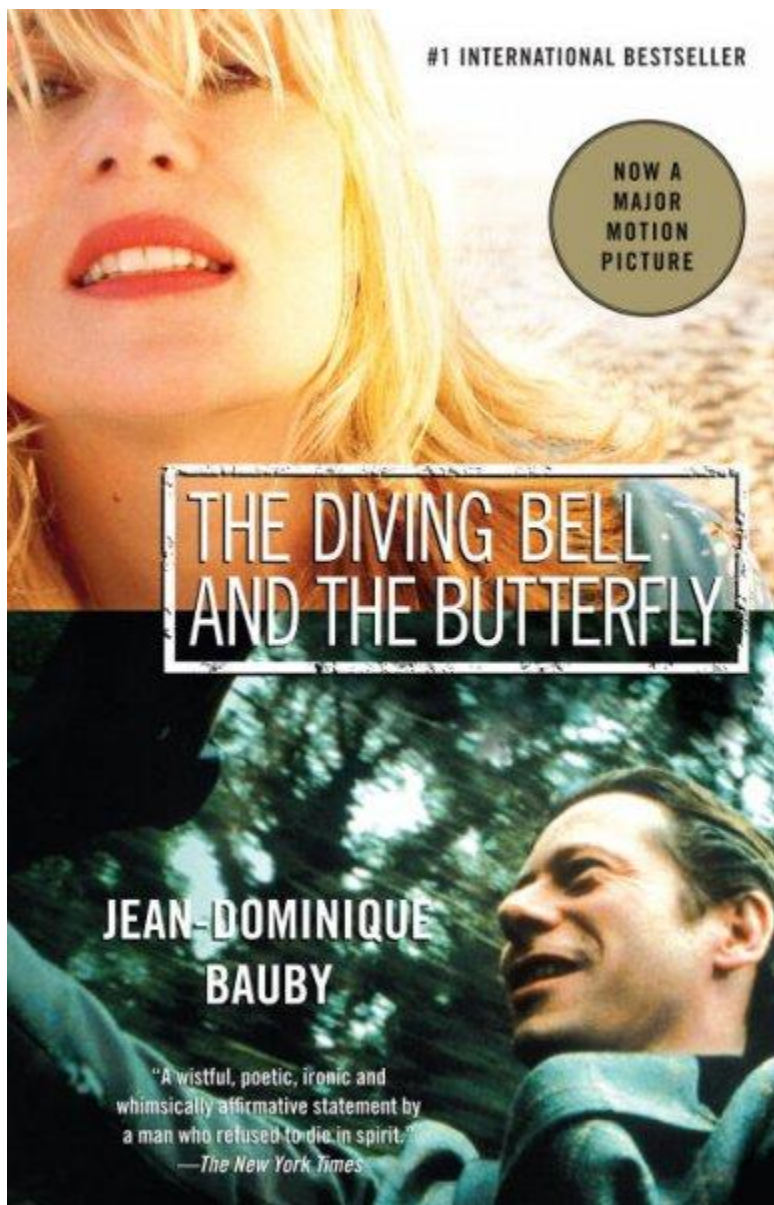


## About the book...



In December 1995, Jean-Dominique Bauby, the 43-year-old editor of French *Elle*, suffered a massive stroke that left him permanently paralyzed, a victim of “locked in syndrome.” Once known for his gregariousness and wit, Bauby now finds himself imprisoned in an inert body, able to communicate only by blinking his left eye. The miracle is that in doing so he was able to compose this stunningly eloquent memoir.

In a voice that is by turns wistful and mischievous, angry and sardonic, Bauby gives us a celebration of the liberating power of consciousness: what it is like to spend a day with his children, to imagine lying in bed beside his wife, to conjure up the flavor of delectable meals even as he is fed through a tube. Most of all, this triumphant book lets us witness an indomitable spirit and share in the pure joy of its own survival.

## Reviews

### *Choice Reviews*

Bauby wrote this memoir with the blink of an eye. After a stroke, in his 45th year, Bauby is first in a coma and then in a condition called locked-in syndrome, a paralysis that makes him feel as if his body is imprisoned in a diving bell. Within this bell, however, is movement: his "mind takes flight like a butterfly." Transformed from editor in chief of French Elle to the likes, as he points out, of Dumas' Noirtier de Villefort, he experiences each sensation in the present and in memory with great intensity, the smell of French fries, his daughter Celeste singing "Poor Little Rich Girl," the recollections of shaving his father or of soaking in the tub, a Scotch and a good book in hand. He remembers, imagines, and dreams. He learns about his true nature and about others, who respond to his paralysis with anger, fear, or compassion. Bauby is eventually taught an alphabet which allows him to put into words this interior life by blinking his left eye, and this memoir--published in French as *Scaphandre et le papillon* two days before his death--testifies to the richness of human consciousness despite the body's oppressive entrapment in the diving bell. Highly recommended for all collections.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Through the frayed curtain at my window, a wan glow announces the break of day. My heels hurt, my head weighs a ton, and something like a giant invisible cocoon holds my whole body prisoner." Thus begins the remarkable testimony of Bauby, who was editor-in-chief of French Elle when he was felled by a stroke in December 1995. The stroke left every inch of his body paralyzed- -except for his left eyelid, which he could blink. But his mind was fully alive, capable of the whole range of thought and feeling from dry wit to sadness to tenderness, and by blinking in response to letters recited by an amanuensis, he dictated ``these bedridden travel notes" about being locked inside his body. It shows that his rich heart, too, was alive and beating, but it finally gave way in March of this year, two days after the French publication of his book.

### *Library Journal*

Two days after this remarkable book was published in France to great acclaim, its author died of heart failure. What caused such a stir was the method Bauby used to write it. For in December 1995, the 44-year-old former editor-in-chief of the French Elle magazine had suffered a severe stroke that left his body paralyzed but his mind intact, a condition known as "locked-in syndrome." Able to communicate only by blinking his left eyelid, he dictated this book letter by letter to an assistant who recited to him a

special alphabet. The result is a marvelous, compelling account of Bauby's life as a "vegetable," full of humor and devoid of self-pity. Although he was trapped in the diving bell of his body, Bauby's imagination "takes flight like a butterfly....You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas's court." His celebration of life against all odds is highly recommended.

### *Publishers Weekly*

In 1995 Bauby, the 45-year-old editor of French Elle, suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed in all but his left eyelid. Out of this waking nightmare (what the medical community calls "locked-in syndrome") he managed to dictate letter by letter, in a semaphore of winks this memoir of his "life in a jar." He died two days after the book's French publication. Bauby's essays are remarkable simply because they exist, and he earns admiration for having endured, with surprising grace and good humor, what is perhaps the worst imaginable fate. This said, the real poignancy of these pieces is their ordinariness. No deathbed philosopher, Bauby avoids the depths of despair and prefers to view his hospital ward with the sardonic cheerfulness and smiling regrets of an homme moyen sensuel as he remembers meals, the pleasures taken from him. There are moments of extraordinary sadness and beauty when, for instance, Bauby dreams at dawn that he can visit his girlfriend, "slide down beside her and stroke her still-sleeping face" or wishes, during a visit from his nine-year-old son, "to ruffle his bristly hair, clasp his downy neck, hug his small, lithe, warm body tight against me." But Bauby's observations, like his prose, stick to the predictable: the everyday is his sustenance. What is most surprising, in the end, is how little he gave in to the loneliness of his "diving bell," how completely he relied on the butterfly of dreams and memory. That is the triumph of his final words.

### **Discussion questions** (prepared by Alice Fishman)

1. Do you feel pity for the author? How did the author feel about his own condition-did he pity himself?
2. Is the author a "vegetable"? Is he enduring a "living death"?
3. What does the title of the book symbolize for him?
4. Does the author tell us all that is on his mind? Why has he chosen, for the most part, to spare the readers the depth of his feelings? Do you think he always viewed his life with such amusement?

5. What situations do bring tears to Bauby's eyes?
6. The author notes the irony of his condition that occurred shortly after reading *THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO*? Have you noticed ironic situations in your life?
7. In his dreams Bauby escapes his body. Do your dreams allow you to do things that you cannot do in real life?
8. What do you become when you let your fantasies loose?
9. How do you react when you see a disabled person or someone in a wheelchair?
10. Do you think Bauby would have preferred to continue to live in his imprisoned state or die?

### **Readalikes**

Elisa Albert, *The Book of Dahlia* (2008)

Kirk Douglas, *My Stroke of Luck* (2002)

Howard Engel, *The Man Who Forgot How to Read* (2008)

Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight: a brain scientist's personal journey* (2006)

Pamela Rosewell Moore, *The Five Silent Years of Corrie ten Boom* (1986)