We've all got our idiosyncrasies when it comes to writing—a special chair we have to sit in, a certain kind of yellow paper we absolutely must use. To create this tremendously affecting memoir, Jean-Dominique Bauby used the only tool available to him--his left eye--with which he blinked out its short chapters, letter by letter. Two years ago, Bauby, then the 43-year-old editor-in-chief of Elle France, suffered a rare stroke to the brain stem; only his left eye and brain escaped damage. Rather than accept his locked in situation as a kind of death, Bauby ignited a fire of the imagination under himself and lived his last days—he died two days after the French publication of this slim volume—spiritually unfettered. In these pages Bauby journeys to exotic places he has and has not been, serving himself delectable gourmet meals along the way (surprise: everythings ripe and nothing burns). In the simplest of terms he describes how it feels
to see reflected in a window the head of a man who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde.

The Review

After reading Lisas Best of 2008 List and after speaking to a fellow Basketball Mom last week, I was intrigued to read The Diving Bell and The Butterfly. The story is a sort of an auto-biographical one, however only sharing Baubys remarkably beautiful memories of the life he lost after the massive stroke he suffered in December 1995. At the time, Bauby was 43 years old and the editor of French Elle Magazine. From what I gather in this book, his life was once filled with travel and he was the type of man with an incredible passion for life. Once stripped of his physical abilities and the ability to effectively function and communicate due to locked-in syndrome, a permanent and full paralysis as a result of the stroke, his mind craves to communicate the very acute and real memories to his bedside assistant.

Bauby is able to communicate via the blinking of his one functioning eye. He describes in the book that he had written and edited the material multiple times in his mind so that the effort to communicate it was clear the first time around. In his memoirs and thoughts, he shares his vivid memories of his travels in his past and times with his family and friends. He further describes what it is like to be trapped in this non-functioning body and compares it to being weighted by a diving bell/suit. He shares what all his sensory functions are like: eyesight, hearing, dreams, smell, and pain.

This book was, to me, more of a book of prose than of typical writing. Each line of the book intricately designed to effectively provide the reader a vision and an understanding.

In describing how it felt to now be described as a vegetable:

The tone of voice left no doubt that henceforth I belong on a vegetable stall and not to the human race. France was at peace; one couldnt shoot the bearers of bad news. Instead I would have to rely on myself if I wanted to prove that my IQ was still higher than a turnips.

And, he describes the hospital cafeteria:
Although my own corner of the hospital has the look of an expensive private school, one would never mistake the cafeteria crowd for member of the Dead Poets Society. The girls have hard eyes, the boys tattoos and some with rings on their fingers. There they sit, chain-smoking and talking about fistfights and motorbikes. Their already stooped shoulders seem to bear a heavy cross. Cruel fate has cured them, and their stay at Berck is just one more stage between an abused childhood and jobless future. When I am wheeled through their smoke-filled lair, the silence becomes deafening; I see neither pity nor compassion in their eyes.

Some of my favorite parts of the book include his visit to the beach, his viewing of his children playing, and his description of what food tastes like although he is only being fed by a tube. This is a remarkable book in the knowing of how it was written and the determination it took Bauby to ensure its completion.

On Shers Out of Ten Scale:

There is no clear book to use as a comparison to this one as it is unique in every way. This is a book that reminds you of the sheer preciousness of life and the value of human health. For the genre Non-Fiction, I would give this book a 9 out of 10.

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The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death by Jean-Dominique Bauby - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!