

Author's novel is life laid bare

By Dennis Coffey - Staff Writer  
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Patrick McKenna Lynch Smith signs a book for Angel and Laureylin Martin. Photos by D. Coffey.

Patrick McKenna Lynch Smith's introduction to the novel he wrote about losing his wife to cancer was gruesome. Prior to the talk about his book at the Bracken Memorial Library on Jan. 17, he recalled an experience he had while working on a commercial fishing boat when he was a young man. The crew caught a 600-pound shark. It was so big they had to struggle to get it onto the boat. They used gaffs, machetes, and a shotgun. When it was still, one man got close enough to stick a knife above its eye to destroy its brain.

Because he was the rookie, Smith had to clean the fish. Gutting it

revealed a smaller shark swallowed whole. Inside that fish was another and inside the stomach of the fourth fish were the remnants of yet another. Finally three young slithered onto the bloody deck, exact duplicates of the mother.

That brutal, bloody episode was life laid bare, he said. "It had a profound effect on me." Yet it was nothing compared to what he and his wife Claudia went through while she fought cancer. "That was one thousand times worse," he said.

Smith spoke at Woodstock's Bracken Memorial Library as part of its authors series. His book, "Leaving the Life: A True Story of Love, Loss & Gratitude," is ultimately a love story. It chronicles the journey Smith and his wife took while coping with her terminal illness and eventual death.

It's a human imperative to tell story, according to Smith. Though his story was a difficult one, writing it saved his life. It helped him make sense of his wife's death. It gave him a wisdom that he's willing to share.

When he first learned of her diagnosis, he refused to say the word, "cancer," as if not speaking it would make it go away. "When you first learn that someone is going to die, it doesn't register," he said. "I thought I could do it on my own. That didn't work. My world and world view were collapsing."

The cancer was in Claudia's lung, pancreas, liver, adrenal glands, hip and tail bones. "I've never seen anything as careless and brutal," he said. "Nothing eased her pain."

Smith suffered as well, but some of that was due to his own selfishness. When hospice workers brought in a bed and set it where Claudia had a nice view, Smith wouldn't let her sleep in it. "I made her sleep in our bed that first night," he said, "even though it was uncomfortable for her. I wouldn't let her go."

Smith struggled with his grief when she died. "I remember the moment," he said. "I went looking for Claudia, rummaging through the kitchen cabinets for her."

When he started attending bereavement support groups offered by hospice, he started to find his way back from the brink. One woman who lost her husband talked about looking through the house for him after his death. "That was confirmation for me that I was going to make it," he said.