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Thread: [Ken Burns takes on 'Cancer'](#)

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Who has not been stung, in one way or another, by cancer?

The statistics cited by PBS's Sharon Rockefeller are staggering: In our lifetime, she says, one in two men, one in three women, and one in 300 children will get some form of cancer. She was one of them; Rockefeller is a breast cancer survivor. So when she read Siddhartha Mukherjee's book *The Emperor of all Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, she was determined to make it into a film

So she turned to PBS's premiere filmmaker, Ken Burns — whose mother died of breast cancer when he was eleven — to shepherd the project. The result is a three part, six-hours series arriving on March 30 narrated by Edward Herrmann, who died of brain cancer shortly after completing work on the film.

"He felt it was appropriate that it was going to be his final project," says Barak Goodman, who produced and directed the film. "He did an absolutely magnificent job. I can't tell you how hard he pushed to get this done and get it right."

Burns sees the film as a science documentary, a historical documentary, a drama, an oral history and a mystery. And an on-going subject: While the film was being made, new advances in immunotherapy were taking place.

"It's sort of a roller coaster of emotions, a roller coaster of discoveries," says Burns, who praises Goodman for having "wrestled all that to the ground." It's a string of false dawns, inflated hopes and failures, Burns says, but many of those failures led to great breakthroughs.

"This should be an edge-of-the-seat story," says Mukherjee. "Can we use the power of reason to solve one of the most elementary mysteries of cellular biology?"

What will it take to solve that mystery? More money, says Mukherjee, who decries the budget cuts that have afflicted scientific research. And if you think we already devote a lot of money to the NIH, the CDC and other government research outlets, Mukherjee says their combined budgets don't equal the money we spent on air-conditioning for the Gulf War.

But he still has hope. "I'm immensely optimistic, despite the political realm. I'm optimistic because of science and patients."

Burns knows cancer is a tough subject to talk about, so much so, that most of us don't even know where the word "cancer" came from. The answer: It comes from the Greek word for "crab," because the ancient Greeks noticed how aggressively it reached out for its victims.

"Just the name itself, where it came from...This is one of the first things we answer in episode one."

Burns was not able to make this film himself, in part because he was too busy, and in part because

the loss of his mother made him feel that he was too close to the story. So he brought in Goodman and served as his executive producer and creative consultant.

It's a new role for Burns, but it's one he plans to embrace. "I think you'll see, I'll continue to do my own work, but there will be lot's of other situations where I'm stepping back to be an executive producer and helping to make things grow."

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2015/01/19/ken-burns-takes-on-cancer/22004683/>