



Suleika Jaouad, Writer Surviving and Thriving

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on December 19, 2023 by Nancy Steiner

- Access **The Thread** episode of Suleika Jaouad on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access her long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Reflect the impact of illness on individuals and society
- Analyze the role of support systems in navigating challenging life events
- Explore the concept of resilience and how it manifests in different contexts
- Examine the intersection of social and economic factors in healthcare access

English Language Arts Focus

- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one artist and writer
- Reflect on the place of writing and other forms of creative expression as an emotional outlet
- Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify key themes in the episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- Analyze, reflect on, and discuss the title “Surviving and Thriving” after watching the episode
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Suleika Jaouad’s episode to inspire different expressions of creative writing and expression

Episode Overview

Suleika Jaouad’s life was forever changed when she was diagnosed with a rare form of acute myeloid leukemia at the age of 22. Told she had only a 35% chance of survival, Ms. Jaouad was determined not to become defined by her illness. Shortly after her diagnosis, she reconnected with a fellow Juilliard student whom she had met as a teenager, the now-renowned musician Jon Batiste. They were married in 2022, just after her leukemia returned following a prolonged period of remaining cancer-free. In this episode of *The Thread*, we hear of their unshakable love and the healing power of music.



Biography

Suleika Jaouad is an award-winning writer, speaker, and cancer survivor. Born in New York City to a Tunisian father and Swiss mother, she studied double bass at Juilliard’s pre-college program and earned her BA from Princeton University, followed by an MFA from Bennington College. Her career aspirations were cut short when she was diagnosed with leukemia at 22. She then began writing her acclaimed *New York Times* column, “Life, Interrupted,” from her hospital room. Her work has since appeared in *Vogue* and other major outlets. A sought-after speaker, her TED Talk was one of the top 10 most popular of 2019, with nearly five million views. During the pandemic, she founded the *Isolation Journals*, a creative community project. Jaouad has served on Barack Obama’s Presidential Cancer Panel and several national advisory boards. She’s been honored with the Red Door Advocacy & Community Service Award and has held residencies at Ucross, ArtYard, and the Kerouac Project. A frequent speaker and workshop leader, her work has been featured on *The Today Show*, *NPR*, *The Paris Review*, and *Glamour*.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode’s opening.

Suggested Steps

▣ **Watch and then read aloud** the opening of Suleika Jaouad’s episode with students:

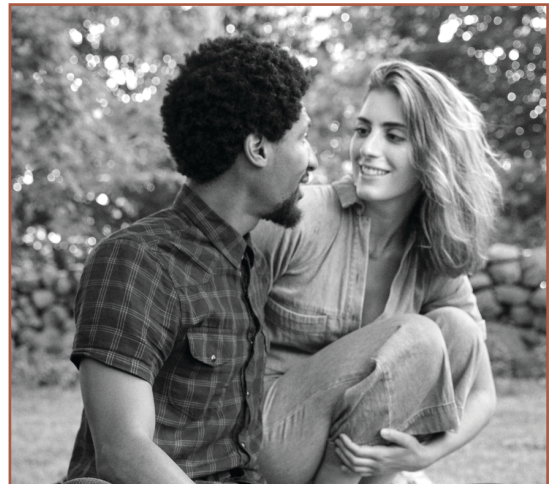
“My life imploded pretty much overnight with the news of my diagnosis. I lost my job. I lost my apartment. But maybe worst of all, I lost my independence and my sense of possibility. I felt profoundly stuck.”



▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Suleika Jaouad’s inner life from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?

▣ **Next,** as a class, discuss the role of “the opening” in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?

▣ **Last,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode’s title, “Surviving and Thriving.” Then, have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



Photos: Suleika Jaouad '10 and travelmate Oscar on the road in Jackson, Wyo., in November 2015. (Provided by Suleika as a press photo. Photo by Lizzie Presser) top: Suleika Jaouad in college. (Provided by Suleika as a press photo.) lower left: Suleika Jaouad and Jon. (Provided as a press photo by Suleika, but photo taken by Lise-Ann Marshal) lower right



Teaching Tip:

The Thread Up Close

Step One: Watch Suleika Jaouad’s episode “Surviving and Thriving” here.

Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ What does Suleika Jaouad’s experience of illness teach you about perceptions of illness and recovery?
- ▣ What do you learn about the importance of community and support systems in navigating challenging life events?
- ▣ What values, beliefs, and attitudes does Suleika Jaouad share that she learned as a result of her illness?
- ▣ What role does creativity play in Suleika Jaouad’s journey?

Step Two: After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of her interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: If you are introducing the theme of resilience in history or literature, this one sentence from Suleika Jaouad is a powerful statement for an opening conversation:

“I knew that the whole point of having endured what I did endure was to not only live a good life, but hopefully a meaningful one, a happy one. Otherwise, what had been the point?”

Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ What forms of creative expression do you use to navigate difficult times in your life?
- ▣ What are ways you understand illness and recovering after listening to Suleika Jaouad’s experiences?
- ▣ Does Suleika Jaouad’s story connect to any of your life experiences or the experiences of others you know?
- ▣ What lessons can we learn from her THREAD episode that can help us navigate our own lives?
- ▣ What ideas or stories did she tell that you felt most connected to?
- ▣ How do you understand the title after watching this episode? What new or surprising insights about surviving and thriving did you learn as a result of Suleika Jaouad’s illness, her career, and point of view?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from her stories?



Activity: Surviving and Thriving

The “Surviving and Thriving” Portfolio

Students will:

- Create a portfolio of creative works inspired by the themes of resilience, creativity, and purpose. Students can choose from and use a variety of mediums such as creative or nonfiction writing, digital arts, visual art, music, or poetry, etc.
- Write an artist’s statement to include as an introduction to the portfolio.

After completing the portfolio, debrief the exercise with a class discussion using these question as prompts:

- Did the process of creating and organizing a portfolio demonstrate your understanding of surviving and thriving in new ways?
- What was new and challenging about this process? What did you learn about yourself?



Photos: 2022 Suleika Jaouad working on an art piece in her hospital bed. (Photo by Kate Sterlin) *lower left*; Art by Suleika Jaouad, (Provided by Suleika as a press photo) *lower right*



Additional Resources

- Explore [Suleika Jaouad](#) - official website
- Watch the documentary [American Symphony](#), which follows Suleika Jaouad and Jon Baptiste over the course of the year as he composes a symphony while he supports his wife through her leukemia treatment.
- Read her memoir, [Between Two Kingdoms](#)

