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Novelist Sarah Marie Graye discusses how the Mary Rose ship helped her reconceive chronic illness and trauma

I was one month short of my seventh birthday when the Mary Rose ship was raised from the seabed in October 1982. She had sunk in The Solent – the five-mile-wide stretch of water between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight – over four hundred years earlier.

We weren't allowed to watch TV before school, so I had to wait until I got home that evening to see the spectacle on children's TV programme *Blue Peter*.

I was so excited as I waited for the ship to emerge from the water, only to be dismayed by what I saw. I'd been expecting a war ship like the pictures we'd been shown at school, not a decimated wreck. I had no comprehension of just how large the discovered wreckage was; to my childish eyes, it was just a piece of wood. I was devastated. I can remember running up to my room, throwing myself on my bed, and sobbing my eyes out.



What I expected the Mary Rose ship to look like.

Credit: The Mary Rose Trust/Geoff Hunt PPRSMA. Image published with permission from the Mary Rose Trust.



The wreck of the Mary Rose being lifted from the water.

Credit: The Mary Rose Trust. Image published with permission from the Mary Rose Trust.

My father followed me upstairs and sat on the edge of the bed, ready to console me. He explained the Mary Rose ship was not only valid in her new form, but just as important as she had been before. Had she not sunk, we would have lost her to time – as we did with the rest of Henry VIII’s fleet – and we’d not have the opportunity to learn from a wreckage that had effectively been sealed in time for over four centuries.

I didn’t really grasp the point my father was making, but knowing the ship was still valuable went some way to soothe me.

Fast-forward twenty-five years, and I found myself in hospital having lung surgery for a newly diagnosed recurrent pneumothorax (collapsed lung). The damaged part of my lung was sent for biopsy and the resulting diagnosis was idiopathic emphysema with focal collapse and fibrosis: a life-limiting health condition that would probably be the cause of my death.

Overnight, my life had changed irrevocably.

Dealing with the physical side of being ill – surgeries, treatments, drugs, physio – was relatively straight forward; the mental and emotional side was not. I didn’t know how to adjust from being a “well person” to suddenly being a “chronically ill person”: my life was falling apart, and I had to somehow learn to live with the aftermath.

Once again, my father came to my rescue. He reminded me of the Mary Rose ship. Yes, I might be different now, but the new version of me was still just as valid. I realised that in some ways my life had changed beyond comprehension, and yet I was still me.

I was also conscious that being in hospital was triggering flashbacks from my childhood. I thought I’d left those memories behind, but for some reason they were now flooding

my brain and I didn't understand why. I discovered that new trauma is processed by the same part of the brain that has dealt with any traumas of the past, and so dealing with new trauma can awaken old traumas that the brain has attempted to bury.

I decided that if I shared my story with others who had been diagnosed with a life-changing illness and who had ended up reprocessing old traumas as a result, it would be one way of validating the new version of my life. As a writer, it made sense to me to write a novel using the Mary Rose ship as a motif running throughout the story.

I'm now writing a novel as part of a "practice as research" PhD at the University of Kent. My protagonist, who is called Mary Rose, suffers a freak accident in the bath and starts to sink "starboard-side" first, just like her namesake. She ends up in a coma – and her mind makes sense of her situation by letting her believe she's on the Mary Rose ship.

The ship becomes both her safe space and a place she needs to escape from in order to recover from her coma. The ship's artefacts are mimicked by important items in her own childhood as she revisits her past in order to understand the memories of trauma that her accident has triggered.

I hope my novel will speak to those who have recurring trauma and make them realise their response to their past traumas is completely normal – and that they are not alone in their experiences.

***Sarah Marie Graye** is a published indie author and a PhD candidate on the University of Kent's Contemporary Novel: Practice as Research programme. Her research focuses on illness narratives, specifically looking at memory, trauma and mental health. She can be found on Twitter at @SarahMarieGraye.*