

A BRUSH WITH MORTALITY

He is the renowned cancer expert who cared for JG Ballard. His first novel was so full of sex that he had to use a pen name.

Now Jonathan Waxman has published the book that he and Ballard had hoped to co-write. Caroline Phillips reports

PORTRAIT BY STEVE SCHOFIELD

Pen pals:
the oncologist
Jonathan Waxman
treated JG Ballard
(far left) until the
author's death in 2009

When JG Ballard died, in April 2009, few people knew he had been planning a new work. The author of *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun*, celebrated for his bleak dystopian vision, had proposed a book co-written with his oncologist, Jonathan Waxman, to be called *Conversations with my Physician: the Meaning, if Any, of Life*.

An £80,000 advance was agreed in 2008, but then, as Professor Waxman recalls, "darkness struck, and Jimmy became too poorly to think about writing". The book was abandoned and Ballard succumbed to prostate cancer aged 78. Waxman gave a tribute at Ballard's memorial service at Tate Modern. But he felt he had let Ballard down, and decided to write the book himself, "for the love of a great man". It is now being published, retitled *The Elephant in the Room*.

They had become friends years earlier, when Waxman had cared for one of Ballard's friends who was suffering from breast cancer. "Jonathan is highly intelligent, thoughtful and always gentle," Ballard wrote of Waxman in his autobiography, devoting an entire chapter to him. He had also encouraged Waxman's own creative efforts, giving an ecstatic cover quote for Waxman's first attempt at fiction, *The Fifth Gospel*: "The most extraordinary novel I have read for many years... an explosive masterpiece."

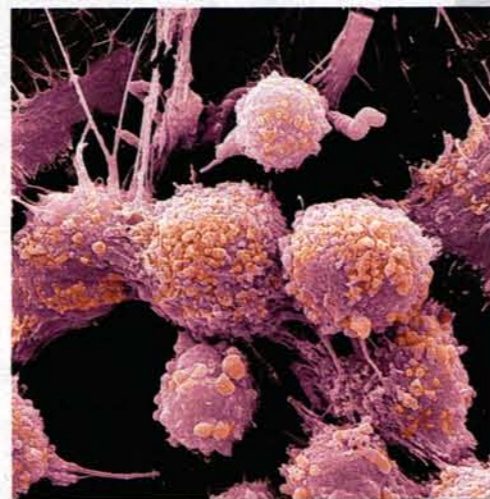
By day, Waxman, 59, is professor of oncology at Imperial College London and consultant physician at the Hammersmith Hospital. He is a world expert on prostate cancer, and developed a new, now routinely-used treatment for the illness. He founded the Prostate Cancer Charity, raised funds towards building the Hammersmith Cancer Care Centre, and co-established an All Parliamentary Group to improve cancer treatment. He was also involved, controversially, in assessing the Lockerbie bomber, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi. "My prognosis, based on averages, was that he'd live about nine months. But I wrote in my report that there was a 1% to 3% chance that he could survive up to five years. Who could have predicted he'd last this long?"

Waxman's life as an author has been under wraps. He hasn't been identified as the author of *The Fifth Gospel*, published in 1997, until now. The tale includes sodomy, getting wenches with child and passionate couplings conducted by priests: "a novel about decadence, deviance", as the cover has it. Little wonder he used a pseudonym, David Alexander. "I was worried about my grants, my patients and the amount of sex in it."

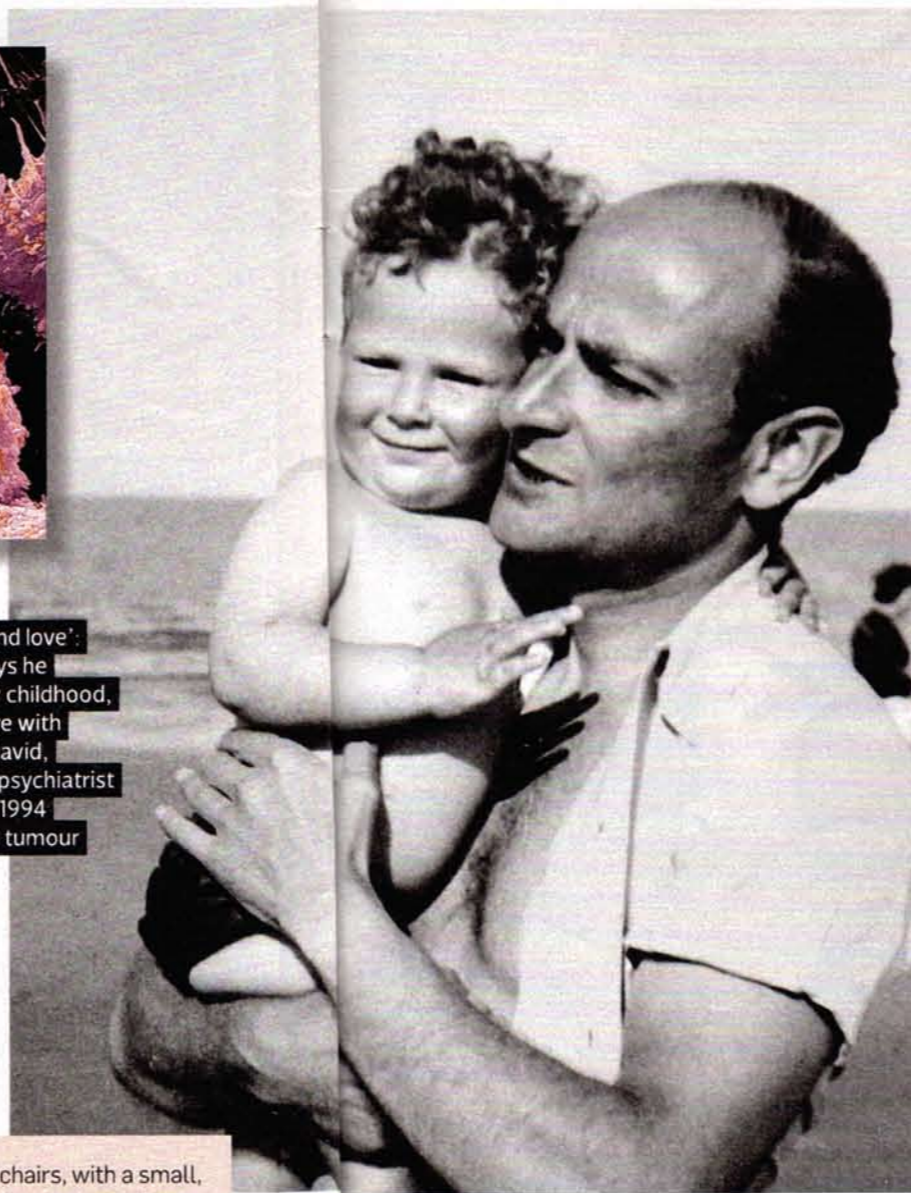
He lives in a large Victorian house in what should be dubbed the Therapists' Square Mile near Hampstead Heath, with his partner of many years, Naomi Heaton. But we first meet in the Hammersmith Hospital's Cancer Care Centre. Waxman, softly spoken with a gentle manner and wry humour, is wearing a gangster's suit with wide chalk stripes. His office has navy walls, red carpet, a yellow sofa and green chaise longue. On the wall is an ironic touch: a 1940s advertisement, "Smoke Craven 'A'. Will not affect your throat".

Waxman is more than a little eccentric. He featured in a 1989 Sunday Times Magazine article about individuals who preferred ideas to objects. "He's the only person I know who doesn't have a TV. You see him looking at the wall," laughs a friend of 35 years. (Actually, Waxman now has a television for the sake of his children, Thea and Freddie, 17 and 15). He wrote *The Elephant in the Room* in two weeks, on holiday. "A chapter a day," he adds. "I'm not good at the beach or skiing."

There's a tradition of authorial doctors — from A J Cronin to Somerset Maugham and William Carlos Williams. Christopher Isherwood, Waxman reminds me, also went to medical school. And books for the layman on cancer: CS Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, Susan Sontag's



'Sunshine and love': Waxman says he had a happy childhood, pictured here with his father, David, an eminent psychiatrist who died in 1994 from a brain tumour



'He told us your father has a tumour'

An extract from *The Elephant in the Room*, by Jonathan Waxman
My mother telephoned. "I'm worried about your father. He's not right." My father worked as a psychiatrist, and he loved his job almost as much as he loved my mother. "Well, Mum, I'll arrange for Dad to see somebody at the hospital..." My dad seemed relaxed with the process

of being a patient; the disempowerment of a surrender to medicine was comforting.

I pulled his folder from the medical record trolley, to the prickly disapproval of three ugly nurses, and read the diagnosis: a suspected glioblastoma. I flicked through the plastic sheets of brain CT scans and saw the poisonous white spider's web of the tumour's traces creeping out through the normal structures of his brain. Those images and that moment are with me now. Dad had his biopsy the next morning. I found him sitting in one of those horrid, unstylish, plastic-covered

hospital chairs, with a small, square plaster slapped over his skull. "The surgeon's just been in," said my mum. "He told us that your father has a tumour, and then he left."

The famous surgeon had broken bad news, badly, without pausing for questions or suggesting that any treatment might be possible. "Well, we'd better have a drink." I'd brought a bottle of whisky to the hospital and it was in the bedside cabinet. Dad got up from his chair and we walked to the water fountain in the corridor because Dad liked to water his whisky.

"Is there anything you'd like to talk about, Dad?"

Illness as Metaphor and Siddhartha Mukherjee's *The Emperor of All Maladies*. Plus John Diamond and Ruth Picardie's cancerlogs. But *The Elephant in the Room* is just one of a tiny number of books published from the doctor's point of view. "I wanted to explain in a sometimes light-hearted way how cancer is managed, how doctors think and to show their humanity," says Waxman, pausing to sip herbal tea. "Medicine has also become so undervalued — it seems so simple on ER or *Spooks*. I wanted to show it's actually enormously complex and skilled."

There is one pure Carry On Doctor moment in the book: a true story of a consultant who carries out a rectal assessment while berating a junior doctor — and pays no attention to his examining finger. "As the consultant walked off, he was dragged back by an unseen silky force. He had managed inadvertently to insert his tie into the patient's bottom. 'Sister,' he said. 'Scissors.'" The final chapter is particularly poignant. It's

about Waxman's father, David, a well-known psychiatrist, who died of a brain tumour in 1994. "It took him two weeks to die. That's the longest I've taken off work. I said everything I needed to say. I'd married someone he didn't like and I apologised for the heartache that had caused. But most of the time he was in a coma. I didn't feel anything. You have to protect yourself. I was a doctor in my father's death rather than a son, but it makes me cry now to look back."

Waxman had a happy childhood full of "sunshine and love". But when he was 11, he went into his father's garage and found boxes of photographs of mounds of dead bodies. "I can still feel the bare concrete garage floor..." His father had gone into Belsen after the war as a doctor, and these were his pictures. Waxman also grew up around a man, known to him only as Mr Fallon, who had spent time in prison for the molestation of children. "He'd lurk outside with his hands in his pockets but he never touched us."

His family (he has two younger siblings) lived in a mock-Tudor house adjoining a council estate. "Walking through our north London streets with Dad was the suburban equivalent of a royal procession." He often went on medical rounds with his father. "I'd sit in the car reading while he visited patients, and every so often someone would come out with sweets for me."

Waxman's family also features some infamous figures, including Peter Rachman, the notoriously exploitative 1960s London landlord and racketeer. The pornographer and media mogul Richard Desmond is his second cousin: "I only met him once, at my grandfather's flat. All I can remember are his suede shoes."

At medical school, Waxman devoured all of Ballard's sci-fi works. Later the novelist became the "most brave" patient he had ever encountered, and a father figure. "He was like my own father: quiet, dignified and above all concerned with his own family. He was a moral and sensitive man who did everything right." Waxman saw him — sometimes weekly — over a period of four years.

As recently as 1981, the treatment for prostate cancer was castration. "I thought it was bad enough to have cancer without then being castrated." That was what spurred him on to find a

humane treatment. He recalls how his father delivered babies to highlight how much medicine has changed. "He'd put soap under his fingernails and lay down newspapers." Cancer treatments have also advanced massively. "I used to go to the wards and nurses would hide patients from me behind curtains. They didn't want oncologists giving dying patients drugs that would make them even worse."

Potentially groundbreaking trials to genetically test tumours of 9,000 newly diagnosed patients have just been launched in seven British hospitals. Scientists believe the results could revolutionise cancer treatments. In other trials, Waxman is one of the people involved in overseeing 300 researchers — 30 under his supervision — who are trying to understand the processes that control cancer growth, with the aim of developing new treatments; and working with chemists to develop new drugs.

"The dream is always that we'll find a cure for all cancers tomorrow," he says, clasping his hands. "In the '50s there were just one or two treatment drugs; now there are thousands, with the potential soon for many more." Are we on the cusp of individualised treatment? "Yes, for each patient a customised drug cocktail could be mixed to treat their particular cancer." And the downsides? "It would bankrupt the nation — for example, currently to give a colon cancer patient the best of everything costs £250,000."

Waxman does not believe there is a God. "With such suffering, how can there possibly be one?" He has looked after "many thousands" of people. One in three dies. "I've learnt to savour every moment," he says quietly. "But I haven't had any great insight into why we're here or what life is about. Most people when they're dying

don't say much. They're usually in a cloud of drugs and peace. Occasionally, I've heard the dying seize the opportunity to say, 'You've been a shit,' or, 'I've been so grateful for your support.' But it's rare — people don't seem to tidy up."

Nowadays, doctors are encouraged to be utterly candid with patients, even if the prog-

nosis is grim: Waxman is unusual in that he always offers hope. He has no intention of retiring. "We don't ever stop working in my family," he concludes. Good news for cancer patients ■ *The Elephant in the Room* (Springer, £22.99) is available at the special price of £20.69 (inc p&pp) from the Sunday Times Bookshop (0845 2712134)

HE HAD INSERTED HIS TIE INTO THE PATIENT'S BOTTOM. 'SISTER,' HE SAID. 'SCISSORS'