, her family and support network. What did you learn from Joni Rodgers's story?

**13.** Rodgers recommends several books about healing and cancer. Would you recommend this book to someone with cancer? Why or why not?

## Author Bio

Joni Rodgers is the author of two novels -- **Crazy for Trying** and **Sugarland** -- and many articles. She has appeared as a keynote speaker for the Lymphoma Research Foundation, the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, CanCare, and other conferece and benefit audiences nationwide. She lives with her family near Houston.

## Critical Praise

" Rodgers' attitude...is what sets her book apart from others by and about cancer survivors, earning it a wider audience and more positive responses. The book is brutally honest. It's also deeply personal, with the reader drawn into the drama of a marriage and family under overwhelming strain. "*-Dayton Daily News*"Ms. Rodgers's...book is impressive in its immediacy. With engaging honesty...she describes in ways others may find helpful how cancer has affected her sexuality, her faith [and] her life with her family... "*-Janet Maslin New York Times*"Rodgers's attempt to convey serious business lightly is commendable... "*-Publishers Weekly*

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**Bald in the Land of Big Hair: A True Story** **Publication Date:** February 1, 2001

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**Genres:** Nonfiction

**Hardcover:** 272 pages

**Publisher:** HarperCollins

**ISBN-10:** 0060195886

**ISBN-13:** 9780060195885