

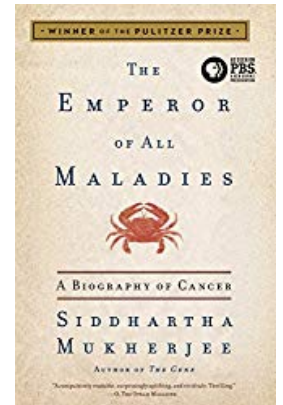


Discussion Guide – Quarter 3 - 2020

The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer

Author: Siddhartha Mukherjee

The Emperor of All Maladies is a magnificent, profoundly humane “biography” of cancer—from its first documented appearances thousands of years ago through the epic battles in the twentieth century to cure, control, and conquer it to a radical new understanding of its essence. Physician, researcher, and award-winning science writer, Siddhartha Mukherjee examines cancer with a cellular biologist’s precision, a historian’s perspective, and a biographer’s passion. The result is an astonishingly lucid and eloquent chronicle of a disease humans have lived with—and perished from—for more than five thousand years.



Discussion questions:

1. Cancer is often described as a "modern" disease—yet its first description dates from 2500 B.C. In what sense, then, is cancer a disease of modern times? How does knowing its ancient history affect your notion of cancer?
2. Mukherjee frames the book around the story of his patient, Carla Reed, a teacher who is diagnosed with leukemia. What did you find interesting or important about Carla's experience? How do you think she shaped the author's life and thoughts?
3. Mukherjee writes how in the early 1950s *The New York Times* refused to print the word "cancer" (or "breast"). Compare this to how we view cancer today. Is there any difference in the way you discuss cancer as a political or news topic and how you discuss a cancer diagnosis among family and friends?
4. How have the relationships between doctors and patients evolved along with cancer treatments? What could be done to restore some of the lapses in this relationship?
5. How can doctors and scientists draw the line between reckless, unproven treatment and necessary experimentation for drug development?
6. How did Mary Lasker borrow from the worlds of business, advertising and even the military to build a nationwide effort to combat cancer? How might Lasker's vision be invoked today to generate funding and national attention for breast or ovarian cancer?
7. Numerous advances in cancer research would have been impossible without patients willing to submit themselves to grueling experimental trials—experiences from which they did not benefit, but future cancer patients might. How would you counsel a friend or relative about submitting themselves to such experiments?
8. Was the War on Cancer a failure? Why or why not?
9. How did the tobacco industry react to studies in the 1950s about the link between cigarettes and lung cancer? How did the industry's reaction differ to that of the general public? Do you think cigarette companies should be legally liable for cancer and other health problems likely caused by smoking?
10. The author says that he was motivated to write this book after a patient asked him, "What is cancer?" Mukherjee could not think of a book that would answer her question. So he wrote it. Does "knowing your enemy"—knowing cancer—bring some kind of comfort?