The End of Your Life Book Club

‘a true meditation on what books can do’

Edmund de Waal, author of The Hare With Amber Eyes
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Discussion Questions
Provided by the publisher

1. Does this book have a central theme? What is it?

2. Why does Mary Anne always read a book’s ending first? How does this reflect her character?

3. Early in the book, Will writes, “I wanted to learn more about my mother’s life and the choices she’d made, so I often steered the conversation there. She had an agenda of her own, as she almost always did. It took me some time, and some help, to figure it out.” (6) What was Mary Anne’s agenda?

4. Mary Anne underlined a passage in Seventy Verses on Emptiness, which resonated with Will: “Permanent is not; impermanent is not; a self is not; not a self [is not]; clean is not; not clean is not; happy is not; suffering is not.” Why did this strike both of them as significant? What do you think it means?

5. Throughout the book, Will talks about books as symbols and sources of hope. How has reading books served a similar function for you?

6. While reading A Thousand Splendid Suns, Will and Mary Anne discuss three kinds of fateful choices: “the ones characters make knowing that they can never be undone; the ones they make thinking they can but learn they can’t; and the ones they make thinking they can’t and only later come to understand, when it’s too late, when ‘nothing can be undone,’ that they could have.” (41) What kind of choices did Mary Anne make during her cancer treatment? Did she or Will make any of the third type?

7. Mary Anne especially liked a passage from Gilead by Marilynne Robinson: “When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?” (96) Why do you think this moved her so much? What did it mean to Will?

8. How does religious belief help Mary Anne? How do you think it might have helped Will?

9. Mary Anne doesn’t believe her travels to war-torn countries were brave: “I wanted to go to all those places, so how could that be brave? The people I’m talking about, they did things they didn’t want to do because they felt they had to, or because they thought it was the right thing to do.” (167) In what ways is Mary Anne brave during her cancer treatments? Does she ever come to think of herself as brave?
10. Will is amazed by his mother’s ability to continue her efforts to fund the library in Afghanistan even while facing a death sentence, until he realizes that “she used her emotions to motivate her and help her concentrate. The emphasis for her was always on doing what needed to be done. I had to learn this lesson while she was still there to teach me.” (194) Did Will learn? What makes you think so?

11. Why did Mary Anne become so intent on certain things happening: Obama’s election, David Rohde’s safe return? Will talks about his own “magical thinking” several times in the book—what form do you think Mary Anne’s took?

12. “We’re all in the end-of-our-life book club, whether we acknowledge it or not; each book we read may well be the last, each conversation the final one.” (281) How did this realization affect Will’s final days with his mom?

13. After she dies, Will looks at Mary Anne’s copy of Daily Strength for Daily Needs, next to the bed. He believes this quote from John Ruskin was the last thing his mother ever read: “If you do not wish for His kingdom, don’t pray for it. But if you do, you must do more than pray for it; you must work for it.” (321) How did Mary Anne work for it throughout her life? Do you think Will found solace in this passage?

14. Several times in the book, Will talks about eBooks versus their physical counterparts. Why does he prefer one to the other? Does Mary Anne agree? If you read this book on an eReader, how do you think it affected your experience?

15. Which of the books discussed by Will and Mary Anne have you read? Which do you most want to read?
A Long Goodbye: ‘The End of Your Life Book Club,’ by Will Schwalbe

By CHRISTOPHER R. BEHA

Published: January 4, 2013

After Mary Anne Schwalbe learned she had advanced pancreatic cancer, in 2007, her son Will suggested she start a blog to keep family and friends informed. Schwalbe liked the idea but worried it was “unseemly” to broadcast news about herself, so she asked her son to write it instead. The blog became “Will’s Mary Anne Schwalbe News.” When Mary Anne decided it would be “easier” if she composed the first entry, she dictated in the third person for Will to type and post — a practice that continued until the blog’s, and Mary Anne’s, last days.

This wasn’t the only project mother and son embarked upon together during her illness. Mary Anne, a lifelong reader, and Will, then the editor in chief of a major publishing house, began trading books to discuss when Will accompanied his mother to her chemotherapy sessions. As its title suggests, these discussions are the ostensible subject of Will Schwalbe’s memoir, “The End of Your Life Book Club.” But just as the books themselves served as excuses for Mary Anne and Will to talk of difficult things — particularly mortality — the book club serves here as an excuse for a loving celebration of a mother by a son.

Certainly Mary Anne Schwalbe comes across in these pages as a woman worth celebrating. A Radcliffe graduate, she worked as a theatrical casting agent before taking this skill for talent evaluation to her alma mater’s admissions office. (She eventually became the director of admissions for both Radcliffe and Harvard.) After she and her husband moved their family to New York, Mary Anne held prominent positions at local private schools, first Dalton and then Nightingale-Bamford, before a visit to a refugee camp in Thailand inspired a late-life career change. Schwalbe helped found the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, which she directed for several years. Her work with the organization brought her to Afghanistan, Liberia and Sudan, among other war-torn places to which she fearlessly traveled. Until the end of her life, she was the kind of woman who, after striking up a conversation with a fellow customer at the pharmacy, finds her way to paying for the medication the woman can’t afford. Even in her final months, she seemed less concerned with her own condition than with raising money to start a traveling library in Kabul.

All of this her son outlines in an amiable, conversational style that is often charming but ultimately unsatisfying. The book is chatty not just in its tone — Mary Anne is referred to throughout almost exclusively as “Mom” — but in its form, or rather its essential formlessness.
Though each chapter is named after a book, they aren’t always books the Schwalbes read together. When they are, the discussions are perfunctory. (In the chapter named for T. S. Eliot’s “Murder in the Cathedral,” Schwalbe quotes his mother as saying, simply, “I find the play very inspiring.”) Discussions of Will’s childhood or his own late-life career change — he quit his job and started a cooking Web site — mingle with descriptions of his mother’s treatments and synopses of popular novels.

At one point, Schwalbe recalls a childhood Christmas when his mother read the Nativity story to him and his siblings by the fire. “So Mom was reading,” Schwalbe writes; “the fireplace was glowing; we three children were all around her. And then one of us started to giggle. I’m not even sure which one of us it was. Well, truthfully I am, but even after all these years it would seem like ratting out a sibling to name a name.”

This is a kind of joke, and yet it gets at another problem with “The End of Your Life Book Club.” Discretion and familial loyalty are fine characteristics, and it may be one more tribute to Mary Anne Schwalbe to say that her son displays them in excess. But these are not qualities that make for a scintillating memoir. To paraphrase Joan Didion, a writer is always ratting somebody out. A great memoirist, even one moved primarily by love and devotion, must possess a certain amount of ruthlessness — toward himself if no one else. Schwalbe’s book contains little of the lacerating honesty that marks Didion’s recent memoirs of loss.

There is an effort, admirable in theory but regrettable on the page, to credit every person who helped along the way, leading to dutiful but less-than-thrilling sentences: “Dr. Foley and Nessa work in tandem with Dr. O’Reilly at Memorial Sloan-Kettering and specialize in helping cancer patients and their families with both quality-of-life concerns during treatment and also end-of-life care.” Or, discussing his mother’s work with the International Rescue Committee: “She’d founded the I.R.C.-U.K. a decade earlier, and it now contributed more than £30 million a year to the I.R.C.’s overall budget, as well as having programs of its own.” After reading such sentences, one is hardly surprised to discover that Will’s mother, having learned of his intention to write this book, sent him a series of e-mails urging him to include the story of a young refugee from Sierra Leone or the urgent need for health care reform. “The End of Your Life Book Club” too often reads like “Will’s Mary Anne Schwalbe Book.”

Conversely, the best parts of Schwalbe’s memoir are those that it would not have pleased his mother to read. Occasionally he hints at the hardly surprising fact that having a mother at once so controlling and so extravagantly selfless — one who writes the cards with which she wants her family to respond to condolence notes; one who replies, when asked how she feels after a blood transfusion, “A little guilty to be taking that much blood” — can be infuriating. Schwalbe first learned about mortality, he writes, when his mother donated his beloved stuffed-toy turtle to an orphanage and then told him the turtle had died. The giving away of the turtle might have made for a charming family anecdote; it is the thoughtlessness of the explanation that brings the reader up short. Similarly, the story of the children laughing by the fireplace ends with Schwalbe’s mother slamming the Bible shut and announcing, “Maybe this year there won’t be a Christmas.” Playing the loyal son, Schwalbe finds a lesson in his mother’s threat to cancel Christmas: the written word should be treated with respect. But the more obvious lesson is that Mary Anne Schwalbe, like every other human, sometimes got angry and sometimes hurt the people she loved. These stories do no harm to the woman. Quite the opposite; they honor her by rendering her complete. As a more complicated picture of Mary Anne emerges, her son’s dedication becomes only more poignant.
One of this book’s most moving passages occurs near the end, in a description of Mary Anne’s final days. After almost two years of dictation, Mary Anne is too ill to compose her blog posts. For the first time, Will himself writes the message that goes out under his name. He shows it to his mother for her approval, and she adds a few lines about President Obama and the need for health care reform. The next day she isn’t well enough even to look over Will’s post; he must write it entirely without her. “Mom’s illness is progressing quickly,” it bluntly begins. We are past the point of fund-raising pleas or polite nods to the palliative care staff. Instead we read the words of a man who is losing a person he loves and is helpless to do anything about it. These pages are stirring for all the reasons one might think, but also for the subtle way they hint at what “The End of Your Life Book Club” might have been.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/books/review/the-end-of-your-life-book-club-by-will-schwalbe.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0
When my mother was dying of pancreatic cancer, I would often go with her to chemo, and we would usually talk about books. Discussing what we were reading was something we had done all our lives. But it wasn’t until one day during her second month of treatment that we realized that we had created a very peculiar book club: one with only two members.

That November day, when I arrived at the outpatient care center, Mom was already there waiting. (She was always a big believer that if you aren’t 10 minutes early, you’re late.) Mom was barely 5-foot-4 — with gray hair (not yet thinning from the chemo) that she never colored. She liked the gray and also felt it made her less threatening in her travels to the world’s most dangerous places as an advocate for refugees.

I sat in the chair next to her and asked how she was feeling. “A little uncomfortable,” she said. “But I’m not in pain.” After a while, I asked what she was reading. Her answer: a Wallace Stegner novel about the lifelong friendship of two couples, “Crossing to Safety.” It was a book that I’d always pretended to have read, but never actually had. That day, I promised her I’d read it.

From then on, until my mother died almost two years later, at age 75, we read dozens of books of all different kinds: classic novels and modern ones, mysteries, biographies, short-story collections, self-help books, histories. (Mom was thrifty; whatever book someone gave her, she would read.) We didn’t meet over meals, like so many book clubs, or a set number of times. But we were forced to keep coming back to that waiting room as Mom’s health got worse and worse. And we talked about books just as often as we talked about anything.

My mother was a fast reader, and a slightly odd one. Ever since she was a girl, she had read the end of a book first because she couldn’t wait to learn how things turned out. I realized, when I started writing a book about our book club, that, in a way, she’d already read the end of it — when you have pancreatic cancer that’s been diagnosed after it has spread, you can be fairly certain of what fate has in store.
Sometimes, Mom wanted to talk very specifically about her own death — including what color ink we should use when answering people who wrote condolence notes (blue, not black, which is too depressing). Sometimes, she wanted to talk about anything but. Books gave us a way to talk about death that allowed her to choose how personal or abstract she wanted the conversations to be.

One of the books that meant the most to her was Marilynne Robinson’s “Gilead.” The main character, a 75-year-old minister, knows he is dying, and the novel is in the form of a remembrance for his son. In the character of this pastor, Mom had a model of a person whose faith helps him accept death. The book also gave her a bit of an opening to try to persuade me, ever so gently, to give church another try. It had always given her such solace that she wanted the same for me.

In true book-club fashion, our conversations about books led to conversations about our lives and life in general.

My mother, Mary Anne Schwalbe, had been an educator who had worked in college admissions and in high schools before devoting herself in her mid-50s to the cause of refugees — as founding director of an organization that is today known as the Women’s Refugee Commission. Before she died, she wanted to do one more big thing: help raise money for a national library and cultural center at Kabul University, and for traveling libraries to reach remote villages throughout Afghanistan, a country she had repeatedly visited, and loved. (Today, the main library building is almost finished and there are nearly 200 libraries across all 34 provinces.)


The book that got our club started, Stegner’s “Crossing to Safety,” prompted one of our most important discussions. When Mom said that she was pretty sure that the husband of a character who was dying of cancer would be O.K. after her death, she wasn’t just talking about that character’s husband — she was, I suspected, talking about my dad as well.

The book club also offered us a chance to travel far beyond the walls of the outpatient care center, even as Mom was stuck there for hours at a time. When we got absorbed by novels like “Man Gone Down,” by Michael Thomas, or “The Price of Salt,” by Patricia Highsmith, or even stories by P. G. Wodehouse, we discovered that while we were reading, we weren’t a sick person and a well person, but a mother and son sharing a journey together.

I privately dubbed our club “The End of Your Life Book Club,” not to remind myself that Mom was dying, but so I would remember that we all are — that you never know what book or conversation will be your last.

My sister and brother also took turns accompanying Mom to her various medical appointments and treatments. We all learned a huge amount from our mother. Some of the lessons I’ll be thinking about today are these: make your bed every day, even if you don’t feel like it; keep spare gifts in a “present drawer” so you’ll always have something on hand; write thank you notes within hours of receiving gifts; use shelf liner.
But this Mother’s Day, I’ll be thinking mostly of this: We all have a lot more to read than we can read and a lot more to do than we can do. But reading isn’t the opposite of doing; it’s the opposite of dying. I will never be able to read my mother’s favorite books without thinking of her — and when I pass them on or recommend them, I’ll know that some of what made her the person she was goes with them.

Which leads me to a suggestion: If you’re tempted to get a book for your mother today, why not buy or borrow a copy for yourself at the same time? That way, you can share the experience of reading it together. For me, there was no greater gift.

A book editor, the founder of the recipe site Cookstr and the author of the forthcoming memoir “The End of Your Life Book Club.”

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http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/opinion/sunday/reading-together-knowing-the-ending.html?ref=review
Will Schwalbe discusses his affecting new memoir 'The End of Your Life Book Club'

by Stephan Lee

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When Mary Anne Schwalbe was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer, she didn’t want to slow down. A tireless advocate for refugees around the world, Mary Anne didn’t stop striving to build a library in Afghanistan — or continuing to discover new literature with her son Will. In his engrossing, deeply moving new memoir *The End of Your Life Book Club* (EW grade: A), Will Schwalbe writes about his mother’s last days through the prism of the things they read together. He took the time to talk to EW about his mother's inspiring legacy and the transformative power of books.

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY: Your mother Mary Anne was clearly an exceptional person with very impressive accomplishments and passions — but in a way, I felt like she was every great mom, and you were like every child of a great mom who wanted to give her the tribute she deserved.

WILL SCHWALBE: There’s no reaction that could make me happier than that reaction. I’m very proud of my mother. But when she died, there was no obituary in the *New York Times*. She wasn’t famous. In fact, I don’t think her name was ever in the *New York Times*, and that’s true of most people’s moms. I like to think of her as an extraordinary, ordinary person. There are so many extraordinary, ordinary people across the country — people who are fantastic mothers and adore their children, and their children adore them, and do incredible things in their communities. I was in publishing for 21 years, and I saw a lot of really wonderful memoirs by
people who had very difficult times with their mothers. In fact, it’s almost a kind of genre, yet there are a lot of people who have great mothers. In some ways, I feel like this is a celebration of moms.

**When did you decide you wanted to write this book?**

It was a couple of months before Mom died, and I’m not quite sure how it popped into my head first, but I mentioned to her that I wanted to write a something about our conversations, the books we’d read. It was something I suddenly felt really compelled to do, and her reaction was very typical to her: She was like, “Why would you want to do that? There’s got to be something else that’s more interesting to write about.” But then she sent me an e-mail, and in the e-mail was a list of all the books we’d read. She followed up with e-mails that were like, “Don’t forget to talk about Healthcare Reform,” and “Remember Mariatu, that extraordinary woman who was maimed by the Sierra Leonean boy soldiers.” We never talked about the book again, but she would send me notes, and in the end, when she died, she left for me a pile of her speeches, her notes from her refugee trips.

**Even though the book is written from your point of view, it’s almost as if your mother was backseat-writing parts of it.**

I think she felt very strongly that the message is more important than the messenger. There were things that she wanted to say in her life, but she didn’t care of she said them. She just wanted them heard. That was pretty much in keeping with her work as a refugee advocate, bringing refugees’ voices to the front. For example, the need for Healthcare Reform – she was passionate about that. She needed someone to say that, but it didn’t have to be her. It very much was an emphasis on the message, not the messenger. She loved the idea that the causes and books she was passionate about would get out in the world, and if that had to be through my telling her story, then that would be okay.

**It’s interesting what you said wrote about grown men having a hard time writing about loving their mothers, because the subject is regarded as “a bit gay.”**

It’s funny. When straight men write about their mothers, and other straight men talk about those books, they’re very nervous about that aspect. So when they’re talking about The Tender Bar by J.R. Moehringer, which is a love letter to his mother, it’s like, “Oh yeah, that book about the bar and the guys in the bar and drinking.” The other thing is, whether it’s a straight man or gay man doing it, talking about your mother after she’s dead is something that I think people are sometimes nervous to do. There is a sort of, especially with men, a kind of prejudice against being seen as a Mama’s Boy. You’re supposed to be manly and get on with your life. But I like talking about her – continuing the conversation, telling people about her. If the book does that, I’ll be really proud. If it helps people feel like it’s okay to talk about how much you love your mom and it’s also okay to talk about people when they’re dead. You don’t have to exclude them from the conversation. Some people said to me, “I’ve always been nervous asking you things about your mom because I didn’t want to make you sad.” It actually makes me really happy to talk about her. It makes me sad when I forget about her.

**Were there parts of this book that were really hard to write?**

I really had fun. I was talking to my mom, and she was talking back. It was that act of remembering, so most of it was very joyful. Writing about her death was hard. What I tried to do there was just say what happened. Just as simply as I could, just say what happened. And I also tried to be really honest about things that I hadn’t seen before. I talked at one point in the book about how, as emotionally distraught I was, and how wrenching it was to sit by her bedside.
when she was dying with this alternating vigil with my brother and sister, there was an element to it that was tedious, too. It’s not easy. Time goes very, very slowly. But that whole passage was very hard to write about. I just tried to let the facts try to speak for themselves.

Mary Anne did so much and meant so much to so many different people. Was it difficult to choose which parts of her story to tell?
I mean, I was frustrated because there was so much I wanted to tell. I wanted to tell so much of her refugee missions. I mean, she was in Bosnia during the Bosnian War when it was being shelled … her trips to Liberia during the chaos. She was several times in Monrovia, and she had amazing stories. But I just had to remind myself when I was writing: This is about my relationship with my mother and our love for books and how books showed us what we needed to do in life and how books helped us. It’s not a biography.

Did you know immediately that you wanted to write about your mother’s life and death by talking about books?
Yes. I wanted to write about books and our conversations. I loved these books, and she loved these books. So I feel like in some ways that if this book does nothing but get more people to read Wallace Stegner, my work is done. Stegner! That was a revelation for me. In some ways, I worried that this kind of all-enveloping experience that you have when you’re a kid and you read The Hobbit – can you have that as an adult? And I was in publishing, so I read a lot of books, but there are certain books that gave me that. Stegner was one of them, and I want that for other people.

It’s amazing the breadth of reading you and Mary Anne did at the end of her life.
One of the things that I didn’t think about until afterwards – and it’s so Mom – was even while she was dying, she wanted to discover new things. That’s living while you’re dying. Some people said, “Wow, Victor LaValle’s Big Machine, that’s kind of an unusual book to choose as one of the last books you’ll ever read.” But it got this great review in the Wall Street Journal, and it sounded really interesting. I wanted to make it really clear too that it’s really this kind of natural thing where we read what we wanted to read. It wasn’t, “Let’s read all of the classics.” Just read.

You read everything from hefty literary tomes to The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo!
Everyone was talking about it! If everyone was talking about it, she wanted to read it. Also, that was very much part of her thing about the message and messenger. Just because a book is selling zillions of copies and is enormously popular, that doesn’t mean there aren’t extraordinary things to be learned and gained from it. That education and inspiration can come from all different kinds of messengers.

What was really impressive to me was that even though I hadn’t read most of the books you wrote about, I still found reading about them really engaging. Did you find it hard to write about books in an interesting way without giving away all the details?
Actually, no! In 21 years in publishing, I had to get up two times a year and talk to a roomful of wonderful sales reps who were book lovers and passionate about books, but who then had to go to booksellers and then tell them about books. I had to talk about books in such a way that they would want to read them. Tell them enough so that they will have a sense of it – hopefully
tell them something interesting about it that would stick in their mind, but not give away the plot. So in some ways, that’s how I talk about books. We always used to say at sales conference is the minute the editor gets up and starts to tell the plot of a book, that book is dead in the water because there is nothing duller than something telling you the plot of a book. If someone could describe to you the plot of *Moby Dick*, then there’d be no reason for reading it – the fact is, it’s impossible. I really wanted to show how my mother and I talked about books, which is we’d talk about what was interesting to *us* in a book. It doesn’t have to be the best thing you ever read or the worst thing you ever read. It can just be interesting.

**What was the one book that was most important to you and your mom during this whole period?**
It probably was *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. That was a book that was so important to her. It perfectly described her faith, and it was a book that she re-read so I could read it with her. Also, a book like *The Lizard Cage* by Karen Connelly. It’s an extraordinary book. Her reaction to her book, which was to write a check to the campaign for Burma, is one of the lessons she left me. It’s not enough to be moved by a book — you have to do something. I think of her very pragmatic view that books are calls to action. Sometimes they’re calls to action to do something very specific in the world, like write a check for the campaign in Burma. But sometimes they’re calls to action to see things differently, to treat people differently, to change the way that you move in the world … recognize things. She felt very strongly that if you don’t read books about cruelty, you don’t recognize evil. And if you don’t recognize evil, you can’t stop it.

**What are some books that have been published after your mother’s death that you would have liked to read together?**
*The Headmaster’s Wager* by Vincent Lam. She would have loved that book. I think she really would have been fascinated by *Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson. I think *Joseph Anton* by Salman Rushdie — I just started it. She’d be really interesting on that topic.

**What do you hope *The End of Your Life Book Club* accomplishes?**
Being a grandmother was Mom’s favorite thing in the world, and to some degree, I realized as I was writing this book that I also wanted the book to tell the grandchildren know who their grandmother was. I think that’s another thing that books do—you can get to know someone by reading the books they love. The books you love form a portrait of you.
Author Will Schwalbe Answers Your Questions

The author of “The End of Your Life Book Club” talks to the members of the No-Obligation Book Club.

Hi, Bookies:

Will Schwalbe has sent on his answers to the questions we asked about The End of Your Life Book Club. But there was more: They came with a note that expressed how deeply touched he was that you picked his book and by your careful reading of it and the observations that resulted. As for your “tremendous questions,” he says they “are among the best I’ve had since the book was published—and . . . I’ve had a lot of conversations and a lot of questions!” Enjoy.

—Maura

From reader himmel: My question for Will is one that came up in our discussions. That is, how much did you experience of your mother’s anxiety/fear concerning her death? Or do you feel that she protected you from that aspect of her journey? Or do you think she was not fearful or anxious about the end of her life approaching?

This is such an important point—many thanks for this question. Mom did share with me some of her fear and anxiety—but usually after the strongest moments had passed. For example, she would say that she had had an anxious night, or that she had been feeling sad the day before. But it was rare that she would even say that. I think much of her fear and anxiety came at the start, right after her diagnosis—when I was abroad, and she didn’t want to worry me or have me cut my trip short.

I also think Mom chose to have different kinds of conversations with different people, the way we all do. Just as we go to one friend to talk about one kind of thing and another to talk about another, so it was with Mom—she and I had certain kinds of conversations over the years; she had different kinds with my siblings; and still different kinds with her minister or with her oldest friends. I don’t think she was protecting me from that aspect of her journey, though that could have been part of it: I think it was more that in the search for normalcy in whatever time she had left, she wanted to preserve the essence of her relationships. Mom and I mostly talked about the kinds of things we always talked about, though the books did allow us to approach some very difficult topics obliquely.

It’s also important to mention that her faith gave her great comfort—she would say that she was sad, but not especially anxious or afraid. And I think that really was the case. She believed in life everlasting. Also, because Mom had such a lethal form of cancer, she was able to see any extra time as a blessing. I should mention again, too, that Mom had researched palliative care and
home hospice long before she was sick—and I think making those plans removed a measure of anxiety as well. In addition, the palliative care team and hospice nurses were a great resource to her and to the whole family in the final months.

(A note here: I included my original comment only as backgound to reader himmel’s question, but Will was thoughtful enough to answer it too). From deputy editor Maura Fritz: I admire both the grace and dignity that Mom shows in the face of cancer and her deep commitment to helping others in need. But what do you think of her perpetually even emotional keel? I keep wondering if she never got angry or sad or felt even an ounce of self-pity, all of which seem to me would be normal on the path to acceptance. Do you think that maybe she guarded those emotions from Will and the rest of the family? Or is Will, maybe, protecting his beloved mom by keeping those aspects to himself? Or is it possible that Mom reconciled herself without taking that emotional journey?

Thank you for the wonderful comments and excellent question.

Mom certainly told me that she got angry and sad, and I’m sure there were times she felt sorry for herself. But I think there’s a difference between feeling those things and expressing them. And Mom rarely expressed them to me or in front of me. I’m not sure why, and it doesn’t feel right to speculate—there could have been so many reasons. I think every one of us is wired differently and needs different things—some people more naturally express and share emotions and others prefer not too. I’m not sure that one path is better than the other.

Mom’s faith was certainly a great comfort to her, as was expressing her good fortune and thinking and worrying about others. I do write about the times when she told me she was sad. She confided and I acknowledged it—but there just wasn’t that much more that she wanted to say to me about that.

I think to the degree that Mom was selfless, it was actually one of the ways she coped with and accepted her illness. I think being relatively selfless often gave her pleasure, as it had throughout her life, and was a comfort to her—maybe even a distraction, sometimes.

One of the things I’ve witnessed is that everyone deals with illness (and grief) differently, and there’s no one path that’s right for everyone. For some people, I think, anger is very important and even healing—but for others, it’s just not how they express themselves. I do think Mom had a full emotional journey, greatly informed by her faith, but I think it was a journey that was both private and shared in different parts and in different ways with different people.

From reader karingam: I’ll bet it was very therapeutic to write this book, Will. Thank you for modeling devotion to a parent. In today’s world, I must say, that kind of raw commitment is a bit understated. People are so distracted with their own immediate world and needs that talking so openly about helping his mom is wonderful. Well done, Will, in so many ways. Thank you.

Thank you! I didn’t ever quite think of it as therapeutic—but more as a way to continue our conversations. I didn’t want them to end just because Mom had died. And I really appreciate your observation. I loved spending time with Mom, so the time I spent with her never felt like a sacrifice or an obligation. Certainly, there were things she wanted me to do that felt like
obligations! But the time we spent together never felt that way. I've had such an interesting journey since, traveling around the country talking to people, and have discovered so many adult children who enjoy spending time with their parents, and parents who enjoy spending time with their adult children.

There are many memoirs that focus on very difficult or broken relationships—and there’s a huge need for these books. But I think there’s also room for books that chronicle happier and easier relationships, as well. That's one reason I wanted to write this book. Again, many thanks for your kind comments.

From reader DarleneAA: Mr. Schwalbe, I’d just like to send my condolences to you on the loss of your mom and commend you on a wonderfully written piece about such a nice relationship that you shared with your mother. She seems to have been a wonderful person and you were fortunate to have her in your life! I’d like to know, was it difficult or burdensome for you to keep up with the readings of the books with your mother in light of how busy your life was, or did you view the readings as a welcome sanctuary from your busy life? Did you ever do what your mom did and read the end of the book first?

First, thank you for your kind message of condolence and your generous words about the book. And I really enjoyed your question! It was indeed sometimes difficult and burdensome to keep up with the reading of the books. I remember at many points thinking (and even once saying) that I really didn’t have time—and then, of course, I would remind myself that I had the rest of my life, whereas Mom only had months. I never made much of a dent in Joseph and His Brothers, by Thomas Mann, and still haven’t. But I am a fast reader and did have both insomnia (still do) and 21 years of experience in book publishing, a career where you often need to power through books quickly, even if you aren’t totally in love with them. But mostly I did see the books as welcome sanctuary and loved almost all the books we read. So the reading usually brought me great pleasure. As for skipping ahead—I’ll sometimes jump to the end of a chapter but never, ever, to the end of a book. Again, many thanks!

From reader swansonkl: My question for Will: How is the library coming in light of the war in Afghanistan and have you seen it?

I’m so pleased to say that the main library has been finished for several months. It took some months to get the electricity hooked up. But now that’s finally done—so the library is open! There’s an official opening ceremony planned for the end of March—very exciting. I’ve seen pictures of the library and it is absolutely stunning. Thank you for asking!

From reader dconnolly: I have so many questions for Will! If narrowing it to two, I would ask: If he were to write an afterword to EOYLBLC what key piece would he include? How have the efforts toward maintaining/growing the library in Afghanistan continued?

What great questions! If I were writing an afterword, I would love to include stories people have shared with me about the way books have played roles in their lives and brought them closer to people they love. I’ve heard literally hundreds of wonderful and inspiring stories. I also might want to include books I’ve read after Mom’s death that have been especially meaningful to me—like Help, Thanks, Wow, by Anne Lamott, and A Tale for the Time Being, by Ruth Ozeki.

As for the library, please see my answer above. I’m also delighted to add that there are now
“book-box libraries” in more than 200 villages in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

From reader bettyskid: I noticed that you dedicated the book to your family and partner but not your mother, whom you thanked in your acknowledgments. How did you decide to do that?

I gave that a lot of thought. After going back and forth, I figured that I would save a special place for Mom as the last and most important thank-you in the acknowledgments—that she would literally have the last word in the book. But I thought I would save the dedication for the living. I also think that so very much of the content of the book is dedicated to my mother that it was almost redundant to include a dedication to her.

From deputy editor Maura Fritz: Of all the books you and your mom read together, which affected you the most?

The book that affected me the most was Crossing to Safety, by Wallace Stegner. It’s a masterpiece. And that I discovered it at age 45 became somewhat symbolic for me of everything that is still ahead in life. How could I have made it to 45 without reading that book! It’s such a rich, involving, moving work. And I’m not giving anything of the plot away to say that it ends with a character saying one of the most powerful words there is, maybe the most powerful.

From reader 1margo2: This book is one of the best books I have read for a long time. I asked my son if he would start a book club with me and he said yes! I have had cancer twice and am always waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I know I am here for a reason, each day is a gift. The mom in the story is amazing and the son is a rather a normal person with normal reactions; how true of us all. I can’t wait to read some of the books they read, that I have never even heard of.

I can’t thank this reader enough for this comment. I’m delighted to hear that this reader and her (or is it his?) son are doing a book club together! I’m deeply honored that they’ll be reading some of the books we read—and I hope they enjoy them as much as we did. And I’m also wishing for them and for all [the No-Obligation Book Club] readers long lifetimes of great books and great conversations about them.