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# The Last Leaves Falling



## Synopsis

A teen grapples with ALS and his decision to die in this “deeply moving” (Booklist, starred review) debut novel infused with the haunting grace of Japanese poetry and the noble importance of friendship. Sora is going to die, and he’s only seventeen years old. Diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease), he’s already lost the use of his legs, which means he can no longer attend school. Seeking a sense of normality, Sora visits teen chat rooms online and finally finds what he’s been longing for: friendship without pity. As much as he loves his new friends, he can’t ignore what’s ahead. He’s beginning to lose the function of his hands, and soon he’ll become even more of a burden to his mother. Inspired by the death poems of the legendary Japanese warriors known as samurai, Sora makes the decision to leave life on his own terms. And he needs his friends to help him.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gr 8 Up Abe Sora loves baseball, wants to be a professor, spends much of his time reading history and literature and is dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). No longer able to attend school, as he is now wheelchair bound and the school is not equipped to handle his physical needs Abe spends his days either alone or with his mother and doctors. He joins a chatroom anonymously, never telling anyone of his illness. When his mother, worried about her son’s isolation, insists that he invite his two online friends over for dinner, he agrees but does not inform them his health situation. Despite the initial shock, the three become

good friends, giving Abe a chance to have normal teen experiences. As his condition grows worse, he thinks more and more about death. His counselor gives him a book on samurai death poetry, which helps him realize that he wants to die with dignity. Written by a British author and set in Japan, this unique title deals not just with the days leading up to death but with facing it on one's own terms. This is more a tale of friendship than of romance and one of living life to the fullest for as long as possible. Abe is a strong, introspective teen who reads, thinks deeply, and wants more out of life than pity. VERDICT Not just another "dying teen novel," this thought-provoking read offers teens a different perspective on living and loving life. —Janet Hilbun, University of North Texas --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Benwell's deeply moving story is visceral...and psychologically acute in its portrayal of a dying teen and his loyal friends. Its shattering ending is sure to engender discussion among readers." (Booklist, starred review) "Benwell's gentle treatment of friendship and death with dignity will touch fans of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*." (Kirkus) "This is more a tale of friendship than of romance and one of living life to the fullest for as long as possible...this thought-provoking read offers teens a different perspective on living and loving life." (School Library Journal, starred review) "Benwell's story is remarkably unsentimental, and her setting—contemporary urban Japan—adds a unique appeal...[T]he haiku Sora reads, and writes, are a perfect symbol for his life: brief in length but full of strength and subtlety." (Horn Book, starred review) "It's a memorable and haunting story of a boy's determination to seize control of the limited time he has left." (Publishers Weekly, starred review) "An exquisite debut YA novel that serves as a guide to living a meaningful life, and the importance of family, friendship and self-knowledge." (Shelf Awareness, starred review)

What would you do if you knew you were going to die? Travel the world? Spend it with your family? Your friends? Go skydiving? Rocky Mountain climbing? For Sora, his options are limited. What friends he had at school have stopped visiting, his grandparents live in the countryside, and his single mother has to work to support them. This leaves the wheelchair-bound Sora for the most part alone in an apartment, slowly losing the ability to use his body due to ALS. Sora reads death poetry by samurai and turns to internet message boards to find a connection and as an outlet for his questions. Sora also struggles with the inevitable death waiting for him at the end of his illness. He pays a visit to the hospital's ICU and what he sees there horrifies him into exploring options for palliative care available in his country, and searches for answers to what

happens after, a subject the internet has no answer for, and a topic no one around him wants to discuss with him. Benwell brings extra depth to the tragedy of a teenager dying too young. She peels back the layers of sadness and regret and asks "what can you do about it?" Sora cannot control his body, but he wields his mind in a desperate search for answers most adults shy away from. When is enough pain enough? Is quality of life more important than longevity? While these questions make the novel compelling, younger readers may find the themes and questions upsetting. The format uses chat boxes and familiar online forms graphically on the page, which streamlines the narrative. *The Last Leaves Falling* is a poetic and compelling story about respect, dignity, friendship, and making difficult decisions for oneself about both life and death.

The book is about a teenage boy suffering from ALS and his life struggles with the early approaching of death. It tells how he coped with his deteriorating physical body and how he sees death. The most touching part is his relationship with his mum, grannies and two other teenagers.

I enjoyed every minute of the book it makes you laugh and cry all at the same time I recommend reading this book

Words can not express how disturbing this book was to me. It somehow was listed on my sons school summer reading list. In a day and age where so many teens are committing suicide should we need books that find a reason to justify teen suicide? My son is in a wheelchair. He has a permanent physical disability. NEVER in his life has he been considered a burden on this family. NEVER did it occur to him before reading this book that he had any reason to feel he could be a burden. He has spent his entire life in a wheelchair. It is how he gets around, not who he is. He is the happiest young man you could meet. I will never be able to erase from his head the comment a Boy made in your book reacting to a simple photo of a boy in a wheelchair. He said, " People like that should F\_\_\_ing die, I mean, what is the point". You put those words into my sons head. It was the most insensitive thing I have ever read. I really tried to find some redeeming lesson...no didn't find it. A one star is too high but there is nothing lower

So says Sora, the Japanese teen protagonist of "*The Last Leaves Falling*," as he decides to reject his doctor's offer to take advantage of a Make-A-Wish-type organization, even though he has ALS, and is slowly losing control of his faculties. An excellent student who dreams of one day becoming a professor, Sora has recently had to leave school, and spends his days at home. Lonely and longing

to find peers who won't pity him or feel awkward around him, Sora begins to log into chat rooms frequented by teens and eventually forms friendships with two of them: Mai, a brilliant artist whose mother is adamant that she become a lawyer, and Kaito, who is a video game fanatic and later gets into web design (their talents are eventually pooled to create something amazing in the end that they share with others). Though surprised when they meet Sora in person, they are quick to stand by him, and their relationship grows and deepens - even as Sora's time as a functional person begins to run out. (Random side-note: I thought it was interesting that Sora's character was personified as a crane, as "sora" is actually the real name of a bird. Anyway...) This is a very G-rated book, except for one f-word, the language is squeaky clean, and there is no sex (or romance). There is a little drinking at the very end, but no stereotypical teen partying. However, Sora's final choice and act is anything but lightweight, and is sobering enough that I would only recommend this book to older kids - middle school and up. The relationship Sora has with his mother and grandparents is very sweet (perhaps a bit too so), and he is an admirable character. My one criticism is that the author didn't delve into the more personal regrets of Sora - we hear about what he wants to achieve as a career but not so much what he wants in terms of romance, something you'd think would be very much on the mind of a boy that age. But it is beautifully written nonetheless.

Abe Sora is a teenager dying of ALS. This book follows him as his health declines. When Sora can no longer go to school, he turns to an internet message board for Kyoto teenagers. His internet friends become real-life friends when Sora's mother suggests inviting them over. Thus begins the most meaningful friendship of Sora's short life. At seventeen, he wants to be planning a future, a career as a literature professor, but Sora's life is all about dying. Worrying about his single mother, knowing he is her whole life. Knowing all the things he will miss. Instead Abe is looking for solace in the death poetry of samurai warriors. This is a very powerful book. It is beautifully written. It reads quickly. It doesn't shy away from the ugliness of serious illness. I didn't care for all of the internet chat in the book (there are pages and pages of reproduced internet chat room dialogue), but I suspect teenagers probably won't care about that. This is a heavy book, that deals with heavy issues. Highly recommended for older teenagers.

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