

KIRKUS

REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

ONLY A SHADOW

Janet Richards

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BOOK REVIEW

A memoir offers a tribute to a young man of indomitable spirit who dies too soon.

Richards (*Crossing the River Sorrow*, 2013) met Monty Martin McDonald in 2001 in Lakeview, Oregon, when he showed up at her front door the day of his mother's funeral. The author had seen him for the first time a few days earlier, sitting by the curb with his mother, selling lemonade. Shortly thereafter, his mother committed suicide, leaving behind three children. At age 8, McDonald was the youngest. Over the next three years, he and Richards formed a unique bond—a middle-age nurse/teacher and a young boy with a drive to forge his place in the world. Then McDonald moved to Key Peninsula in Washington state to live with his grandmother and father, and Richards and her husband headed to Moscow, Idaho. The author and McDonald stayed in touch. On Feb. 21, 2013, 19-year old McDonald called to report he had a rare form of bone cancer that had invaded his knee. Richards immediately drove to Seattle to meet him at the hospital. What follows are the excruciating details of his courageous, good-humored, yet ultimately doomed struggle to overcome this cruel disease, interspersed with Richards' memories of her own childhood and young adulthood. The author is a skillful wordsmith, so it isn't until about halfway through this short volume that readers will realize the sad, lovingly textured story is as much about Richards' rediscovery of Christianity during her friendship with McDonald as it is about his fateful odyssey. Nonbelievers may find the heavy dose of religiosity an intrusion into what could easily have been a more universal, metaphysical treatise on the nature of suffering and the beauty of life's simple joys. Yet the prose remains riveting. Here is the author's first impression of Lakeview: "The arid landscape at the foot of the Warner Mountains was as disheartening as the scent of sunbaked sagebrush, the whirling dust devils that circled our car, and the swarms of kamikaze locust obliterating our windshield with a thick yellow goo."

Alternately buoyant with youthful optimism and heartbreakingly painful; a touching account of a striking journey.