



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Brain on Fire by Susannah Cahalan

Summary

One day in 2009, twenty-four-year-old Susannah Cahalan woke up alone in a strange hospital room, strapped to her bed, under guard, and unable to move or speak. A wristband marked her as a “flight risk,” and her medical records—chronicling a month-long hospital stay of which she had no memory at all—showed hallucinations, violence, and dangerous instability. Only weeks earlier, Susannah had been on the threshold of a new, adult life: a healthy, ambitious college grad a few months into her first serious relationship and a promising career as a cub reporter at a major New York newspaper. Who was the stranger who had taken over her body? What was happening to her mind?

In this swift and breathtaking narrative, Susannah tells the astonishing true story of her inexplicable descent into madness and the brilliant, lifesaving diagnosis that nearly didn’t happen. A team of doctors would spend a month—and more than a million dollars—trying desperately to pin down a medical explanation for what had gone wrong. Meanwhile, as the days passed and her family, boyfriend, and friends helplessly stood watch by her bed, she began to move inexorably through psychosis into catatonia and, ultimately, toward death. Yet even as this period nearly tore her family apart, it offered an extraordinary testament to their faith in Susannah and their refusal to let her go.

Then, at the last minute, celebrated neurologist Souhel Najjar joined her team and, with the help of a lucky, ingenious test, saved her life. He recognized the symptoms of a newly discovered autoimmune disorder in which the body attacks the brain, a disease now thought to be tied to both schizophrenia and autism, and perhaps the root of “demonic possessions” throughout history.

Far more than simply a riveting read and a crackling medical mystery, *Brain on Fire* is the powerful account of one woman’s struggle to recapture her identity and to rediscover herself among the fragments left behind. Using all her considerable journalistic skills, and building from hospital records and surveillance video, interviews with family and friends, and excerpts from the deeply moving journal her father kept during her illness, Susannah pieces together the story of her “lost month” to write an unforgettable memoir about memory and identity, faith and love. It is an important, profoundly compelling tale of survival and perseverance that is destined to become a classic.

Discussion Questions

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?
12. What are some of the reasons that Cahalan may have chosen to share her story with the public? What lessons can we ultimately learn from her unique story?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher