My Personal Review:
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 Baubys 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 Mans 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. This makes it all the more remarkable
that Bauby is able to write about his life with such great humor and generosity of spirit and with so little bitterness. Public opinion surveys reveal an interesting contrast in modern opinions on the right to die. Contrary to the accepted wisdom, the so-called right is favored by those who are young and healthy, but opposed by those who are old and sick. The very premise which underlies such a right is the belief that the quality of life experienced by the aged and the ill is so inadequate that they would willingly choose death instead. In fact, the evidence suggests that--despite the anecdotal horror stories with which all of us are familiar--people generally cling to life even in the face of suffering which seems unendurable to the well. Baubys book, for all the horror that we naturally feel at his status, is wonderfully optimistic and life affirming. Sure, there are a few moments of well earned self pity, but they are almost completely drowned out by the authors enduring hopes and dreams and memories. Jean-Dominique Bauby died two days after this book was published, but in its pages, he left behind one of the great testaments to the splendor and majesty of the human spirit. In these times when people tend to complain about the pettiest matters, he reminds us that even when life is genuinely difficult, it is still quite beautiful and invaluable and well worth living.

GRADE: A+

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