

The End
of Your
Life
Book Club
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Will
Schwalbe

The end of your life book club

By Will Schwalbe

First published 2012

Genre & subject

Biography

Cancer patients

Mother and son

Synopsis

This is the inspiring true story of a son and his mother, who start a “book club” that brings them together as her life comes to a close. Over the next two years, Will and Mary Anne carry on conversations that are both wide-ranging and deeply personal, prompted by an eclectic array of books and a shared passion for reading. Their list jumps from classic to popular, from poetry to mysteries, from fantastic to spiritual. The issues they discuss include questions of faith and courage as well as everyday topics such as expressing gratitude and learning to listen. Throughout, mother and son are constantly reminded of the power of books to comfort us, astonish us, teach us, and tell us what we need to do with our lives and in the world. Reading isn't the opposite of doing; it's the opposite of dying.

Author biography

William Schwalbe is an author, entrepreneur and journalist based in New York City. He is the author of three books and was the former editor-in-chief of Hyperion Books. In 2008, he founded the recipe web site Cookstr, which was acquired by Macmillan Publishing in 2014, where he serves as executive vice president.

His first book, *SEND: Why People Email So Badly and How to Do it Better*, was co-written with David Shipley, and was published by Penguin Random House in 2010. The book was reviewed by Dave Barry in the *The New York Times*, became a business bestseller and was featured in an interview with Schwalbe on The Colbert Report on June 20th, 2007.

The End Of Your Life Book Club spent more than four months on the New York Times Bestseller List.. As a journalist, he has written for various publications, including The New York Times and The South China Morning Post.

Books for Living was published in 2016, and consists of essays about 26 different books that affected the author's life.

Discussion starters

- Why does Mary Anne always read a book's ending first? How does this reflect her character?
- Early in the book, Will writes, “I wanted to learn more about my mother's life and the choices she'd made, so I often steered the conversation there. She had an agenda of

her own, as she almost always did. It took me some time, and some help, to figure it out." What was Mary Anne's agenda?

- Throughout the book, Will talks about books as symbols and sources of hope. How has reading books served a similar function for you?
- While reading *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Will and Mary Anne discuss three kinds of fateful choices: "the ones characters make knowing that they can never be undone; the ones they make thinking they can but learn they can't; and the ones they make thinking they can't and only later come to understand, when it's too late, when 'nothing can be undone,' that they could have." What kind of choices did Mary Anne make during her cancer treatment? Did she or Will make any of the third type?
- How does religious belief help Mary Anne? How do you think it might have helped Will?
- Mary Anne doesn't believe her travels to war-torn countries were brave: "I wanted to go to all those places, so how could that be brave? The people I'm talking about, they did things they didn't want to do because they felt they had to, or because they thought it was the right thing to do." In what ways is Mary Anne brave during her cancer treatments? Does she ever come to think of herself as brave?
- Will is amazed by his mother's ability to continue her efforts to fund the library in Afghanistan even while facing a death sentence, until he realises that "she used her emotions to motivate her and help her concentrate. The emphasis for her was always on doing what needed to be done. I had to learn this lesson while she was still there to teach me." Did Will learn? What makes you think so?
- Why did Mary Anne become so intent on certain things happening: Obama's election, David Rohde's safe return? Will talks about his own "magical thinking" several times in the book—what form do you think Mary Anne's took?
- "We're all in the end-of-our-life book club, whether we acknowledge it or not; each book we read may well be the last, each conversation the final one." How did this realisation affect Will's final days with his mum?
- After she dies, Will looks at Mary Anne's copy of *Daily Strength for Daily Needs*, next to the bed. He believes this quote from John Ruskin was the last thing his mother ever read: "If you do not wish for His kingdom, don't pray for it. But if you do, you must do more than pray for it; you must work for it." How did Mary Anne work for it throughout her life? Do you think Will found solace in this passage?
- Which of the books discussed by Will and Mary Anne have you read? Which do you most want to read?

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