

## Book Review

### Review of *Rearranged: An Opera Singer's Facial Cancer and Life Transposed*

Vinciya Pandian, PhD, MBA, MSN, ACNP-BC, FCCM, FAANP, FAAN, FFMNRCIS<sup>1,2,3</sup> , Michael J Brenner, MD, FACS<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Ross and Nese College of Nursing, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA,

<sup>2</sup> Department of Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery, College of Medicine, The Pennsylvania State University, Hershey, PA, USA,

<sup>3</sup> Center for Immersive Learning and Digital Innovation, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA,

<sup>4</sup> Department of Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Keywords: Laryngology, Head and neck cancer, Voice and identity, Airway management, Swallowing dysfunction, Tracheostomy care, Reconstructive surgery, Interdisciplinary care, Patient narrative, Quality of life

---

## ORL - Head and Neck Nursing

Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2026

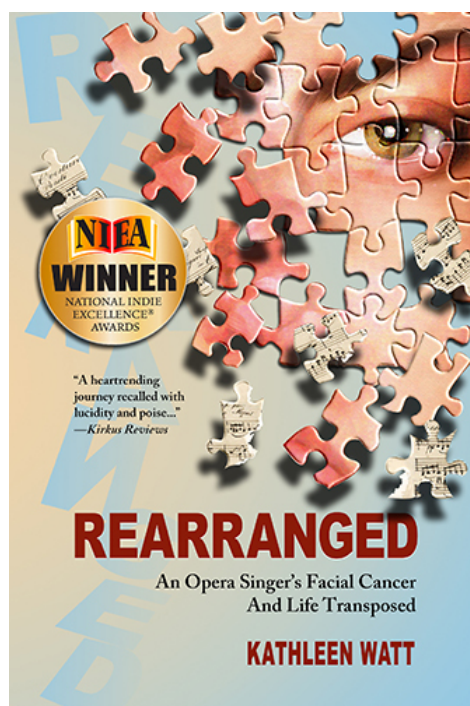
---

When Kathleen Watt, an accomplished opera singer, was diagnosed with head and neck-related facial cancer affecting structures central to voice, airway, and identity, her world was irrevocably altered. A powerful blend of memoir, medical journey, and personal reflection, *Rearranged: An Opera Singer's Facial Cancer and Life Transposed* offers readers a deeply emotional account of Watt's experience, as well as a meditation on identity, survival, and the resilience of the human spirit. Watt's memoir is more than just a recounting of her battle with cancer. It's an exploration of how a life can be rearranged, not only by a diagnosis but by the very essence of living through profound trauma. The book is an unflinching look at the intersection of personal ambition and the vulnerability that accompanies a medical crisis. Through Watt's narrative, readers are offered an inside look at the struggles, triumphs, and setbacks she faced while trying to navigate a world that demanded both vocal performance and personal appearance from her as an artist.

### THE ARTIST'S IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF VOICE AND IMAGE

One of the most striking elements of Watt's story is her deep connection to her voice and appearance as a professional opera singer. For Watt, her face, laryngeal function, and voice were inseparable and integral parts of her art. Opera is not just about the beauty of the voice; it is a physical performance, a total sensory experience where the performer's presence, emotions, and facial expressions are equally crucial. Watt's story reveals the profound psychological and emotional toll that comes with losing part of one's identity, especially when that identity is rooted in the visible and audible performance art of opera. From the outset of her diagnosis, Watt was faced with the cruel reality of losing both her facial features and the tool of her profession, her voice, breath control, and expressive communication. The treatment she undergoes for her facial cancer required multiple surgeries, each of which changed not only the structure of her face but also laryngeal function, resonance, articulation, and her ability to sing and perform. In a world that prizes physical beauty, especially in the performing arts, this challenge took on a deeper significance. Watt explores the delicate balance between maintaining her passion for opera while dealing with the harsh reality of a body that no longer mirrored the self she once knew.

As a facial plastic surgeon, one sees in Watt's narrative the immense physical and emotional impact of reconstructive surgery, the way every incision, graft, or implant intersects with a patient's self-image. As a tracheostomy nurse practitioner, airway management, voice loss, altered communication, and dysphagia, are core concerns in laryngology and head and neck oncology care, that Watt delicately alludes to. Together, these perspectives underscore that healing in laryngology patients is never only physical. It is also artistic, social, and existential. In several deeply reflective passages, Watt conveys the profound existential crisis she experienced as she grappled with the loss of facial features that had long



been inseparable from her sense of self and artistic identity. She describes not simply the loss of appearance, but the disorientation of no longer recognizing herself in the mirror or in the world. This captures the depth of her struggle as she confronted both her altered physical appearance and an uncertain professional future. Her powerful narrative speaks to the universal experience of loss, regardless of profession or social status.

### THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

While Watt's experience with cancer is harrowing, the way she navigates it is inspiring. Her ability to recount the various treatments, surgeries, and therapies with candidness and vulnerability allows readers to connect with her on an emotional level. The book is filled with both moments of despair and moments of light, revealing the complexity of living with illness. What stands out is the detail with which Watt describes not just the physical aspects of her treatment, including repeated surgeries and functional losses relevant to speech and swallowing, but the emotional toll. From the moment of diagnosis to the ongoing process of healing, she reveals the depth of her inner turmoil and the profound impact cancer had on her sense of self. Yet, she also weaves in the moments of beauty, grace, and humor that sustained her. Whether it was the comfort of her family, the strong support of friends, or the

moments of joy that came from rediscovering music in a new way, Watt's journey was not only about survival but about transformation.

Her emotional candor about the loneliness and isolation that came with her illness is also compelling. She speaks frankly about the strain her diagnosis put on her relationships and how the pressures of her physical appearance reshaped her interactions with the world. It's a difficult and often isolating process, and Watt's openness allows others going through similar experiences to feel less alone. From the surgical and nursing perspectives, this honesty resonates. We are reminded that every reconstructive plan, voice rehabilitation strategy, or tracheostomy care protocol, however clinically successful, must be measured against the lived experience of the patient navigating altered identity, communication, and relationships.

### THE POWER OF RESILIENCE AND REINVENTION

A recurring theme throughout *Rearranged* is the power of resilience. While Watt's journey is filled with obstacles, the book is also about the transformative nature of hardship. Watt ultimately describes a process of relearning how to express herself artistically and personally, finding new ways to "sing" that extended beyond technical vocal performance to include communication, emotional expression, and redefined vocal identity. This encapsulates the idea that reinvention and resilience do not come from returning to the past but from embracing a new future, one that may not look the same but is equally beautiful in its own way. Watt's reinvention as both an artist and a person is a central narrative thread. As her surgeries progressed, she found herself not only adapting to a new appearance but also discovering new ways of relating to the world around her. She confronted her fears and insecurities head-on and began to explore the ways in which she could express herself, both as an artist and as an individual, through a new lens. It is not just the recovery of her physical voice, but also the reclamation of her inner strength that drives the narrative forward.

Her transformation was not quick or easy. It was fraught with discomfort, doubt, and frustration. Yet through persistence, she ultimately found a renewed sense of self. From the surgical lens, her journey highlights how reconstruction is as much about restoring confidence as repairing tissue. From the nursing lens, it underscores the small, daily adaptations, managing airway care, nutritional support, voice and speech rehabilitation, and patient education, that allow a patient to build toward reinvention. The book's title, *Rearranged*, perfectly encapsulates this shift—life may not return to the way it once was, but it can be reshaped and redefined in ways that lead to new beginnings.

### THE ROLE OF SUPPORT: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Another powerful element of Watt's story is the importance of community and family. She is quick to acknowledge the immense support she received from her loved ones, from her partner to her friends, to the medical professionals who helped guide her through the journey. Her family's emotional support provided her with the fortitude needed to push through the darkest moments of her illness. It is a testament to the importance of human connection in the face of crisis. Watt also reflects thoughtfully on the role of affirmation and connection during her illness, while making clear that formal cancer support groups were not a good fit for her personally. Rather than presenting a single prescribed path to emotional support, she emphasizes the importance of honoring

individual needs, finding understanding, validation, and strength through trusted relationships, creative expression, and personal reflection. This perspective offers reassurance to readers that choosing not to participate in structured support groups is also a valid and self-aware decision, and that healing can take many forms. For us as reviewers, these themes resonate deeply: the surgeon's task is never complete without acknowledging the psychosocial scaffolding that sustains recovery, and the nurse's task is incomplete without recognizing the family caregivers who shoulder daily care. Watt's memoir validates the central role of these human supports in laryngology recovery, long-term adaptation, and reinvention.

### CONCLUSION: A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

*Rearranged: An Opera Singer's Facial Cancer and Life Transposed* is more than just a memoir about cancer; it is a meditation on the human condition, the fragility of life, and the strength that resides within us all. Kathleen Watt's journey through facial cancer is marked by immense physical and emotional pain, but also by a deep well of courage and resilience. Through her story, readers are reminded of the importance of redefining oneself in the face of hardship and of the transformative power of embracing change, even when it seems insurmountable. As a facial plastic surgeon and tracheostomy nurse, we found Watt's memoir both clinically illuminating and profoundly humanizing. Her account underscores the need for interdisciplinary, compassionate care in otorhinolaryngology and head and neck nursing, where reconstructive surgery, airway management, voice and swallowing rehabilitation, and psychosocial support are inseparable. The book is a witness to Watt's determination to not only survive but to thrive. It offers invaluable insights for patients, caregivers, and otorhinolaryngology clinicians navigating illness, trauma, or change. Watt's story will resonate with anyone who has ever faced a difficult challenge, reminding us that even in the most trying of circumstances, the human spirit has an incredible capacity for reinvention and survival. *Rearranged* is a powerful, emotionally resonant work that leaves readers with a sense of hope and a profound appreciation for resilience, artistry, and the human soul.

#### Disclosure

The authors report no financial or personal relationships with the author or publisher of the book reviewed.

#### Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the conception, drafting, and final approval of this manuscript.

#### Permissions

The authors received permission from the book's author to review and discuss this work; no copyrighted text was reproduced verbatim.

Submitted: December 30, 2025 CST. Accepted: December 30, 2025 CST. Published: February 28, 2026 CST.

### REFERENCES

Watt, K. (2023). *Rearranged: An opera singer's facial cancer and life transposed*. Heliotrope Books.