

A Totally Unauthorized Reading Group Guide to 'The Last Lecture' by Randy Pausch

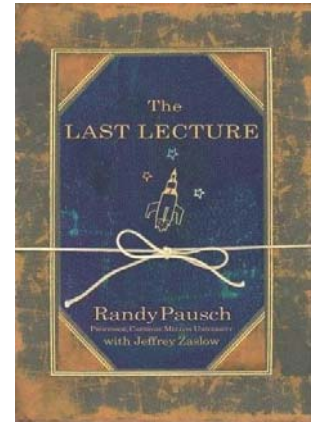
10 Discussion Questions

The Last Lecture

By Randy Pausch with Jeffrey Zaslow

Source: One-Minute Book Reviews

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After learning that he had terminal pancreatic cancer, Randy Pausch gave an upbeat valedictory lecture at Carnegie Mellon University, where he teaches computer science. He called his talk “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams” and explained in it how he had accomplished most of what he set out to do in life. Enlivened with humor and showmanship, his lecture drew millions of visitors to its posting on YouTube and made Pausch a star on the Internet. His talk also inspired *The Last Lecture*, a collection of short essays written with Wall Street Journal columnist Jeffrey Zaslow, which became a No. 1 bestseller on the New York Times “Advice, How-To and Miscellaneous” list.

Discussion Questions

Please note that the page numbers below come from the large-type edition of *The Last Lecture* (Thorndike, 2008), the only one available when this guide was prepared.

1. When someone asked what he wanted on his tombstone, Pausch said: “Randy Pausch: He Lived Thirty Years After a Terminal Diagnosis.” [Page 247] If you were to write his epitaph, what would it say?
2. Summing up a theme of his lecture and book, Pausch writes: “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” [Page 32] This is one of many clichés he admits he loves and uses liberally in *The Last Lecture*. Did he succeed in making any old ideas fresh? How did he do it?
3. Pausch began his lecture “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams” by saying he wasn’t going to deal with big questions of religion or spirituality, and he sticks to that pattern in *The Last Lecture*. How does the book benefit or suffer from his decision?
4. *The Last Lecture* recycles much of what Pausch said in his valedictory lecture at Carnegie Mellon and expands some of it. Should people who’ve watched the talk also read the book? Why? What does the book give you that the lecture doesn’t?
5. Pausch could have called his book *The Last Lectures*, because he structures it as a series of mini-lectures instead of one long lecture. How well does this technique work?
6. *The Last Lecture* balances general advice such as “dream big” with specific tips – for example, about how to work well in small groups. “Instead of saying, ‘I think we should do A, instead of B,’ try ‘What if we did A, instead of B?’” [Page 190] Which, if any, of the tips struck you as most helpful?

7. Many cancer patients are bombarded with the advice to “be optimistic” or “think positively.” This approach has led to a medical backlash alluded to in the chapter “A Way to Understand Optimism.” Pausch says his surgeon worries about “patients who are inappropriately optimistic or ill-informed”: “It pains him to see patients who are having a tough day healthwise and assume it’s because they weren’t positive enough.” [Page 249] What is Pausch’s view of this? Is he appropriately or inappropriately optimistic? Why?

8. Many people who have heard about *The Last Lecture* may be tempted to give the book to someone who has had a devastating diagnosis, or who is perhaps dying, hoping it will provide comfort or cheer. What would you say to them? Is this a book for the living or the dying?

9. *The Last Lecture* comes from Mitch Albom’s publisher and literary agent and has a small format similar to that of *Tuesdays With Morrie*. These similarities – let’s face it – could be a kiss of death for some people, especially critics who see Albom as an icon of saccharine and dumbed-down writing. What would you say to someone who didn’t plan to read *The Last Lecture* because, “One Mitch Albom is enough”?

10. If you were going to give your own “last lecture,” what would you say?

A review of *The Last Lecture* appeared on *One-Minute Book Reviews* on May 30, 2008. If you are reading this guide on the home page of the site, scroll down to find the review. If you are reading this guide on the Internet, click on this link to find it [www.oneminutebookreviews.wordpress.com/2008/05/30/](http://www.oneminutebookreviews.wordpress.com/2008/05/30/).

Watch Pausch’s talk “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams” and read an excerpt from *The Last Lecture* at [www.thelastlecture.com](http://www.thelastlecture.com).