**When Breath Becomes Air
by Paul Kalanithi**

**About the Book**

At the age of thirty-six, on the verge of completing a decade’s worth of training as a neurosurgeon, Paul Kalanithi was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. One day he was a doctor treating the dying, and the next he was a patient struggling to live. And just like that, the future he and his wife had imagined evaporated. *When Breath Becomes Air* chronicles Kalanithi’s transformation from a naïve medical student “possessed,” as he wrote, “by the question of what, given that all organisms die, makes a virtuous and meaningful life” into a neurosurgeon at Stanford working in the brain, the most critical place for human identity, and finally into a patient and new father confronting his own mortality.

What makes life worth living in the face of death? What do you do when the future, no longer a ladder toward your goals in life, flattens out into a perpetual present? What does it mean to have a child, to nurture a new life as another fades away? These are some of the questions Kalanithi wrestles with in this profoundly moving, exquisitely observed memoir.

**About the Author**

Paul Kalanithi was a neurosurgeon and writer. He graduated from Stanford with a B.A. and M.A. in English literature and a B.A. in human biology. He earned an M.Phil in the history and philosophy of science and medicine from Cambridge and graduated cum laude from the Yale School of Medicine, where he was inducted into the Alpha Omega Alpha national medical honor society. He returned to Stanford to complete his residency training in neurological surgery and a postdoctoral fellowship in neuroscience, and received the American Academy of Neurological Surgery's highest award for resident research. He died in March 2015. He is survived by his family, including his wife Lucy, and their daughter Elizabeth Acadia.

**If you enjoyed *When Breath Becomes Air:***

* *On the Move* by Oliver Sacks
* *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion
* *Brain on Fire* by Susannah Cahalan
* *Tinkers* by Paul Harding
* *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova

**Discussion Questions**

1. How did you come away feeling, after reading this book? Upset? Inspired? Anxious? Less afraid?
2. How do you think the years Paul spent, tending to patients and training to be a neurosurgeon, affected the outlook he had on his own illness? When Paul wrote that the question he asked himself was not “why me,” but “why not me,” how did that strike you? Could you relate to it?
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. Were there passages or sentences that struck you as particularly profound or moving?
5. Given that Paul died before the book was finished, what are some of the questions you would have wanted to ask him if he were still here today?
6. How did this book impact your thoughts about medical care? The patient-physician relationship? End of life care?
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?