



Last Breath: Cautionary Tales from the Limits of Human Endurance

Peter Stark

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In a fascinating blend of adventure and science, Stark recreates in heart-stopping detail what happens to our bodies and minds in the last moments of life when an extreme adventure goes awry.

Last Breath: Cautionary Tales from the Limits of Human Endurance Details

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From Reader Review *Last Breath: Cautionary Tales from the Limits of Human Endurance* for online ebook

Loren says

This is a truly strange book. Neither fish nor fowl, it follows the journalistic tradition of *In Cold Blood* to relate a fictional story hung on a skeleton of nonfiction. *Last Breath* gave me a strange sense of dissonance as I turned its pages.

Each chapter explores the way our fragile human bodies fail before the awesome power of nature: drowning while white water kayaking, cooking internally while bike racing in high humidity, choking on lungs full of blood while suffering the bends. In each chapter, the author creates characters—who often do not have names—to illustrate the sometimes complicated medical stages the body shuffles through on its way off this mortal coil. Some of the stories struck a nerve, like the woman who dies on the first female team to climb a mountain in the Himalayas. Her death was narrated in the third-person, observed by her fictional teammates. Something about their rituals for saying goodbye hit me hard, despite my knowledge that this was not a “real” person being mourned. Even the mourners were made up. Every time I began to consider it, the flashy trappings of the telling distracted me from the information being conveyed: *How We Die* swamped by fiction.

As the book progressed, I found myself paying as much attention to how the stories were told (from the dying person’s point of view or from the outside?) as I worked to understand and absorb the medical terminology. I became fascinated by the author laboring behind the stories. How did Stark decide who survived their injuries? Did he take satisfaction in letting the corporate raider die on the mountain ledge after he foolishly attempted a solo 5.9 climb? Did the woman survive the jellyfish attack in Australia? Her story is not told from inside her haze of pain, but rather from the point of view of her stodgy husband. The tale seemed to end before she did. Why doesn’t Stark convey the fever dreams of the man dying of malaria, rather than focusing on his blood counts? Why does the chapter on scurvy cover the start of the dot-com sailor’s journey rather than after he shows symptoms of his diet of red wine and potato chips?

And yet: the information being conveyed was fascinating. Stark excels in the stories where it’s clear he’s experienced some of the symptoms of onrushing death himself: high altitude physical sensations, the feel of extreme cold inside your nose, the way an athlete pushes himself to continue. Stark’s dire warnings and the love for nature in which they’re wrapped made compelling reading for me.

I’m a timid traveler. As much as I love the outside world, I don’t put myself in dangerous situations on mountaintops or beneath the waves. It would be easy to read *Last Breath* as a warning to stay in your home. However, Stark’s initial chapter, about a man who nearly freezes to death while skiing at night after being repeatedly warned about the extreme cold, was written for *Outside* magazine. Stark says in his introduction that he intended the book to serve as an *Ars Moriendi*, a guide on how to face our impending doom. Beneath that aim is the subtle repetitive message to study the conditions in which you are going to be outside, to listen to your body when it feels strained, to pay attention to your equipment, and avoid doing anything stupid. In that vein, *Last Breath* is not so much a treatise on the Art of Dying but a primer on How to Live.

Morbid Curiosity #6 published this review originally.

Cindy says

Kind of strange. I liked the chapter about avalanche best, given that I live in avalanche country, but overall it was an odd read. Why did he use a fictional was of telling the story? Why not interview actual people who survived these events, or tell actual accounts of people who died? As a storytelling device, it kept me disconnected from the story. Not recommended. Read Surviving the Extremes instead.

Ashley says

What a strange book. It was compulsively readable, and yet it wasn't quite nonfiction. The author created scenarios with fictional characters to illustrate some of the most harrowing kinds of death--heatstroke, dehydration, avalanche, hypothermia, et cetera. The mix of history, physiology, and narrative was wonderful, but I found myself wondering if he couldn't have told the stories of real people who suffered from these misfortunes and survived, or those who died but left behind witnesses. He certainly had a large number of sources he could have tapped--many of whom, he says, suffered these experiences themselves. He writes a good yarn. Fun book.

Ruth says

This book of several presumably true stories is pretty heavy on the medical descriptions of the victim's body. In some of the stories, probably 75% is taken up with the body's reaction to a wound, or dehydration, or malaria. It gets old pretty quick.

J. says

Eh

Audrey says

The whole time I was reading this book, I had Australian Metro's "Dumb Ways to Die" jingle running through my head. It was festive.

Because honestly, who decides to visit Southeast Asia without taking any kind of anti-malarials, either as a pre-trip precaution or as ongoing prophylaxis? Who free-climbs a 5.9 while angry and focused on your dayjob? Who takes a shortcut through the woods at night during an icestorm? Who deliberately swims outside a swimming net during Australia's high-jellyfish season?

The people in this book do, that's who.

The short, illustrative vignettes create, in all but one case, memorable characters with tiny, abbreviated (but interesting) lives, around which Stark weaves a whole lot of medical science, history and geography. There's

just enough detail here to keep a layperson interested, while providing an intriguing amount of backstory on the perils of scuba diving, heatstroke, hypothermia, free climbing, malaria, dehydration, drowning and a couple other outdoorsy pursuits. It helps that you know the outcome of each story so you don't get invested in the characters, but they're still remarkably detailed.

Good weird reading.

Brad Angle says

Kind of morbid, but interesting little stories about eleven ways to die. Explains in scientific detail how the body fails due to drowning, altitude, heat, the bends, scurvy, etc, all in fun fictional stories!

Dallas Veit says

Last Breath is a very interesting book. It has many different angles of ways to die and how to barely escape death. From drowning to running out of Vitamin C, Peter Stark really gives you a roller coaster of emotions when you read this book. He tells you a story, then explains the science and what happened to the person in the book. Even though it consisted of short stories, it added up to the theme of, be careful. Thus I would rate this book a 8/10.

Kim says

An enthralling blend of adventure and science, Last Breath re-creates in heart-stopping detail what happens to our bodies and our minds in the perilous last moments of life when an extreme adventure goes awry.

Reynaldo Calvillo says

This book tells stories of the limits of the human body. All of them except one is made up. Each chapter tells a different story, for example, chapter 1 would be about let us say a heatstroke. It'll get all sciency about it and go back and forth between actual facts and the story. Then chapter 2 would be about something else and have the same rhythm and so on.

I thought it was a good book because it wasn't boring. It wasn't boring because each chapter told a different story. I liked the way the information flowed, it was very smooth and easy to follow especially for someone who gets easily distracted like I tend to do a lot whenever I read. I really liked that I would learn something new in each chapter. Also, with all the imagery I could play the book in my head like a movie; it is really good when it can make me use my head. I also really liked that the stories had some humor in it though it was very subtle. Overall, Peter Starks, Last Breath was a good book and would recommend it to anyone who enjoys reading non-fiction and being at the edge of their seat or wherever they read.

Linda Murphy says

The science behind this was interesting

Schuyler Wallace says

As I sit reading “Last Breath,” Peter Stark’s engrossing study of life’s last moments during venturesome activities, a sudden thought occurs. I’ve done several of the activities he writes about, and experienced some of the physiological hardships he discusses. Not to the extremes he portrays, of course, but I’ve been cold, thirsty, overheated, and even nearly drowned. I can appreciate that had any of my hardships progressed to the levels of his discussions, I wouldn’t be here right now. That’s sobering.

For this book Stark has conducted immense research and interviewed a vast array of medical specialists. He has plumbed the depths of normally recalcitrant research labs, reticent scientists, wilderness conference attendees, and adventurers from many disciplines. With the information he has gathered he dissects hypothermia, drowning, mountain sickness, burial by avalanche, scurvy, heatstroke, falls, predators, the bends, malaria, and dehydration. To top it off, he includes an essay on his own fear of death.

It’s a thought-provoking book that conjures up intense personal feelings about one’s mortality and willingness to take chances. It illuminates moments of foolishness and bravery, although the bravery most always leads to poor decisions. Stark knows how to make each experience resonate within the reader like a fire bell. In my case, introspection leads to disturbing thoughts of the way things could have been had my comfort zone been larger.

The author uses a highly effective technique of creating a story leading to each mishap. He weaves wonderful tales of seemingly innocuous circumstances leading to decisions that illustrate how judgment can bring death to careless adventurers. A Jeep stuck in the snow prompts the driver to attempt to walk to his destination, a warm and cheery mountain cabin filled with friends. A kayaker bites off more river than he can swallow. A hot dogging snow boarder creates an avalanche that traps him in its cold embrace. A rock climber falls, is seemingly saved by a ledge, but then succumbs in a lonely place from injuries caused by his sudden stop. A cyclist attempts to blow away her competition by a sprint that ends up with a fatal heatstroke.

Every end result benefits from Stark’s careful explanation of the physical possibilities that exist, the actual damage incurred in each scenario, and what the stricken person’s mind envisions as trauma overtakes him or her. The chattering thought process will carry over to the reader, bringing dismay and a bit of self-study. I sucked on an orange the entire time I was reading the chapter on scurvy.

Valerie says

This book is filled with fascinating details about drowning, being smothered in avalanches, hypothermia etc. Goes well with any Into the Wild type reading.

Lea says

3.5 Stars

Kyle Garner says

Disappointed that the stories in the book were fictional. The author does a good job of describing the mental, physical, and spiritual turmoil people go through in extreme situations. Still would have liked to read real-life stories.
