

This month I read two memoirs from physicians: Oliver Sacks, a neurologist who lived a long life, and Paul Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon who barely finished his residency, both of whom passed away last year.

[On the Move: A Life](#), by Oliver Sacks, Knopf, New York City, 2015, 416 pages, ISBN: 978-0385352543.

I remember when Sacks' book *Awakenings* came out in 1973. I was not old enough to read it, but my mother, who was also a physician practicing in New York City, talked about it with great respect at the dinner table. While I have read other books by him, I have still not read *Awakenings* (although I know I should).

On the Move came out 4 months before Sacks passed away due to a metastasized ocular melanoma in August 2015. The author describes his late childhood and early teens, his coming out, his study of medicine, and his love of motorcycles. He traces his path from Oxford to Montreal to San Francisco to Los Angeles and finally to New York City. He details his compassion for his patients as a neurologist and his ability to tell stories both through his expository writing and this autobiography. There are many interesting anecdotes – for example, his squat record at Muscle Beach in the early 60s and the time he strapped a dying patient to his bike to show her the sunrise at the Grand Canyon. It was his time at Beth Abraham in New York that allowed him to treat patients with post-encephalitic disease with L-dopa and led to his rise to fame. The book ends only eight months before his death, offering a nearly complete autobiographical portrait. This book has some explicit descriptions and I would not recommend it for youngsters.

[When Breath Becomes Air](#) by Paul Kalanithi, Random House, New York, 2016, 256 pages, ISBN: 978-0812988406.

Paul Kalanithi was a resident neurosurgeon at Stanford Medical Center. He died March 9, 2015 of stage IV metastatic lung cancer. The prologue describes his first inkling that he might be sick, even though his tests came back negative. The first chapter then jumps backward in time, describing his youth moving from Bronxville, New York to Kingman, Arizona with his family and growing up in this forgotten valley; his days as an undergrad at Stanford; a year at Cambridge; and medical school at Yale where he met his wife, Lucy. After medical school they took residency positions in the Bay area: he at Stanford, she at USCF. Paul specialized in neurosurgery and started his residency at Stanford. The second chapter details the progression of his cancer and his daughter's birth. He officially completed his residency, but could not attend the ceremony because he was too ill. As his health declined, he began writing the book and completed it as best he could. Lucy provides the final chapter, written posthumously.

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