

When Breath Becomes Air

by Paul Kalanithi



End in Mind

1. What did you think of Paul’s exploration of the relationship between science and faith? As Paul wrote, “Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue. Between these core passions and scientific theory, there will always be a gap. No system of thought can contain the fullness of human experience.” Do you agree?
2. Paul had a strong background in the humanities, and read widely throughout his life. Only after getting a Master’s in English Literature did he decide that medicine was the right path for him. Do you think this made him a better doctor? A different kind of doctor? If so, how? How has reading, music, or the arts influenced your approach to life?
3. What did you think of Paul and Lucy’s decision to have a child, in the face of his illness? When Lucy asked him if he worried that having a child would make his death more painful, and Paul responded, “Wouldn’t it be great if it did,” how did that strike you? Do you agree that life should not be about avoiding suffering, but about creating meaning?
4. In Lucy’s epilogue, she writes that “what happened to Paul was tragic, but he was not a tragedy.” Discuss what she meant by this. Did you come away feeling the same way?
5. Kalanithi said that he acted in caring for his patients as "death's ambassador." "Those burdens, he wrote, "are what makes medicine holy and wholly impossible." What does he mean? Have you had a medical experience that embodies this?
6. How did this book impact your thoughts about medical care? The patient-physician relationship? End of life care? Describe Kalanithi's love-hate relationship with medicine. He saw it as a job that kept his cardiologist father away from home. But how else did he see it?
7. Lucy also writes that, in some ways, Paul’s illness brought them closer – that she FELL feel even more deeply in love with the “beautiful , focused man” he became in the last year of his life. Did you find yourself seeing how that could happen?