



One More Theory About Happiness: A Memoir

Paul Guest

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Paul Guest was a normal 12-year-old, fascinated with the old firecrackers his grandfather kept in a jar. He'd break them up and set fire to the rupture, creating showers of sparks. The day after he graduated from grade school, he borrowed a bicycle, lost control, and flipped it. Lying on the ground, unable to feel his body below his neck, what he thought was blood running from his nose was, in fact, spinal fluid.

Guest would never again have the use of his arms or legs. Even so, he says he was lucky: "If I couldn't lift my arms I could breathe. I could feel... I no longer had to be, or even could be, who I once was. What I once was. I was broken. And new.

One More Theory About Happiness is among the rarest of books: humbling, heartbreaking, and suffused with joy. Guest must learn to navigate the rest of his life in a wheelchair. An immobilizing halo is screwed into his skull. There are diapers and suction; basic bodily functions are no longer private; the simplest daily tasks require help. Yet every agony is met with hope, each humiliation with dignity, moments of despair banished by an extraordinary capacity for gratitude.

If you've never laughed and cried at the same time, Guest's book will change that. His language is pure poetry, and his simple, amazing grace redefines that world-weary word, "hero".

"In these lyrical, searing pages, Guest manages to break our hearts and put them back together again." --Ann Hood, author of *The Red Thread*

One More Theory About Happiness: A Memoir Details

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Della says

I am happy to win this book on FirstReads!

I didn't really know what to expect from a quadriplegic's memoir. Part of my worry was that Guest's life story would be told in an all-too-heart-wrenching emotional tone. Instead, Guest found just the right balance in his writing for me to sympathize with his lifelong struggle with quadriplegia without that feeling of estranged pity that one generally feels for the physically disabled.

His language is concise but casual and descriptive. The content of this memoir is very personal, at times describing situations in which he felt most vulnerable. This combination builds a connection with the reader and gives the overall effect of a private conversation between close friends. He writes using matter-of-fact prose peppered with his general take on life. His words are honest and bare, at times with a sense of humor and wit, and it is easy to feel like I understand why he feels the way he does in specific situations, and that I would feel the same way too.

One thing that puzzles me is the title. I suppose I have an idea, but I won't write it here in order to avoid coloring your interpretation if you haven't yet read the book. Also, there were a couple of places, particularly near the ends of chapters, where I feel that the thread of the idea gets a bit lost.

Overall, an insightful and good read.

Robin says

Working as a therapist I see what transpires with people after an injury or an illness. I feel that everyone has a right to tell their story, it justifies them as a person. However, I felt that this book lacked emotion. In my opinion, he was telling a story that could have been about anything. He was not describing what he was really feeling as he grew into manhood.

Suep says

I've just finished reading, One More Theory About Happiness by Paul Guest, a book I won through the Goodreads First Reads. It's a "coming of age story", his journey from 12 to adulthood after becoming paralyzed. He shares his experiences of being totally reliant on others as he gains independence and understanding of self/body. The memoir elicits many emotions but it is not pitying of Guest. He was able to share his experiences while shedding light on what his parents, siblings and friends were experiencing as well. It's not a memoir of dysfunction but one of inspiration! A quick and moving read.

Bonnie Brody says

This gripping memoir is an homage to resiliency, strength and courage. It is written by Paul Guest, now 27, who had a cataclysmic accident when he was 12 years old. While riding his teacher's old 10-speed bicycle, which had no brakes, he crashed and broke his neck. Since that day he has been confined to a wheelchair, virtually a quadriplegic.

Paul is a poet and this book is written in a straight-forward, no-nonsense manner. The memoir's themes are tough and some of the book is painfully difficult to read. However, he is at no time maudlin and the poetics of his words cry out from the page. This is a man who knows his vocation, who was born to write. "The first poem I ever wrote came to me like an accident of the mind. A blip, noise that had no apparent cause." Paul was "thinking of nothing particularly literary, watching the sky and the visible world happen outside the window, when he began to hear in his head the rhythms of language, the propulsive patterns of a poem, and though he had no idea why, it was suddenly imperative that he write it down." "There was no doubt, none, that I had stumbled on to something essential about himself, who he was and who he might become, and all around him the future seemed to crackle like a storm. This is what I am supposed to do, he thought,. After that moment, he never doubted it."

Paul's journey to self-discovery begins when he is twelve years old. He is graduating from sixth grade and is invited over to his favorite teacher's house. She gives him a reading test which he is able to ace from beginning to end. He is in the gifted program and is obviously verbally gifted well beyond his years. His teacher loans him a very old bicycle, so old that it is covered with cobwebs. Paul knows the brakes don't work but figures he can steer the bicycle to safety when the time comes. However, when the time comes, Paul lands in a drainage ditch with the third and fourth vertebrae of his neck broken. The treatment he received at the time of the accident was not state of the art and may even have made his situation worse.

He spends months in an Atlanta rehabilitation facility undergoing extensive and painful therapies and surgeries. He is able to remain in rehab until he reaches the point where they feel that he will no longer make any improvement. This comes sooner than Paul would like. He is released to his home where his wheel chair is too narrow to fit into the bathroom and he has to be carried by his mother. His pride is in shambles. He likes naked a lot of times for washings, examinations, changing of urine bags, etc. Though his family is tender with him, Paul feels remote and 'other'. In the rehab center he felt like one of the others, as though he fit in. "Disability isn't so much about the loss of control as it is about the transferal of it. From yourself to someone else, to loved ones, strangers. To devices."

Paul begins to regain some sensation in his body, most at chest level or above. These sensations don't improve his movement or control over his body. However, some of these sensations are very painful and he also suffers from very painful leg spasms, especially at night. He talks candidly about his fears. "You enter this place. And you wait. For your body, for your nervous system, for the manifold nerves which comprise it, to do something, to do anything, for your faithless skin to pebble with gooseflesh in a draft of cold air, for one muscle out of the six hundred gone slack to convulse back to life, for the most desperate fears within you to recede. And whatever it is you fear, and all of it is elemental, whether you'll walk again or dress yourself or eat without help, make love, all these fears are not assuaged by your time here. Those fears are systematically stoked."

Paul thinks a lot about who he is now and who he once was. "Luck beyond luck gilded me. If I couldn't lift my arms, I could breathe. I could see. I could move more of my body than any diagnosis could have ever sanely promised. Great grief filled me up, I seemed to breathe it but what freed me was this: if my arms

never worked again, never dressed myself, if I depended on others to do these things for the rest of my life, I no longer had to be, or even could be, who I once was. What I once was, I was broken. And new." It is this sense of newness that propels Paul. Despite pain, isolation, and loneliness he finishes high school, then college and manages to get a Master of Fine Arts in poetry. Using a mouthpiece to type, we writes out his beautiful mesmerizing poems one at a time. We take for granted that if we want to write about something in the middle of the night we can reach for our pencils, pens, pad, or computers and go at it. This isn't the case for Paul. He can't reach for pen and paper, computer, or any aids for his writing. He must wait for morning and, because of this, he has lost many poems.

He is blessed with a supportive family who help him individuate and reach his potential. They offer kind support without enabling. Paul is pushed, like a baby bird, out of the nest, and he learns to fly. He flies to all kinds of adventures, some of which we share with him smiling, and others that require kleenex. When he has his first book of poetry published, when he makes his closest friends, when he is able to be intimate with the woman he loves, we cheer for him. When he's mugged in an elevator while he is helpless to do anything to fight back, we are angry at his perpetrator and sad beyond measure at Paul's plight. We share his feelings of harassment at his job in Tuscaloosa and wish we could give his supervisor a piece of our minds. When his day caretaker brings his Romanian father in to try an old world remedy for Paul's twisted ankle, we hold our breaths because it requires setting fire to Paul's skin. Oh my God!!!

Paul talks eloquently about the first poem he ever wrote and his rush home to write it. Along the way he worries whether the automatic doors to his apartment will work, whether the elevator is broken down, are the chair lifts in the buses functional. All those things that able-bodied people take for granted can create huge and, sometimes, insurmountable challenges for Paul.

Paul has an ebullient curiosity about the world, an energy to explore his surroundings and the spirit of a poet. His resilience is a lesson to us all. He perseveres and he creates beauty and loveliness from his world. He is a person of sensitivity and empathy, watching others for signs into their souls. This book is not meant to be an 'inspirational' book or a religious book. It is a book about a man who, despite great odds, goes on to make a quality life for himself, drawn from the creative spirit within him that calls out to him for expression. Paul Guest must be an amazing man. He certainly is a wonderful writer.

Wheeler says

A remarkable memoir about the permanence of accidents and what powers life after tragedy occurs. A true tale told by a poet. Worth your time.

Barbara Mitchell says

This memoir is about how Paul Guest became a quadriplegic at the age of 12, and how he has lived his life since then. It was a bike accident and then someone, despite his protests, picked him up which might have done further damage, although he'll never know. He writes almost dispassionately about the humiliations, the phantom pains, the difficult adjustments he had to make. How to go to school and learn with the help of an aide. How to make friends again, how to handle it when people treated him like he was going to break.

It's evident that he keeps emotion at bay because he doesn't want pity, but of course the reader feels badly for him. He writes of his parents and their loving care, and he writes of the difficult emotions he had to cope with as he began to want a girlfriend. I was glad to read that he graduated from college and found work.

I'm very glad I read his book and I don't pity him, rather I am happy that he found his own kind of happiness. Fortunately he discovered writing, beginning with poetry, and this is his fifth book.

Judith says

Happiness as a subject fascinates me and I read quite a few books specifically on that subject. This is another inspiring story about a person who created his own world of happiness after great tragedy. At 12 years old, Paul was attending a party celebrating his 6th grade graduation with his classmates, all of whom had been in a gifted class together for many years. The party was hosted by his teacher. As she prepared the lunch, she suggested that Paul and another boy might like to ride the bikes which had been stored in her garage. Paul rode the unfamiliar 10-speed bike down a hill and discovered that the brakes were useless, thus he crashed into a ditch. While lying there, unable to move, one of the neighbors tried to pick him up and see if he could stand on his own, though Paul, (smart enough even at 12 to know better) begged the guy not to move him. The neighbor moved him anyhow and Paul flopped down sustaining a second fall. I mention all these details because at each instance, the reader is compelled to ask: what if? . . . what if he was wearing a helmet? what if the teacher had checked out the bikes first? etc., etc.

Of course we make decisions every day that affect our lives, but each step leading to this tragedy seems heart-breakingly avoidable. In any event, the book details the anguish of the accident and Paul's subsequent ability to create a life for himself and find happiness. This book is really well-written. You can finish it in one evening. And Paul looks adorable in his book jacket picture. What's not to like?

Melissa says

easy read, short book. was just an ok read.

Stuart says

Paul Guest is one of the most brilliant contemporary American poets; for me, he's approaching Ashbery and James Tate. I was surprised by how little there was of poetry in this book — except in the writing itself. But I was OK with that: I already know a lot about poetry; I wanted to read about things I didn't know a lot about. I like that Guest's entry into writing poetry is almost arbitrary, accidental. There are some things that can't be explained or analyzed.

One More Theory about Happiness is sublime in its understatement, its matter-of-factness. That's not to say it lacks emotion, though. Like many other reviewers here, I read this book quickly, and I rarely read books quickly. Guest's prose is clear and yet contains much poetry. I am amazed at the simplicity of language he uses to describe what must be hugely complex situations and emotions.

I learned a lot from this book. As I continue to read and re-read his poetry, *OMTaH* will provide added

texture as a backdrop.

Martinet says

I wish I'd liked this better. I love this guy's poetry and I like everything I know about him from his blog and other articles, so I was looking forward to his memoir. But I found it curiously flat, and there were weird gaps that I wish had been filled in more (for instance, I would have liked to hear more about his development as a writer, particularly through his academic life and through his friendships with other writers).

He seemed bent on minimalism, and while I respect that (I suspect it was done to avoid going too far the other way and getting caught up in minutia that might have come across as self-pitying or self-serving), I think in the end it detracted from the book's impact.

Barb says

I won this book on Goodreads First reads. Paul takes us into his life from when he was 12 yrs old and had a bicycle accident which left him paralyzed. This book tells of great courage to go on and overcome the challenges that we face when something tragic happens. Paul has had more than his fair share of obstacles to overcome. I wish the author would have told us more about his inner feelings. Example: instead of saying he was scared, I needed more of a description. Some places it felt like he was telling the facts but not giving us his feelings. The times I felt more of the passion coming through in his memoir is when he would meet a female. Especially at the end with his epilogue. I felt at times he is pissed at the world, but hell I'd be pissed to if I had to go through everything he's been through. There are other times when I felt he just wanted to be understood and have people see him with a little more compassion and not pity. I think the purpose of telling our stories through our memoirs is to help other people understand us and to leave a legacy for our children and grandchildren to help them learn about our lives. Just goes to show you that your life can change in an instant and to live each day fully. The only thing I still am confused about and maybe the author can help me understand is the title. Even when I reached the end I didn't quite get why you named the title, "One More Theory About Happiness". Throughout the book the author never seemed that happy. Unless your trying to tell us life isn't always a bed of roses and that sometimes life just sucks. I would appreciate any feedback on the title if someone understands that more than I did. I also would have liked to read more about how the parents dealt with the situation and more on their feelings in the book.

Lara says

Paul Guest is just 12 years old when a biking accident indelibly changes his life forever. Now 27, **ONE MORE THEORY ABOUT HAPPINESS** is Guest's account of the events that resulted in his broken neck and adjustment to life as a quadriplegic. In a word, this memoir is stunning. In a few more words, it's more than I expected--even in its mere 208 pages--and one that I think everyone should read.

It's easy to tell in the first few pages of **ONE MORE THEORY ABOUT HAPPINESS** that Guest is a bright, mindful and considerate person. Wrapping up his sixth grade year at a barbeque hosted by his teacher, Guest and his best friend take off on a pair of old bikes while the food is still being prepared. The bikes are dilapidated at best and leave Guest wondering if a ride is the best thing to do; but once the tires are filled

with air, the two take to the hilly streets of the neighborhood. Guest couldn't have anticipated that the bike's brakes were out of commission, nor could he have seen the drainage ditch lying in hiding under overgrown foliage. But when his speed picked up and he hit the ditch, he "was thrown from the bike, over the handlebars, catapulted, tossed like a human dart into the earth."

What follows, in beautiful and lyrical prose, is Guest's journey to find himself in this new body and to connect with others in real and meaningful ways. Understandably, he struggled with the forced intimacy that must be shared with a caregiver that sees you at your most vulnerable, when in need of help with basic life skills like eating, bathing and using the bathroom. And yet, I wonder if this exposure helped him create such an intimate account of his life, one that I felt fully welcomed to enter.

Despite what may seem like a grim story, Guest's eloquence, insightfulness and humor convey a life that is not to be pitied. In fact, I found his story to be a reminder that, while life is fragile, we are all so very capable of greatness... whatever greatness is for us. Guest most certainly could have become embittered and resigned, yet he always worked through his therapies and sought his passion and is now not only a memoirist, but an award-winning poet. I kind of wonder if he would have become a writer were it not for his accident. We may never know.

What I do know is that he has immense gifts and significant talent. I know that the words I write here don't do any justice to the words he placed on the page for us all to experience. I know, or was reminded, that happiness is a choice no matter what your circumstances. I also know that I wanted just a little bit more from this otherwise perfect book. He is still so young with such a promising career that is just beginning to unfold.

Shin Yu says

Having read Guest's poetry, I was not sure what to expect from his memoir of the body. I was pleasantly surprised at the narrative deft and openhearted vulnerability and self-disclosure presented by this account of the author's life-changing injury at 12 years old and his growth into adulthood and his transition into a career as an emerging poet. The author is honest with his struggles with self-loathing and unfulfilled desire - the romantic relationships which he gets involved in are awkward and sad, based it seems on pity, misdirected forms of identification, and anything but love. There are times when the narrator of the book seems less likeable - particularly when he judges his caregivers who take notes for him in class or help him with basic activities like bathing or going to the bathroom - the helpers are over-caricaturized for the sake of comic relief and the reader senses an impatience or judgment of these working class attendants - the helper who can't spell who falls in love with the broken hero of the narrative; the foreigner with superhuman strength who talks to his Japanese wife by phone in between tasks - hinting at a messy marital situation due to various personality eccentricities. Much of the author's anger and frustration with his situation seems directed towards the ancillary characters that come in and out of his life providing various forms of support. These characterizations at times seem like a way to create distance or superiority - the narrator, even as a teenage boy is smarter than his caregiver who can't take notes fast enough or spell correctly. Even though the narrator has been horribly injured, he maintains a physical and psychological dignity, which he does not invest his caregiver with - the one who takes a shit in front of him in the bathroom while the narrator is immobilized in the shower. There is ugliness - but it's the ugliness of the author's pain arising through his judgment of others.

At the climax of the book, the author prepares to give a major public reading of his work at a literary conference and finds that he's had a medical malfunction with some equipment which leads to him pissing

himself. He describes a scene in the hotel's bathroom where his mother helps to dress him in newly purchased Gap jeans that she ran out and bought. She washes his pants in the sink to remove the urine and helps him clean himself and they both go to his reading, no one the wiser. Guest puts it all out there - the pain and difficulty of living in a body that betrays him over and over again, in his most vulnerable moments.

Anne Holcomb says

Even though I have never read any of his poetry, as I read "One More Theory About Happiness," author Paul Guest's CV as a poet came shining through every word. I felt like I was reading a long autobiographical prose poem rather than a short memoir.

When he is 12 years old, Guest borrows a broken-down bike at a teacher's house and accidentally crashes it into a ditch, breaking both arms and fracturing his vertebrae. This book shares the results of this accident: hospitalization, and paralysis.

Guest takes readers through these life-changing experiences with a narration in which every word seems to be carefully and perfectly chosen to express what was happening to his body and mind at the time. His descriptions of the spinal-injury hospital he stays in for a while after his accident are especially striking, somehow managing to be both horrifying and comforting at the same time. Even as young Paul feels isolated from others because of what has happened to him, his language seeks out and emphasizes the human connections he feels with his family, fellow patients, friends, and later colleagues and lovers. He's especially able to recognize the frailties of others because of his own condition. This memoir is really a beautiful and satisfying read and I will definitely be seeking out Guest's books of poetry.

Michele Benson says

I liked the book, but have since listened to his poetry online and I like that so much better.
