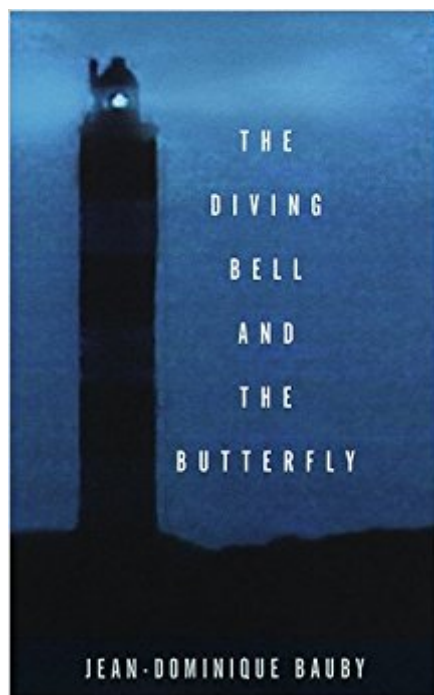


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The Diving Bell And The Butterfly: A Memoir Of Life In Death



Synopsis

In 1995, Jean-Dominique Bauby was the editor-in-chief of French Elle, the father of two young children, a 44-year-old man known and loved for his wit, his style, and his impassioned approach to life. By the end of the year he was also the victim of a rare kind of stroke to the brainstem. After 20 days in a coma, Bauby awoke into a body which had all but stopped working: only his left eye functioned, allowing him to see and, by blinking it, to make clear that his mind was unimpaired. Almost miraculously, he was soon able to express himself in the richest detail: dictating a word at a time, blinking to select each letter as the alphabet was recited to him slowly, over and over again. In the same way, he was able eventually to compose this extraordinary book. By turns wistful, mischievous, angry, and witty, Bauby bears witness to his determination to live as fully in his mind as he had been able to do in his body. He explains the joy, and deep sadness, of seeing his children and of hearing his aged father's voice on the phone. In magical sequences, he imagines traveling to other places and times and of lying next to the woman he loves. Fed only intravenously, he imagines preparing and tasting the full flavor of delectable dishes. Again and again he returns to an "inexhaustible reservoir of sensations," keeping in touch with himself and the life around him. Jean-Dominique Bauby died two days after the French publication of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. This book is a lasting testament to his life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In December of 1995, Jean-Dominique Bauby, 43 year old editor in chief of Elle magazine in

France, suffered a stroke which severely damaged his brain stem. After several weeks in a coma, he woke to find that he was one of the rare victims of a condition called "locked-in syndrome" or LIS, which had left his mind functioning but his body almost completely paralyzed. In a perverse sense he actually got fairly lucky because, unlike most victims, he was still able to move one eyelid. This allowed him to work out, with a speech therapist, a system of communication which entailed winking as someone slowly read through the alphabet. By using this code, he could painstakingly spell out words, sentences, paragraphs and, finally, this memoir. The title of the book refers to the metaphors he uses to describe his situation. The physical paralysis leaves him feeling as if he was trapped within a diving bell, as if there is constant pressure pinning his body into immobility. However, at the same time, his mind remains as free as a butterfly and its flights are as random. In fact, he calls the chapters of this book his "bedridden travel notes" and, indeed, they eloquently relate his journey through memory. Although Bauby's situation is obviously unique, this book has universal resonance because his condition is itself an apt metaphor for the human condition. It is the essence of Man's dilemma that our infinitely perfectible minds are trapped within such weak containers of flesh and blood. For most of us, at most times, this frustrating dichotomy, between that which makes us godlike and that which makes us mortal, lurks in the background; but the author has it thrust rudely into the foreground, where it necessarily dominates his existence.

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