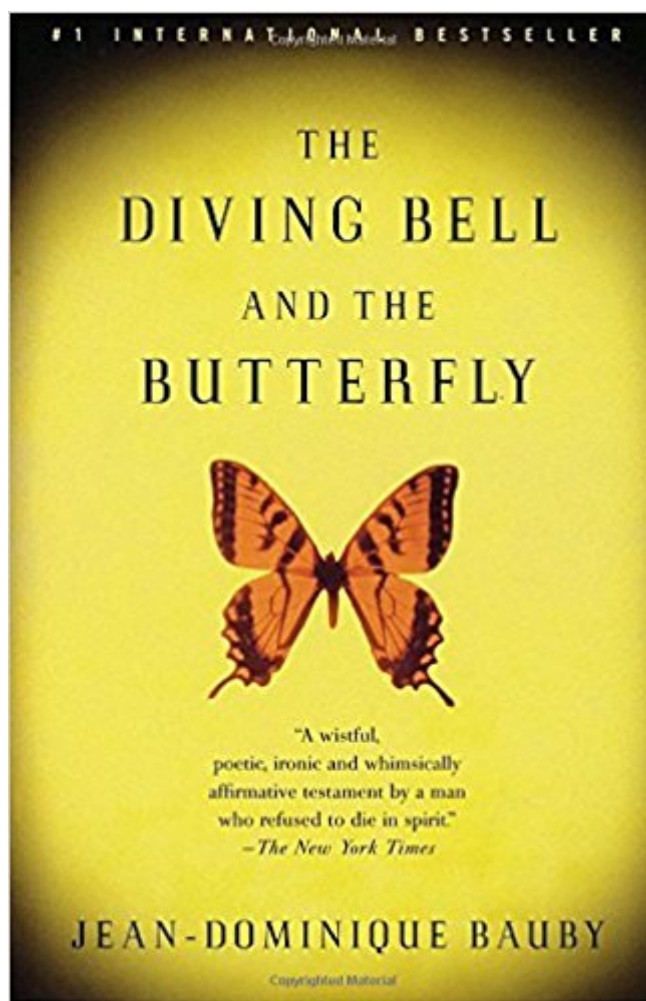


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# The Diving Bell And The Butterfly: A Memoir Of Life In Death



## 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

Paperback: 131 pages

Publisher: Vintage (June 23, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375701214

ISBN-13: 978-0375701214

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.4 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 497 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #5,312 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #2 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Strokes #12 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Journalists #18 in Books > Self-Help > Relationships > Love & Loss

## Customer Reviews

We've all got our idiosyncrasies when it comes to writing--a special chair we have to sit in, a certain

kind of yellow paper we absolutely must use. To create this tremendously affecting memoir, Jean-Dominique Bauby used the only tool available to him--his left eye--with which he blinked out its short chapters, letter by letter. Two years ago, Bauby, then the 43-year-old editor-in-chief of *Elle* France, suffered a rare stroke to the brain stem; only his left eye and brain escaped damage. Rather than accept his "locked in" situation as a kind of death, Bauby ignited a fire of the imagination under himself and lived his last days--he died two days after the French publication of this slim volume--spiritually unfettered. In these pages Bauby journeys to exotic places he has and has not been, serving himself delectable gourmet meals along the way (surprise: everything's ripe and nothing burns). In the simplest of terms he describes how it feels to see reflected in a window "the head of a man who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde." --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

On December 8 1995, *Elle* magazine editor-in-chief Bauby suffered a stroke and lapsed into a coma. He awoke 20 days later, mentally aware of his surroundings but physically paralyzed with the exception of some movement in his head and left eye. Bauby had Locked-in-Syndrome, a rare condition caused by stroke damage to the brain stem. Eye movements and blinking a code representing letters of the alphabet became his sole means of communication. It is also how he dictated this warm, sad, and extraordinary memoir. Bauby's thoughts on the illness, the hospital, family, friends, career, and life before and after the stroke appear with considerable humor and humanity. Actor Rene Auberjonois's narration adds to the poignancy of the story. Sadly, Bauby died of his condition in 1997. This is a fine companion to works like Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (LJ 7/94). For all audio collections. --Stephen L. Hupp, Univ. of Pittsburgh at Johnstown Lib. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I finished this book, but not because of the tragedy of Bauby's illness. I was filled with gratitude for the loving gift to the world that this slim book is. It is not at all what I expected after seeing Julian Schnabel's movie. Which is not to criticize the movie, but the book itself is something very different. It is a sensitive, humorous, and beautifully written reflection that conveys Bauby's appreciation for life--before his illness and even after it. His quick and nimble mind, the butterfly, roams freely, lighting on his memories, his loves, people who touched him, evoking the preciousness of experience.

A very quick read. I read it in two days. Then, a few weeks later, I read it again. A very inspiring

story. Completely engrossing. Considering Bauby's condition, there is a surprising amount of humor in it. And, although you cannot help but feel sympathy towards him, this is not a "pity party." It is an appreciation of life. The movie is nearly as good as the book, and is very faithful to the book. I highly recommend both.

"A testament to the human spirit" is a hackneyed, clichéd, descriptor. In this case, however, apt in that the author of the book was quite literally a human spirit, having lost all motor ability (save for blinking motion of the left eye) due to a cerebrovascular accident affecting the brainstem. Ironically, at least some sensory input stayed intact allowing him to feel pain and discomfort. The author is Jean-Dominique Bauby, one-time editor of French "Elle", dictated laboriously with the use of the above-mentioned left eye and an alphabet board. The title refers to the dichotomy of body and mind. The content of the book includes memories and escapist fantasies (the "butterfly") and descriptions of a life locked inside one's own body (diving bell) in language that evokes such vivid imagery it seems that the reader is inside Jen-Do's head, sharing his leaden, useless limbs--a feeling that can almost be disturbing. In spite of the gravity of his situation, he conveys humor ("if I must drool, I may as well drool on cashmere"), dignity and above all, gratitude. With empathy and affection, he portrays fellow patients (little packets of life turned in on themselves), friends, family, hospital staff, giving particular reverence to the speech therapist who initiates the alphabet board system. The book almost has a stream-of-consciousness feel in that it is no way linear or chronological, but somehow every part fits into a coherent whole. At 132 easily readable pages, this book is a small time commitment with innumerable insights to the reader. Even if you've seen the Julian Schnabel movie, read the book.

A testament of our will to find meaning in life, regardless of our circumstances. It will make you long for life, and then remind you how lucky you are to still enjoy yours. A courageous look at self when that is all that is left. Read it and be reminded how blessed we are that fate dealt us a gentler hand. At least, hopefully, so far. Beautiful memoir.

Can you imagine what it would be like to have locked in syndrome? Not being able to move or talk but your mind is fully there?? Well Mr. Bauby finds a way to communicate by blinking and tells us exactly what it feels like. He tells us how healthcare professionals treat him because he can't speak and if you are a healthcare professional then this puts things into perspective. Doctors, nurses, etc all need to consider patients feelings and treat everyone equally with compassion. This book is

definitely an eye opener and really makes you question how you would handle what Mr. Bauby went through.

My son started reading this to me while I was in the hospital with a massive brain hemorrhage. Mine was luckily not in the brain stem so I do not have locked-in syndrome. At any rate, it was too soon for me, too close to the uncertainty I was facing in my own life. Now, after a year and a half, I came back to it and, luckily, I was able to read it for myself and not rely on others. The book is amazing. Bauby is a much stronger and more philosophical person than I am. He has a rich internal life that he uses to sustain himself, along with vivid memories, the love of his family, his children, and his friends. The book is not a chronological telling of a story. It is a series of thoughts and events, things that stuck in his mind, things that elucidate his condition. They are often touching, frequently depressing, but always enlightening. The book is a quick read, but not a light one.

One of my favorites of all time! I'm a senior who has read a ton of books, and this was one of my favorites, Life is so fragile, it should be enjoyed every possible moment.

Powerful story. I read it after my son suffered a massive stroke and was diagnosed as locked-in. I did feel hopeless for a long time after reading it, fearful that this could be my son's future. Thankfully, my son has improved over the past 2 years and is now able to eat and talk, and now has partially mobility.

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