

TOPICS

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**DAMON
CRONSHAW**

Writing for survival in the big unknown

FOR Hamilton's Ruth Cotton, knowledge is power when it comes to health conditions and living with uncertainty.

Ms Cotton was in her early 50s when first diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

That was 25 years ago. Her world changed forever.

"My first response to receiving unwelcome health news is to get information, first from the practitioner, then from a reliable source," she said.

"It helps one work out what questions to ask, decide what one needs to know. And I'm never afraid to ask for help."

Ms Cotton, known for her Hidden Hamilton history blog and books, has written a memoir, titled *A Fragile Hold - Living with multiple sclerosis and other uncertainties*.

The book, recently released in local and online bookstores, describes the mental and physical challenges she has faced.

It also describes her husband's journey with melanoma, which was found to have progressed to a stage four cancer in 2020.

The cancer metastasised from his back to his lungs and brain. He underwent brain surgery during the pandemic.

Overwhelmed by a sense of life's fragility, Ms Cotton turned to writing.

"I was writing for survival, to manage my feelings of being stressed and overwhelmed," she said.

"It was a way of processing my experiences and how I was feeling about them, making sense of what was happening as COVID-19 swept in and confined us indoors."

As well as writing, she finds solace in poetry.

She tried computer games to help with memory, reflexes and peripheral vision.

"I was hopeless. Then the idea of memorising poetry came to me," she said.

"During the pandemic, as I pushed my walker around Hamilton, I would be mentally traversing the lines of a poem I loved."

Ms Cotton and her husband are both immunocompromised, so they are considered particularly vulnerable to infection.

They haven't had COVID.

"We had to self-isolate for extended periods, even after lockdowns had ended."

The fear and anxiety she experiences can be intense.

"I'm most afraid when I don't know what is going to happen, when things go off the rails and I discover I'm not in control of my life after all," she said.

For anxiety, she uses cognitive behavioural therapy to "help me reframe situations in more positive ways".

She has a mindfulness technique in which she closes her eyes and focuses on three things she can feel and three things she can



Ruth Cotton has written a captivating memoir. Pictures supplied



Ruth in 1957 as a champion horse rider.

hear to calm down.

"Having lived with MS for 25 years, I've learned a lot about acceptance, and how to adapt to changes in my capacity," she said.

In the book, she quotes a fellow writer and friend advising her on Zen Buddhism.

"In Zen we speak of remaining upright on the cushion, all the while being buffeted by storms and demons.

"But for this to happen, remaining upright, we need a strong container, a process, a practice. Zen is but one in this context, your writing is another."

Ms Cotton took the advice to heart,

describing in the book the Zen mind she needed - given her mobility troubles - while taking out the bins when her husband was in hospital.

She tries not to let her predicament get her down.

In her view, taking an adversarial approach to a chronic health condition is counterproductive.

"I've never been a person who rails against life. My MS is part of me. My husband's cancer is part of him."

She felt good fortune to be well enough to work in health services consulting until her late 60s.

"During my working life, I thought of MS as my watchdog. Step out of line and it barks," she said.

Stress, overdoing it and heat were the main triggers. So she "befriended" her MS.

"In a strange way, we'd come to an understanding of each other and could cohabit in the same body," she said.

One positive of having lived with MS is being better prepared for ageing.

"If I've managed to cope with a challenge like MS, that gives me confidence to believe I can cope with the next challenge, whether it is ageing, my husband's illness or disability in someone I love," she said.

TODAY IN HISTORY

- 1863** Prince Albert Edward (later King Edward VII) of England marries Princess Alexandra of Denmark.
- 1959** The Dalai Lama leads a rebellion against Chinese rule. The revolt fails and the Dalai Lama flees to India.
- 1990** American Jennifer Capriati becomes the youngest player ever to reach the final of a professional tennis tournament, at 13 years and 11 months.
- 2002** Russell Crowe wins best actor honours at the Screen Actors Guild awards for *A Beautiful Mind*.
- 2019** Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, a Boeing 737 MAX, crashes, leading to all 737 MAX aircraft being grounded worldwide.

BIRTHDAYS

Kate Sheppard, English-born New Zealand suffragette (1847–1934); **Chuck Norris**, US actor (1940–); **Morgan Tsvangirai**, Zimbabwean politician (1952–2018); **Paul Haggis**, Canadian filmmaker (1953–); **Sharon Stone**, US actor (1958–); **Prince Edward**, Earl of Wessex (1964–); **Felice Arena**, Australian author (1968–); **Jon Hamm**, US actor (1971–); **Timbaland**, US rapper and music producer (1971–); **Eva Herzigova**, Czech model (1973–); **Shannon Miller**, US gymnast (1977–); **Carrie Underwood**, US singer (1983–); **Olivia Wilde**, US actor (1984–); **Emily Osment**, US actor (1992–).

TRIVIA

1. Actor Sam Neill was born in which country?
2. What were the first names of the musical partnership Gilbert and Sullivan?
3. In what year did the Napoleonic Wars end: a) 1805, b) 1815 or c) 1825?
4. What colour is eosin?
5. Tenerife is the largest island of which set of islands?
6. What is philematology?
7. Which American writer published *The Raven* in 1845?
8. What confectionery was banned by Singapore's government in 1992?
9. Who played Ray's older brother in *Everybody Loves Raymond*?
10. The name of what plant, used as a herb and a spice, comes from the Latin word for 'Greek hay'?

ANSWERS: 1. New Zealand 2. William and Arthur 3. b) 1815 4. Pink 5. Canary Islands 6. The science of kissing 7. Edgar Allan Poe 8. Chew gum 9. Brad Garrett 10. Fenugreek

TODAY'S TEXT

I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

Psalm 16:8

STAR SNAP

CHRISTINE Taylor says quarantining during the pandemic led to her reconciling with husband Ben Stiller. "We had all this time to talk," Taylor, 51, told Drew Barrymore on her talk show. The pair had been separated for three years. "There were no other distractions. It was a really special time," she said, adding that "time apart" was vital.



Ben Stiller and Christine Taylor.

WHAT'S ON

A COMEDY hypnotist show with **Damien Mind Master**, and music by **Kaitlyn Simm**, will be held at **Hexham Bowling Club on Saturday at 6.30pm. It's a fun night of music and magic to raise money for the Cancer Council. Who will end up clucking like a chicken? Damien has been a hypnosis entertainer for 25 years.**

ODD SPOT

GERMAN researchers have found three natural compounds that proved lethal to fungi. They named the chemicals after actor Keanu Reeves, as he eliminates villains in movies such as John Wick and The Matrix. The potential treatment for fungi comes as the organisms are becoming more resistant to existing antifungals.