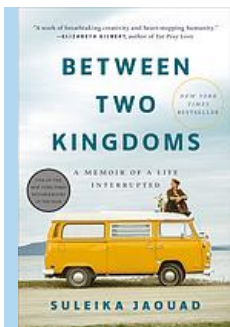


Discussion Guide



Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted By Suleika Jaouad

Random House
2021
368 pages
ISBN: 979-0399588587

Leukemia &
Lymphoma

Summary

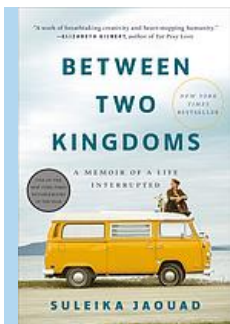
A memoir of illness and recovery that traces one young woman's journey from diagnosis to remission to re-entry into "normal" life—from the founder of [The Isolation Journals](#) and a subject of the Netflix documentary, [American Symphony](#). A few weeks shy of her twenty-third birthday, Jaouad received a diagnosis of leukemia, with a 35 percent chance of survival. She would spend much of the next four years in a hospital bed, fighting for her life and chronicling the saga in a column for *The New York Times*. After countless rounds of chemo, a clinical trial, and a bone marrow transplant she learned that a cure is not where the work of healing ends; it's where it begins.

Questions

1. After her diagnosis, Suleika finds that many people—from friends to healthcare providers—don't know how to react or say the "right" thing to a cancer patient. Her friend Jake rushes off the phone, and a nurse tells Suleika about another young patient who'd been around her age when she died. What do you think would have been more helpful for Suleika to hear from these people? How did these passages make you think differently about empathy and the way you can support people going through something difficult? How have you been supported while going through something difficult?
2. "When you are facing the possibility of imminent death, people treat you differently," Suleika writes. "All of this attention can feel like you are being memorialized while you are still alive." What was it like for Suleika to be mourned like this before she was gone? Do you fault her friends and family for acting this way, or do you think it's a human impulse? How, if at all, does Suleika try to avoid this trap of pre-memorializing with her group of cancer friends?
3. How does Suleika's writing help her throughout her treatment? How does it hurt her?
4. Suleika writes about the pressure to be a model patient, "to be someone who suffers well, to act with heroism, and to put on a stoic facade all the time." Why do you think we put these expectations on cancer patients? Who do you think this performance is for?
5. The book's title comes from a Susan Sontag passage: "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place." Have you used your "kingdom of the sick" passport yet? What was it like there, and what did you learn about yourself? What are the benefits of experiencing this "other" place?

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6. What does Suleika's breakup with Will represent for her? What does her relationship with Jon come to represent?
7. Suleika feels a strange sadness at the end of her treatment, even feeling bereft at the loss of her port. Discuss this sadness. How does it subvert our expectations of what survival and healing are like?
8. Eventually, Suleika realizes that she can't wait until she's "well enough" to start living again. What sparks this realization for her? When have you wanted to wait until you were "enough" of something—rich enough, thin enough, well enough? How can we learn to embrace where we are at present? What do we lose by constantly striving, without satisfaction?
9. Even though Suleika knows exactly what her friend Max needs from her when her cancer returns, she can't bring herself to be there for him right away. "Right now, my impulse is self-preservation," she writes. "The thought of more heartbreak makes me want to cut myself off from the world." When do we need to prioritize our friends? When do we need to prioritize ourselves? How can we learn to tell the difference?
10. Which of the stops, and people, on Suleika's road trip stayed with you the most? Why? What did she learn from that person? What did you learn?

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