



ALAN'S ASTUTE REVIEWS

**BOOK REVIEWS WORTH
READING**

By Alan Darnell

When Breath Becomes Air

by Paul Kalanithi

Let's face it—we live in a death denying society. It is “politically incorrect” to talk about it—especially to a “senior citizen” (I detest that term) or with someone living with a serious illness. Better we pretend that death does not exist, that no matter how dismal the prognosis, a miracle will happen, science will discover a miraculous cure, and we will defy the odds.

I must tell you two facts: first, I live in a “55 and over” community; second, *When Breath Becomes Air* is the only book I read twice. I tell you where I live because everyone here has more years behind them than in front of them and, second because this book is essential reading for each person who will someday die—i.e. everyone. All organisms die—a fact that we try hard to forget, until we are awakened by the wail of an ambulance siren at three in the morning. (Why is it that disaster strikes one of us while the rest of us are trying to sleep?)

The book has several parts: A Forward written by Abraham Verghese, a noted infectious disease specialist. He warns: “After reading the book you are about to read I confess I felt inadequate. There was an honesty, a truth in the writing that took my breath away.

Be ready. Be seated. See what courage sounds like. See how brave it is to reveal yourself in this way. But above all, see that it is like to still live, to profoundly influence the lives of others after you are gone, by your words.”

The second part, entitled “In Perfect Health I Begin”, describes Paul’s life before his illness. He was, for sure, an ultimate achiever. He accrued two B.A.’s and an M.A. in literature at Stanford, then a Master of Philosophy at Cambridge, before graduating cum laude from Yale School of Medicine. He returned to Stanford for a residency in neurological surgery and a postdoctoral fellowship in neuroscience. His training was almost complete when the bad diagnosis hit.

In his Prologue (not to be confused with the Foreward discussed above), Paul tells us: “I flipped through the CT scan images, the diagnosis obvious: the lungs were matted with innumerable tumors, the spine deformed, a full lobe of the liver obliterated. Cancer widely disseminated. I was a neurosurgical resident entering my final year of training. Over the last six years, I’d examined scores of such exams, on the off chance that some procedure might benefit the patient. But this scan was different: it was my own.”

One of the most poignant and ironic things about Paul's story is that he had postponed learning how to live while pursuing his career in neurosurgery. By the time he was ready to enjoy a life outside the operating room, what he needed to learn was how to die.

During the 22 months left to him from that first diagnosis, Paul, who died at 37, wrote a great indelible book. During this time he and his wife, Lucy, also a doctor, had some gut wrenching decisions to make, the foremost being whether to have a child, knowing Paul would only participate in a small slice of the child's life. They decide to have a baby (Paul's sperm was frozen before chemo started) and his wife collected eggs in vitro. The birth (a girl) was successful, and the book is dedicated to her.

But not for the knowledge that the author is dying, one might be tempted to believe he is just another arrogant surgeon telling the world just how smart he is. As the NY Times stated at the end of its review: "Part of this book's tremendous impact comes from the obvious fact that it's author was such a brilliant polymath. And part comes from the way he conveys what happened to him passionately. Working and striving, deferring gratification, waiting to live, learning to die—so well. None of it is maudlin. Nothing is exaggerated. As he wrote to a friend; "It is just tragic enough and just imaginable enough. And just important enough to be unmissable."