

**Book Review:****Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted**

By Suleika Jaouad, Random House, 2021

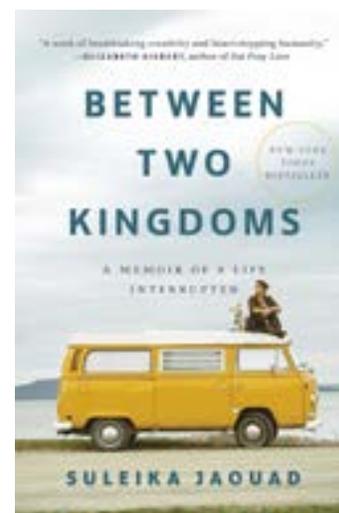
Reviewed by Eunie Alsaker

It has been some time since I began a book on a Friday night and cancelled all weekend plans so I could finish it by Monday. *Between Two Kingdoms* is that good. (Granted, with COVID I didn't exactly have plans, but you get my point.) It is a story of illness and recovery, of suspense (though as Jaouad says in her TED Talk, "Spoiler alert. I survive!"), of a cross-country road trip, and of identity, meaning, and purpose. And it is so very well written.

Suleika Jaouad is a 22-year-old recent college graduate living in Europe embarking on a new life and a new relationship when she develops unusual health issues. She will eventually learn that she has a rare form of acute myeloid leukemia and will be given a 35% chance of survival. Instantly, she goes from a confident, eager young woman launching into adult life to someone who spends the next four years in and out of the hospital, focused on the uncertainty and hope of survival. A turning point for Jaouad comes when she reads Frida Kahlo's diary and discovers that the artist started to paint following a serious car accident which left her bedridden for months. "I decided to reimagine my survival as a creative art," (p. 109) writes Jaouad. She began a 100-day project of journaling, which led to a blog, which led to a weekly column and video for the *New York Times*. Her project caught the attention of people around the country who reached out to her, and soon she had a new community of support.

After four years of treatment, "re-entry" was not nearly as easy as expected. Now in her mid-20s, who was she beyond a cancer survivor? And could she trust the cancer was gone? "To learn to swim in the ocean of not-knowing – this is my constant work." (p. 265) After failed attempts at finding peace, she takes off on a cross-country trek to meet some of the people she corresponded with during her illness. On the trip, she shifts her internal focus to the world beyond her cancer.

Suleika's original hope was to put her pain and grief behind her, but instead, she transforms her relationship with pain. "What if I stopped thinking of pain as something that needs to be numbed, fixed, dodged, and protected against? What if I tried to honor its presence in my body, to welcome it into the present?" (p. 312) For Jaouad, healing was about creating a way to coexist with this pain – a quest for anyone living with grief.



“There is no atlas, charting that long, moonless stretch of highway between where you start and who you become.”

~ Suleika Jaouad