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Side Effects

Amy Goldman Koss

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Reviewer: Gillian Streeter
Reading Level: Young adult
Rating: Excellent
Genre: Contemporary realistic fiction;
Subject: Cancer--Juvenile fiction; Chemotherapy--Juvenile fiction; Family problems--Juvenile fiction; Books-Reviews;

Isabelle (Izzy) Miller is a regular fourteen year-old, right up until the swollen glands her family thought were from the flu turn out to be stage IV Hodgkin's lymphoma. Actually, Izzy still feels the same for the most part, but everyone around her starts acting differently: her mother cries all the time, her father paces, her brother complains about being sent off to his best friend's house, and her friend Kay is a wreck. Once her chemotherapy starts, Izzy feels sick and detached most of the time, and eventually wonders whether she'll be part of the percentage that beats cancer or not, and if it matters anymore. Side Effects, based on the experience of someone Koss knows, is one of the few stories about a teen who gets cancer and actually survives it.

Koss writes an irreverent, funny, and frequently swearing Izzy, showing that not all children with cancer are brave or even particularly likable--they're simply people going through "hellish but successful medical treatment." The reader knows from the outset that Izzy lives but will be caught up in her story to the point of wondering about death right along with her. While the character's eventual survival and success are encouraging, this may not be an ideal book for those suffering from cancer or related to others with cancer.