



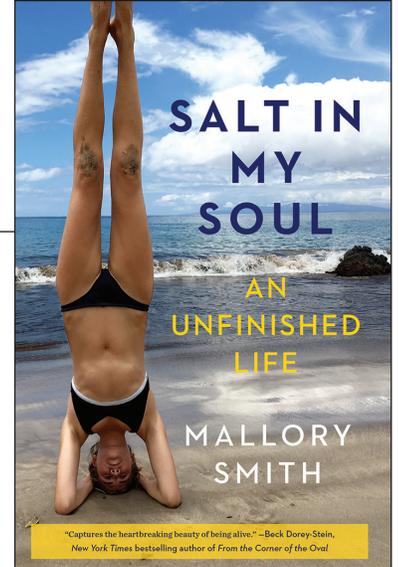
Penguin  
Random  
House

# Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

## Salt in My Soul

### An Unfinished Life

by Mallory Smith



Spiegel & Grau | Hardcover | 978-1-9848-5542-8 | 320 pages | \$26.00

Also available in e-book format and as an audio download

Visit [www.tiny.cc/SaltinMySoul](http://www.tiny.cc/SaltinMySoul) for more resources.

“With spicy wit and brutal honesty, *Salt in My Soul* reveals the heartache and courage of a young woman who always knew that her life would be cut short by a chronic disease. Read this memoir and you’ll be astonished by Mallory’s bravery and uplifted by her vivacious spirit.” —Randi Hutter Epstein, MD, MPH, writer in residence, Yale Medical School

“Those of us fortunate enough to know the amazing Mallory Smith learned that no matter how sick, she would find escape from the prison of her illness to play water polo, to be prom queen, to go to Stanford, to graduate Phi Beta Kappa, and to know true love in her twenty-five years. With the strength of her parents, the support of her many friends, and her own great grit, Mallory lived her ambitions. *Salt in My Soul* is a beautiful, brave, unsparingly insightful account of a courageous girl who becomes a woman warrior and fights for her life while living it fully.”

—Eric Lax, author of *The Mold in Dr. Florey’s Coat*

### • about the book •

Diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at the age of three, Mallory Smith grew up to be a determined, talented young woman who inspired others even as she privately raged against her illness. For more than ten years, Mallory recorded her thoughts and observations about struggles and feelings too personal to share during her life, leaving instructions for her mother to publish her work posthumously.

What emerges is a powerful and inspiring portrait of a brave young woman and blossoming writer who did not allow herself to be defined by disease. Her words offer comfort and hope to readers, even as she herself was facing death. *Salt in My Soul* is a beautifully crafted, intimate, and poignant tribute to a short life well lived—and a call for all of us to embrace our own lives as fully as possible.

Penguin Random House Education, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

[commonreads.com](http://commonreads.com)

QUERIES: [commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com)

## • about the author

Mallory Smith, who grew up in Los Angeles, was a freelance writer and editor. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford University and was a fierce advocate for those who suffered from cystic fibrosis. She died at the age of twenty-five on November 15, 2017, two months after receiving a double-lung transplant. Mallory's Legacy Fund has been established in her memory at the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

## • discussion questions

1. Explore the significance of the book's title. What does Mallory mean when she says that she feels like she has "salt in [her] soul" (v)? How does she describe her relationship with salt? What effect does salt have on those with cystic fibrosis? What role does it play in healing?
2. In Diane Shader Smith's note at the opening of the book, she says that healthcare providers often viewed her daughter as the perfect patient but that this "façade of perfection masked a darker truth" (viii). What does she mean by this? What are some of the darker truths that Mallory's memoir reveals? Why do you think Mallory chose to share them—and to share them posthumously? Were you able to relate to any of these difficult truths?
3. Mallory writes that "CF does a lot of taking. . . . At the same time, it does give" (xiii). What are some of the things that CF takes from those who live with it? Alternatively, what are some of the things that she feels that her experience with CF has given to her? Were you surprised by Mallory's observations about gratitude? Why or why not? In considering what she has gained and lost, does she indicate whether one outweighs the other?
4. In the introduction, what are some of the reasons that Mallory gives for her practice of keeping a journal? What is she on a "perennial quest to find" (ix) and what does she always want to be able to look back at and see? Are readers of Mallory's memoir able to see in her writings what she hoped to one day look back at and see herself? Have you ever kept a diary or journal of your own? If so, why did you engage in this practice? If you went back and read all of what you had written, what do you think your writings would reveal?
5. Early in the book, Mallory reveals that she came to realize that many of her fantasies "were born out of a sense of entitlement" (xii). How does Mallory come to recognize her own privilege? What are some of the privileges she enjoys and how does her willingness to recognize these privileges shape the way that she thinks about those who are less privileged? How does Mallory's experience of chronic illness differ from those who are less privileged and what role does privilege play in the proper care and treatment of those in need of healthcare? How did you come to an awareness of your own privilege or lack of privilege? Did the book have an impact on the way that you think about privilege in your own life?
6. Mallory often writes about the sometimes "invisible" nature of her illness and her experience being mistaken for a healthy person based upon her appearance. She writes, "It's a blessing and a curse not to look sick" (xiv). In what ways does she consider "invisible"

illness to be a blessing? Alternatively, what are some of the downsides of having an illness that is not immediately visible to others? How did judgments by skeptics affect and even jeopardize Mallory's disability accommodations, treatment, and care? Have you ever had an experience like Mallory's in which you felt you were misjudged based on your appearance? If so, how were you affected by this? Alternatively, have you ever misjudged someone else in this way? How did you come to realize that this was wrong?

7. While Mallory was excited to earn admission to the university of her choice, her writings also reveal many of her fears about growing up and going away to school, from her changing body to her changing schedule and interests. What are some of the things that Mallory fears most about becoming an adult and what concerns does she have about living away from home as a college freshman? What are some of the things that Mallory feels insecure about and what challenges does she face as she tries to balance the demands of college life? What steps does Mallory take to overcome these fears and challenges? Is she able to overcome them? Would you say that Mallory ultimately fits in at her university? Why or why not? How do Mallory's experiences correspond to your own experiences transitioning to adulthood and college life? What useful tips and observations would you say Mallory offers for anyone leaving home and/or starting college?
8. Consider the motif of community that runs throughout the memoir. What communities does Mallory belong to and what role do they play in her life? What does Mallory get from these communities and what does she contribute to them? Mallory says that she considers hospitals to be "a sort of ad hoc community center" for those with chronic illness (79). She also bonds with peers with cystic fibrosis like Caleigh and Kari. What benefits do these communities provide? What does Mallory realize that she has always wanted as a result of forming these relationships? Alternatively, what challenges does Mallory face in trying to connect within these communities? What does Mallory say is "[o]ne of the great tragedies of CF" (85) and how do her relationships with others with CF influence her own thoughts about illness and confrontation with mortality? Discuss the impact of community in your own life. How has community affected or changed your life and how might you have impacted the lives of others via your own contributions to the communities to which you belong?
9. Why is Mallory so interested in "the intersection between human societies and the environment and sustainable development and agriculture" (64)? How did the conversation she had with her father at age nine after deciding to stop breathing treatments help her to see that the "concepts of sustainability and human health are intertwined" (101)? What does she say is the relationship between the two and what parallels does she draw between her "own struggling body and the planet itself" (102)?
10. Mallory writes that she struggled with "the ever-nagging question: When to disclose?" (137). How and when does she typically disclose her illness to others? What factors play a part in her determination of when is the right time? Does she always have complete control over this decision? What are some of the stereotypes and mischaracterizations that she fears being branded with if and when she does disclose her illness? Why is Mallory nervous about telling her boyfriend Jack about her illness? Would you say that

her fears are justified? Why or why not? How do the people Mallory shares her diagnosis with respond to her disclosure? How does Jack respond? When Mallory does make the decision to disclose, does the response typically amplify or dispel her fears about being lovable and loved?

11. How does Mallory's memoir contribute to contemporary conversations around opiate use, addiction, and pain management treatment? How does Mallory feel about her own use of opiates? What are her concerns about accepting this type of treatment for her chronic pain? How does Mallory's case illuminate complexities around decisions that healthcare providers must face regarding the prescription of opiates for pain management and the impact of this on patients with chronic pain conditions?
12. Explore the themes of identity and purpose. How does Mallory come to an understanding of who she is and who she wants to be? How does she define herself and how does she say that she hopes to be seen by others? What are some of the "North Stars" that Mallory lists as her top priorities and how do these evolve for her over the period captured in the book? In 2016, what did she say that she "[would] try to enforce" instead of her usual New Year's resolutions? What ultimately becomes Mallory's mantra and what does her mother teach her to prioritize that she feels was "most important" when it came to her identity (166)? What are some of your own "North Stars" or priorities and what have been some of the contributing factors in your identity to date? If you had a mantra, what would it be?
13. Mallory writes throughout her journal about the positive impact of reading and writing. What books are influential for her and why? Are there any books that you feel have been equally influential in your own life? What does Mallory feel that she gains from reading and from writing? What freedoms does she feel that reading and writing give to people? What does she come to believe is "the task of a writer" (171)?
14. Mallory writes, "People have always called me an inspiration, but I'm not" (170). Have you ever felt this way in your own life? Why do you think that Mallory feels this way? What does she reveal about the heavy burdens faced by those who also provide inspiration—either intentionally or unwittingly—to others?
15. What do Mallory's writings reveal about isolation and chronic illness and, more universally, about mental health? How does her illness cause her to feel separated from others? What is "The Duck Syndrome" and what does it reveal about the way that our society approaches mental health and mental healthcare? Have you ever felt like a duck in your own life? Why does Mallory say that she chose to forgo therapy when others suggested it as an option? What other tools does she use to acknowledge and improve her emotional and mental health? During her long hospitalizations, what conversations does Mallory say helped to counter "the dark voices in [her] head, brokers of hopelessness" (156)? What is discussed during these exchanges and what metaphor ultimately provides her with a useful coping mechanism for dealing with her fears, anxiety, and grief?

16. While Mallory acknowledges in her writings that it is medicine that helped her to live as long as she did, defying evolution even, her memoir also exposes many of the common—and some not so common—challenges, frustrations, and disappointments that patients face as they seek the healthcare they need in order to survive. What causes some of the problems, interruptions, or delays in Mallory’s end-of-life care? Could these have been prevented? What does Mallory say that obituaries might reveal if they were written honestly?
17. Who does Mallory seem to imagine as the audience for her book? In the final quotation from Mallory in Part Six, she reveals why she has written all that we have read. What impact does she hope that her writings might have? Would you say that she has been successful?
18. What common myths about chronic illness and disability does Mallory dispel via her willingness to share her thoughts, feelings, and experiences in such a public way? For instance, what does she say about the concept of *mind over matter* “as she tries to reframe the way [she views her] own future” (218)? What were you shocked or surprised to learn about life with chronic illness? How did her memoir inform or otherwise cause a shift in your points of view on the subjects of health, disability, and chronic illness? In sharing the story of her experience of life with a chronic illness, what universal truths did she reveal about the ways in which we judge others and are judged, the purpose of life, and the ways in which we could best spend our time? What “secrets” that “it takes others [without CF] a lifetime to understand” (236) does Mallory ultimately bestow upon readers?

### — about this guide’s writer

**Je Banach** was an original member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers’ Workshop. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom’s literary series. She is the author of more than eighty literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.



Penguin Random House Education, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

[commonreads.com](http://commonreads.com)

QUERIES: [commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com)