

Book Club Discussion Guide



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Between Two Kingdoms

By Suleika Jaouad

About the author:

Suleika Jaouad (pronounced Su-lake-uh Ja-wad) is the author of the instant New York Times bestselling memoir, *Between Two Kingdoms*. She wrote the Emmy Award-winning New York Times column “Life, Interrupted” and her reported features and essays have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *Vogue*, and NPR, among other publications. A highly sought-after speaker, her mainstage TED Talk was one of the ten most popular of 2019 and has nearly five million views. She is also the creator of the Isolation Journals, a community creativity project founded during the Covid-19 pandemic to help others convert isolation into artistic solitude; over 100,000 people from around the world have joined.

Born in New York City to a Tunisian father and a Swiss mother, Suleika attended The Juilliard School's pre-college program for the double bass, and earned her BA with highest honors from Princeton University and an MFA in writing and literature from Bennington College.

Source: Author's website: (<https://www.suleikajaouad.com/>)

About this book:

A searing, deeply moving memoir of illness and recovery that traces one young woman's journey from diagnosis to remission and, ultimately, a road trip of healing and self-discovery.

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Source: <https://www.suleikajaouad.com/>

Discussion 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 actually 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

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“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?

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 particular person? What did you learn?

Source: <https://www.suleikajaouad.com/>