

When Breath Becomes Air Book Review

1 Plot Summary

In a hospital room at the Stanford Medical Center, Paul Kalanithi flips through his CT scan images, which show that his lungs are filled with tumors. His wife Lucy is by his side. Paul is a neurosurgical resident in his last year of training at Stanford. He had earned the respect of his professors and had won prestigious national awards, which had led to job offers from major universities. He is looking forward to finishing the grueling demands of residency, having children, and spending more time with Lucy. But the scans, which show advanced cancer, put that future in jeopardy.

In Part I of the memoir, Paul jumps back to his early life spent in Kingman, Arizona. Though his father is a doctor, as Paul prepares to go to college, he doesn't see himself as ever being a doctor. Instead, he wants to be a writer. His mother had instilled in him a love of literature, while his father, a cardiologist, had often been absent. Paul does admire the way his father earns his patients' trust and give them comfort. As an undergraduate at Stanford, Paul pursues degrees in both English literature and human biology. He is driven by the question of what makes life meaningful and feels that both of these fields provide different perspectives on human experience and consciousness. Paul applies for a master's in English literature at Stanford and studies Walt Whitman for his thesis.

In the second part of the memoir, Paul returns to the day he is diagnosed with cancer. The tumors have invaded multiple organ systems, and he believes that his death is imminent. He meets with his oncologist, Emma, who steps him through his treatment plan but refuses to tell him the statistical probability of his death in order to allow him to remain optimistic. Paul had grown weak leading up to his diagnosis, making basic functions difficult.

Lucy finishes the memoir with an epilogue, describing the circumstances of Paul's death. Around Christmas, Paul's third treatment option stops working, and the cancer spreads to his brain. He becomes completely focused on writing this book, something he had always imagined doing later in his career. Lucy explains that *When Breath Becomes Air* is in a sense unfinished, even though Paul worked on it tirelessly. With the book, Paul wanted to help people understand death and face their mortality. She expresses how grateful she was to have been a part of what gave Paul's life meaning and to have witnessed him face death with integrity.

2 Review

When Breath Becomes Air is not only poignant, touching, and painful – it is also full of love, insight, courage, and humility. I'm thankful Paul Kalanithi found a way to share his love of writing and prodigious talents with the world, especially under such harrowing circumstances. The world is a richer place because of it... And at heart, this is a life-affirming book. It was for me, anyway.

Paul expresses, lived, and has shared how meaning can transform tragedy into a deep transcendence of being that shimmers. With meaning and eloquence, he was able to step outside of himself, trapped in his disease for sustained periods of time, and create the side of humanity we can't know. He does so with balance and personal reflection on the value of life and our relationships with others. His realization of patients as people, and about quality of life was profound to me. Though sad, the story never felt manipulative or self-pitying.