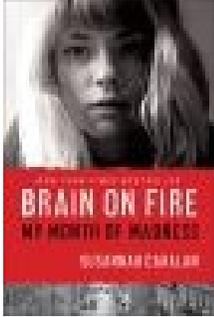


Books by the Stack



Brain on Fire by Susannah Cahalan

An account of the author's struggle with a rare brain-attacking autoimmune disease traces how she woke up in a hospital room with no memory of baffling psychotic symptoms, describing the last-minute intervention by a doctor who identified the source of her illness.

Why you'll like it: Memoir. Fast-paced. Journalistic. Compelling.

About the Author: Susannah Cahalan is a news reporter at *the New York Post* whose award-winning work has also been featured in *The New York Times*. She lives in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Questions for discussion

1. A quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche appears at both the beginning and end of Cahalan's memoir: "The existence of forgetting has never been proved: we only know that some things do not come to our mind when we want them to." Why do you think Cahalan chooses to recall this quotation at both the story's start and end? How does it correspond to Cahalan's tale and its major themes? In addition to the content of the quotation, why is it particularly poignant that the author would choose a quote by Nietzsche to bookend her work?
2. Evaluate and discuss the style and genre of *Brain on Fire*. Cahalan describes the book as a memoir, but she also says that it reportage. She acknowledges using help from other sources since she has little to no memory of many of the happenings recounted in the book. In the author's note she goes so far as to describe herself as an "unreliable source." How does this detail affect our experience of and response to her story? What does this indicate about truth and bias in storytelling? What complex issues does it raise in our understanding of works designated as nonfiction?
3. In the author's note, Cahalan says that her book is "a journalist's inquiry into that deepest part of self—personality, memory, identity." What does her story reveal about these three subjects? How does her account challenge our preconceptions of these three subjects? Alternatively, how does her account confirm or bolster what we already know and believe about these three subjects?
4. *Brain on Fire* is divided into three parts and fifty-three chapters. Why is this structure meaningful and important? How does it correspond to some of the major subjects and themes of the book? How does this

structure affect our comprehension of the work or our emotional experience of it as readers?

5. Consider and discuss the various reactions to Cahalan's illness as chronicled in her book. Are the responses uniform or varied? Are they expected or unexpected? What about Cahalan's own responses to her illness and what she endures? Consider the response she recalls having while she was suffering versus her response after her treatment and recovery. What does consideration of these responses reveal about our responses to the mysterious and the unknown?
6. Consider and discuss your own reactions as readers to what you encounter on the page—at the opening of the story and as the story continues to its conclusion. How did your thoughts, feelings, and opinions change throughout?
7. In Chapter 22 (p. 83), Cahalan refers to a quote by William F. Allman's book *Apprentices of Wonder: Inside the Neural Network Revolution*: "The brain is a monstrous beautiful mess." What does Allman mean by this? What does it reveal about the workings of the brain? How does this correspond to what we find revealed in Cahalan's book?
8. The characters in *Brain on Fire*—friends, family, medical personnel, and even Cahalan herself—frequently consider if she may be suffering from some form of mental illness. What does the book reveal, then, about our way of thinking about mental illness? For instance, what does Cahalan's story suggest about the relationship between psychology and neurology? What preconceptions does it reveal about our understanding of mental illness as a society? How does this story help to highlight the necessity of compassionate responses to those who are ill?
9. Cahalan incorporates many epigraphs, quotes, and references to famous figures—Nietzsche, Aristotle, Virginia Wolff, and many others—in her story. What may be the primary reason or reasons for these being included and why are they important?
10. Cahalan has titled her memoir *Brain on Fire*. What does this title mean and where does it come from?
11. Consider the role of faith in the story—not only religious faith, but also faith defined more broadly to include support for others, faith in one's self (think not only of Cahalan's story but of Dr. Najjar's story), hope and resilience. What role does faith seem to play in success and recovery both for Cahalan and those around her? (*Questions by Publisher*)



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