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**Beautiful Unbroken: One Nurse's Life** Mary Jane Nealon

**An unflinching memoir by a working nurse**

As a child, Mary Jane Nealon dreams of growing up to become a saint or, failing that, a nurse. She idolizes Clara Barton, Kateri Tekakwitha, and Molly Pitcher, whose biographies she reads and rereads. But by the time she follows her calling to nursing school, her beloved younger brother is diagnosed with cancer, which challenges her to bring hope and healing closer to home. His death leaves her shattered, and she flees into her work, and into poetry.

*Beautiful Unbroken* details Nealon's life of caregiving, from her years as a flying nurse, untethered and free to follow friends and jobs from the Southwest to Savannah, to more somber years in New York City, treating men in a homeless shelter on the Bowery and working in the city's first AIDS wards. In this compelling and revealing memoir, Nealon brings a poet's sensitivity to bear on the hard truths of disease and recovery, life and death.

## Beautiful Unbroken: One Nurse's Life Details

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# From Reader Review *Beautiful Unbroken: One Nurse's Life* for online ebook

## Charlene says

Before I began this memoir, I thought it would either be boring or make me sick from all the details of nursing. It definitely wasn't boring. Although, there were some parts that left me queasy, but that was okay. Those moments helped me feel what she felt as a nurse. It made her journey more real for me.

This memoir was heartbreaking and inspiring, both as a human being and a writer. I appreciate her candor and honesty. It is difficult to admit wrong and faults, but it was necessary to her journey and increased self-awareness and self-recognition.

Thanks, Mary Jane Nealon, for sharing your journey with me.

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## Irene says

I recieved a copy of this book from the Goodreads First-Reads program.

So, the book came in the mail a few days ago (woo-hoo!). In the package was a letter from the publisher thanking me in advance for reading and reviewing the book (which always comes with First-Reads books), a postcard endorsing a book of poetry also published by the Graywolf Press publishing company (not an uncommon addition to a First-Reads package), a brochure of some blurbs and reviews of recent books published by Graywolf Press (a bit forward of them, but if *Beautiful Unbroken* is good, I might just check out a couple of the books listed), and finally, a temporary tattoo (unheard of!) that labels the wearer in bold, block letters above the Graywolf Press logo as an "Insensitive Bastard".

Ex-cuse me?!? Did I just read that tattoo right?

Turns out *The Heyday of the Insensitive Bastards* is a collection of short stories published by Graywolf Press, but I didn't know that until I looked it up on the internet. That has to be the weirdest gift I've ever recieved. Somehow I don't see myself wearing *that* on my arm, or, better, on my forehead, anytime soon.

Review to come, once I read the book.

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I really enjoyed this book. One of the pros to reading a proof by a published poet is that 1) they don't make typos much, if at all, and 2) the words are already beautiful as is and an editor is basically not needed to make the story any clearer or more elegant. Nealon is already an accomplished poet, but this memoir proves that she is just as competent in writing prose. The story flowed well, with twists and turns and a lot of internal conflict. I didn't give it five stars because it doesn't quite have that extra oomph to make me want to read it over and over, but it deserves at least a 4.5. Anyone who gives this a 5 star rating, I can definitely see why, and this book probably deserves it. Excellent job, Nealon! People, if you have any connection to the chronically ill, deceased family members, AIDS, nursing, NYC, even just hospitals in general, this is a great choice.

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**Diane says**

I LOVED the beautiful story of sharing intimately in the lives as people are fearful and suffering. Inside story of the first people suffering from our Aids epidemic

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**Dnicebear says**

You learn to salve the wounds of others by knowing and remembering how much it hurts to hurt. Often this memory comes from the realization of your past smallness and immaturity, your selfishness, your false victimhood, and your cruel victimization of others. It is often painful to recall or admit, yet this is also the grace of lamenting and grieving over how we have hurt others.

It is a gift to read this memoir of one who is connected to healing through knowing well her own hurts. Though Ms Nealon does not claim this, I feel like she is as much a chaplain as she is a nurse. And, she does not hesitate to let the poetry come through. Over and over I underlined places where the poetry took me deeper into the situation.

"I tried not to think about it, (the way she'd hurt her brother) but it was like barbed wire around my soul." (p 94)

"...even when I watched the fathers go back down the hall to the bar or their office I understood and made a bubble of understanding and forgiveness around my host families of death." (p.42)

I love the way words and body wisdom go together for Ms Nealon. She learned so much from her writing workshops. One of her teachers was "a gentle woman who was able to make room around a poem and let people talk about, but only if they could do so while continuing to respect where the poem had come from, to honor the impulse of making the poem." p. 47

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**Judyspadoni says**

What to say' it wasn't a light and entertaining book, it was much heavier than that. It felt like it weighed me down in a dark cloud. It was not a hard read but I felt the author was all alone in the world even with her family and friends.

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**Libby says**

This book is life changing. A memoir of nurse Mary Jane Nealon's life and losses, it's also a memoir of transcendence and redemption, of how the celebration of the ordinary, precious moments of our lives can save us from despair, of how compassion can take us a long, long way, and of how words and language can heal. Deserves to be read and reread--lots of wisdom and love here.

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## Jessica at Book Sake says

An unflinching memoir is right. As a nursing student I really wanted to read this and see how nursing could change someone's life. Now I want to give the author a giant hug while also applauding her for following her heart. There is one basic timeline but it's interjected with flashes back and forward, as happens when you are telling a true story. The book covers the time from when the author was a child throughout her nursing career, but most of it does focus on the time she has worked as a nurse. Her story is heart breaking, there is so much loss in her personal life it's amazing to see how it comes to play with her work.

Reading through all of the different types of nursing jobs that Nealon had was eye opening. I knew there were a lot of various types of careers a nurse can work as, but didn't realize one person could do so many different things. She definitely has had the mentality that she would do whatever job other people weren't doing – such as working with AIDS patients and I can totally relate to that as I'm the student that wants to work with the dead, the traumatized, or the mentally ill (not a big draw with the students in our school). Nealon seems to leave nothing out, no detail is left out and the story feels brutally honest. This isn't a book that shows only the bright side of life and nursing, but shows how it really is.

Reviewed by Jessica for Book Sake.

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## Michael says

My review from the Missoula Independent:

As a hypochondriac, I don't typically read first-person medical nonfiction (or second-person, or third-person). I rarely pick up a memoir, and if I do, I invariably put it back down quickly. And I fervently stay away from books that feature exaggerated photographs of women floating dramatically on highly reflective pools of water. So, when I finally received my copy of Mary Jane Nealon's *Beautiful Unbroken*, I was skeptical, insofar as it complies with every one of my irrational offenses. I opened the book apprehensively, expecting to be at once repulsed by health care horrors and marginally disappointed by a sentimental storyline.

From the very first sentence, *Beautiful Unbroken* is not what I had feared. Yes, there are plenty of health care horrors, but to call this sentimental, or even slightly romanticized, would be like calling *Requiem for a Dream* an ecstatic saga about youth.

Nealon begins with: "As far back as I remember I wanted to be a nurse or a saint. I wanted to be heroic." Growing up in Jersey City, she read through the lives of the great nurses and caregivers of history, and, after watching her policeman father cut a neighbor down from a suicide attempt, she decides to care for people in spectacular ways. Becoming a flying nurse, Nealon travels the country, treating the seriously ill in chemotherapy and oncology wards. To overcome the stress she starts writing bits of poetry in her spare time. With the untimely death of her brother from cancer, Nealon seeks to escape the thought that she has abandoned him, while trying to replicate her love for him in the faces of other terminal boys.

A local poet and director of Program Development at Partnership Health Center, Nealon has two previous

books of poems to her credit (certain lines from her second collection, *Immaculate Fuel*, made me an instant fan). She writes with great utility and the poet's disregard for the unnecessary. Episodically recalling past decades, she describes the huge numbers of ailing individuals she attended to, grand friendships and the whirlwind of short-term love affairs with various men in various locales ("Formula for love: be leaving town in three months", she sarcastically advises). Swept along from Savannah to New Mexico and back to the East Coast, *Beautiful Unbroken* hits again and again on the themes of leaving and returning, and how, at a particular point, these terms become interchangeable.

In 1987, everything in Nealon's world changed. As the AIDS epidemic exploded, she found herself plunged into a true heart of darkness, working in one of the first AIDS clinics in New York City. This job, combined with her later experience volunteering at an AIDS-decimated shelter in the Bowery, fill the most noteworthy passages of *Beautiful Unbroken*. One unforgettable incident has Nealon visiting the home of two HIV-positive brothers—who would die within the next few months—and observing the plight of their sorrowful mother. Even here, in the worst possible scenarios of Nealon's nursing career, the carefully rendered personalities of her patients and her sympathy with nearly everyone cuts through the gloom of the inevitable.

Nealon's prose bristles with little enlightenments that arise from coping daily with the emaciation of sufferers, to going on short hiatuses to Fishers Island and the nudist colony of Esalen. But what is perhaps most extraordinary about *Beautiful Unbroken* is Nealon's ability to out-manuever devastating personal calamities with eloquence and determination. After more tragedy culminates with her witnessing the crumbling away of the Twin Towers, she moves to Missoula. "I lost my parents, and then the towers fell," Nealon writes with a characteristic blend of humor and sadness, "and it was the same grief: too large for anything I had ever known, but not, as it turns out, too large for Montana in winter."

A much-deserved recipient of a 2010 Bakeless Prize, *Beautiful Unbroken* is alternately despairing, funny, gross and entirely hopeful. It's a perfectly titled memoir that contains the material for 10,000 stanzas of top-notch poetry. There could have been more than the slim 20 pages detailing Nealon's early years and nursing school days, but this is a quibble with an otherwise striking narrative. This is a riveting autobiography, a heartrending glimpse of living among the dying. I finished the book in about two sittings and had the urge to call the author and demand that she tell me more.

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### **Amy Holman says**

This is a superbly written memoir of a flying nurse working in the south and southwest who returned home to treat New York City's homeless, and then found herself at the forefront of the AIDS epidemic as it ravaged gay men, and then black men and women. She is also a poet who grew up the middle child in an Irish Catholic family in Jersey City, who had a beloved younger brother survive bad childhood accidents only to contract cancer and die barely a man. Her story is about the bodies of young men who are injured and dying, the brother she temporarily abandons to pursue her dream, the parents and sister she lives far away from and finally returns to, and her emergence as a poet. It is a memoir about finally caring for the people who needed her most, and who she was only able to help because of the men all around the country who had taught her through their dying. She needed to leave home to come home. The title, *Beautiful Unbroken*, is a metaphor of balance gained when she finally releases, one by one, the dead she has carried.

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## **Julie Ekkers says**

Beautiful Unbroken is a lovely, lovely memoir. It won the Bakeless Prize for creative nonfiction, a prize which is awarded annually to launch the publication career of a poet, fiction writer, and creative nonfiction writer. I stumbled on it because Bakeless winners are published by Graywolf Press, from which I have purchased things in the past, and it was featured in an e-mail. What a happy find! The author is a nurse, and so trained in compassion, but she struggles throughout much of the book to treat her younger self with compassion for moving away from her family in what would be her brother's last days. Early in the book she writes, "What do we \*owe\* each other?" and answers herself by writing, "We owe more than we have. We owe more than we can bear." I thought the book was very much an exploration of coming to terms with all the ways in which this is unsatisfying, but all the ways in which what we can give, can still make a difference--to others, and to ourselves. The author spent time as a traveling nurse, and well as a nurse on an AIDS ward in NYC when very little was known about AIDS, and as a nurse to homeless men. She does an excellent job conveying what each of these situations was like, particularly how frightening AIDS was before medical professionals even knew what they were dealing with, and were trying to find a treatment that worked let alone a cure, and the world of poverty which is hidden from most of us.

The authors is also a poet, and writes with a poet's sensibilities. Early in the book I found myself impatient with the number of the metaphors, but I came to feel that their absence would be inauthentic. I believe this is the way in which the author just walks through the world. I also came to like the juxtaposition of the poetic and the author's very frank tone (as she author was a nurse, there's some tough stuff in here).

So well done. She doesn't grasp. . .she just holds her life out for the reader to see, and "shows her works" as she has made sense of that life.

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## **Jacquie says**

I didn't enjoy this book as much as I thought I would. Perhaps I had expectations that were different than what Nealon was trying to get across. I thought the book was going to be about her life as a nurse and why the loss of her brother brought her there. Instead, she was fixated on her Laura Ashley dress, numerous meaningless relationships with an occasional nursing experience thrown in.

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## **Michelle says**

interesting and a great read

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## **Sheri S. says**

Beautiful Unbroken is more than just the story of a nurse's life, it is a story about understanding and accepting death in a respectful manner. It is about embracing and accepting the life of a human on the cusp of entering eternity. Nealon writes about how the death of her brother shaped her life and how her experience working with the dying (particularly those dying of cancer and HIV/AIDS) impacted her life's journey. Nealon's ability to depict her feelings through carefully chosen words is evident throughout this book. She

acknowledges her pain and chooses, through poetry and new experiences, to let go of that pain and begin each day anew.

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### **McGuffy Morris says**

For Mary Jane Nealon, she knew her entire life that she was meant to serve others. Her role models were saints, and those who could be saints: nurses, such as Clara Barton. She read the biographies of truly admirable women, mostly saints and nurses that she would strive to be like.

Mary Jane follows her dream into nursing school. There, her dream takes on a new and very personal meaning. Her younger brother becomes seriously ill with cancer. When she loses him to the disease, she finds healing for herself in her nursing career and in poetry.

Poets have used this medium for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Poetry can put feelings into words helping to sort out feelings and events in one's life. It is cathartic and healing.

Writing poetry helped Mary Jane in her healing and coming to terms with issues, and it honed her skills as a writer. She brings her poetic sensitivity to her memoir. Here she speaks of some of her experiences as a nurse in many difficult, even desperate situations. She works for some time as a medical flight nurse. Later she works men's homeless shelters, and the first AIDS ward in New York City.

This is a remarkable book, beginning with a title that is appropriate and poetic. I don't know if she will achieve saint status, but I know some nurses should. Mary Jane Nealon may be one of them.

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### **Jessica says**

I wrote out a review and my computer deleted it. So here goes for a second time.

The book itself was written okay; not really my "style" (lots of similes and metaphors which seemed to serve no other purpose than to make the writing fancier). As a nurse (who deals with a lot of dying patients - I work in a high acuity ICU), I had issues with how she described her relationship to her patients, and that really spoiled the book for me. She deals with the death of her brother (and her response to his death) with her work; she deals with her grief from both of them in her relationships with her significant others. I don't fault her for watching the slide show with her dying patient's family on her lunch break; sometimes (not often) doing something like that can be part of the humanity of nursing (though I don't think doing something like that is essential for any and all nurses). But she seemed to lack emotional boundaries. There seemed to be a lot of counter-transference going on. To last as a nurse, you need to find a way to somehow leave your work at work and not let the stress of it pour into everything else you do, and you need to find a way to leave your personal life at home, and not let all your personal woes pour into what you do for 8 or 12 hours. Yes, one affects the other, but you need some sort of boundaries to stay sane. In the end, I got the impression that part of why she left nursing wasn't just because she wanted to be a writer, but also because she wanted an escape from nursing, because in some degree she had burnt out. I will give her a good bit of credit for making the transition from one to the other, instead of trying to tough it out as a nurse until retirement, getting more and more bitter.



