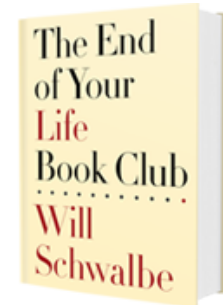


Maureen Langloss

The End of Your Life Book Club

Look no further, I have the book for you: *The End of Your Life Book Club*, by Will Schwalbe. This memoir is about the “book club” that the author formed with his mother, Mary Anne Schwalbe, during the two years she struggled with pancreatic cancer. I won’t lie to you; the book is sad and perhaps sentimental. Your eyes may well up with tears at times. But please don’t be scared away. It is a tremendously uplifting book and here’s why you should read it.



1. It operates on many levels. If you loved Joan Didion’s *Year of Magical Thinking*, you will enjoy this look at life, grief and how to die. If you are a book-lover, you will eat up the discussions the author and his mother had about dozens of books. If you love learning about interesting women, Mary Anne Schwalbe is a tough act to beat. If you are looking for insight on how to live a better life or be a better self, but aren’t particularly jazzed by how-to books, you will find many nuggets to apply to yourself.
2. The book is first and foremost a beautiful tribute to a mother by a son. Perhaps you are as tired as I am of memoirs that trash the mom and blame rotten childhoods for everything that backfired in the author’s life. It may be a sad reality that many moms are worth trashing, but it is a relief to read a book by a son who thought his mother was the cat’s meow. *The New York Times* criticized Mr. Schwalbe for not being more critical of his family members, for his book’s lack of “lacerating honesty.” To that I say, we are surrounded by underbelly, I don’t always want more.
3. I’m sure you will find your own favorite things about Mary Anne Schwalbe’s life, but for me it was that she tackled a whole new career post age of fifty. In an era before many mothers even had big careers, she managed to become Dean of Admissions at Radcliffe and at Harvard. In the midst of a rich and fulfilling career in education, she happened to volunteer at a refugee camp in Thailand and allowed this moment to completely alter the course of her life. So moved by the plight of refugees, she dedicated herself to founding and directing the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children. In the late stages of her life, she took on an altogether new project: the building of a library in Afghanistan. I’m sure many of you Eves out there are in the midst of your own career changes – starting your own businesses after other careers or having babies. This story will inspire you to keep at it and to be proud of yourself.
4. Mary Anne Schwalbe, according to her son, was not a creative woman. She could not paint, draw, write, play an instrument or even cook creatively. What a relief, right? It’s nice

to know that a woman who was amazing in so many ways, who might make you feel like you hadn't accomplished enough in your own life, didn't have it all.

5. It is a joy to learn about so many different books – from a new mystery in Alexander McCall's *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series to Karen Connelly's *The Lizard Cage* set in Burma to the 1915 Japanese novel *Kokoro* by Natsume Soseki. Best of all, Mr. Schwalbe treated each book with respect. He highlighted the positives and the points of interest. In an era when book reviews take scalpels to new books, it's refreshing not to read a book picking other books apart. I'm sure that Mrs. Schwalbe and her son read some that they hated. I'm sure there were times they commented to each other, "What a terrible ending! Pure monotony! Utterly simplistic! Where was the editor?" But Mr. Schwalbe resisted remarks of that kind.

6. Perhaps *The End of Your Life Book Club* would be more interesting if it were more critical of the titles it surveys, if it delved deeper into them, but this was not Mr. Schwalbe's mission. His mission was to celebrate his mother by celebrating books. On the last page of the book, he writes that his mother "never wavered in her conviction that books are the most powerful tool in the human arsenal, that reading all kinds of books ... is the grandest entertainment, and also is how you take part in the human conversation. Mom taught me that you can make a difference in the world and that books really do matter: they're how we know what we need to do in life, and how we tell others ... that books can be how we get closer to each other, and stay close."

7. After reading this book, the first thing you'll do is find another. For me, it was Mary Oliver's slim and accessible volume of poetry, *Why I Wake Early*. My favorite poem was the one quoted in Schwalbe's final chapter: "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?" What about you? Please let us know what *The End of Your Life Book Club* inspires you to read next.

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