

# Cancer Narratives and an Ethics of Commemoration: Susan Sontag, Annie Leibovitz, and David Rieff.

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## Cancer Narratives and an Ethics of Commemoration: Susan Sontag, Annie Leibovitz, and David Rieff

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### Abstract

This essay considers how photographic and biographical forms of memorialization can pay ethical tribute to women who die of cancer, thereby inviting readers and viewers to respond as witnesses rather than as voyeurs. Its focal subjects are controversial photographs by Annie Leibovitz in *A Photographer's Life* (2006) of Susan Sontag during her struggles with three different cancers—from mastectomy to chemotherapy to bone marrow transplant to decline and death—and an acclaimed memoir of his mother's final year, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008) by Sontag's son, David Rieff. The author of this essay argues that both Leibovitz's visual narrative and Rieff's written account offer grim, unsettling, yet eloquent and just commemoration of Sontag's life and death—commemoration that provides reader-viewers with elegiac spaces of

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Susan Sontag's cultural critique of cancer stigmatization in *Illness as Metaphor* and her theoretical musings in *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* offer rich insights through which to analyze photographic and literary representations of Sontag's own experience with cancer by Annie Leibovitz (her lover) in *A Photographer's Life, 1990–2005* and David Rieff (Sontag's son) in his 2008 memoir, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*. My analysis raises ethical as well as aesthetic issues important to twenty-first century understandings of cancer as a sociopolitical construct and an individual disease, and of the ways that cancer patients and their ill, medicalized, suffering, and dying bodies have been, and might justly be, represented in literature and art. I hope ultimately to shed light on debates regarding appropriate versus appropriative depictions of people with cancer and to raise questions from a feminist perspective that might help readers consider what constitutes an ethics of commemoration.

In *Illness as Metaphor* Sontag examines the traumatic and transformational power of life-threatening diseases, which force the humans who contract them to face "the night-side of life," relinquishing their place in "the kingdom of the well" for "a more onerous citizenship" in a grim and nameless land.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, she compares the nineteenth-century quest to eliminate tuberculosis with twentieth-century efforts to eradicate cancer and discusses the ways in which both diseases are "spectacularly, and similarly, encumbered by the trappings of metaphor."<sup>2</sup> Tuberculosis and cancer have long evoked terror and dread, she explains; physicians have described these diseases as *consuming, corrupting, insidious*, while the culture at large has deemed them *un-*



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