The Last Lecture
Randy Pausch and Jeffrey Zaslow (Hyperion 2008)

For Tenth Grade

Concept Analysis

Organizational Patterns

The Last Lecture is an informal memoir of the life of Randy Pausch. It is based on the last lecture he gave at Carnegie Mellon about a year before he died of pancreatic cancer. The book begins with an introduction and ends with acknowledgments and then is split up into sections with mini chapters in each section: The Last Lecture (18 pages; chapters 1-3), Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams (36 pages; chapters 4-11), Adventures…and Lessons Learned (50 pages; chapters 12-22), Enabling the Dreams of Others (24 pages; chapters 23-27), It’s About How to Live Your Life (60 pages; chapters 28-58), and Final Remarks (18 pages; chapters 59-61). The chapters are very short and are actually more like vignettes than chapters. These vignettes range from less than half a page to eight pages, the average of them being about four pages. Rather than a plot, this novel consists of Randy’s ideas on living life to the fullest and various anecdotes from his life. The book is narrated by Randy Pausch (although the book was actually put together by Jeffrey Zaslow while listening to the various anecdotes from Randy’s life).

Plot Summary

In the spirit of the tone of this book, my description of the book will be informal. I think Randy Pausch would rather be called Randy than Pausch or Professor Pausch.

Section I: The Last Lecture—Randy describes his struggle with whether or not to give a last lecture to his students and colleagues at Carnegie Mellon. He reveals that he is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and his recent treatments did not work, so he has only months to live. His wife, Jai, does not want him to give the lecture because he is a work-aholic and will spend his precious time working on the lecture instead of spending time with her and their children (Dylan, Logan, and Chloe). Randy convinces Jai to let him give the lecture, arguing that it will be a legacy that he can leave for their children. He decides to write his lecture on achieving childhood dreams.

Section II: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams—Randy explains that his parents really made achieving his dreams possible by their constant support. He then addresses each of his childhood dreams and what he has learned from them (dreams are underlined). He was able to be in zero gravity after he found his way around a “brick wall.” Although he never played in the NFL, he learned valuable lessons from his old football coach, Jim Graham, such as remembering the fundamentals, realizing that those who critique you are the ones that care the most about you,
and if you work hard enough you will be able to do things tomorrow that you could not do today. He was asked to author an article in the World Book encyclopedia entitled “Virtual Reality.” He never became Captain Kirk but did have the opportunity of hosting William Shatner in his lab and he discovered what a good example of humility Shatner is; he would ask question after question about virtual reality until he understood. He talks about his dream of winning stuffed animals at theme parks which he was able to achieve more than once in his lifetime. He ended up giving many of the stuffed animals away at his lecture. He had the honor of helping Disney work on an Aladdin virtual reality project and became a Disney Imagineer for awhile, after getting through some brick walls.

Section III: Adventures…and Lessons Learned—Randy tells the story of how he and Jai found out that his cancer came back, worse than ever. He watched as the doctor comforted Jai, using semantics to positively phrase his words. He realized that life should always be lived in that positive way. He learned that the way people perceive you matters; you will be limited in your life if you come off as arrogant. He also learned from his mentor, Andy Van Dam, that it is important to give people honest feedback. He also had the mentality that people are always more important than things (and demonstrated that by pouring soda in his brand new car and not fixing his car after Jai put a big dent in it). He talks about how he courted his wife who turned out to be the biggest “brick wall” in his life but he would not give up fighting for her. He relates trials that he and his family have had and how they always worked through them together. He learned a great lesson of humility from his dad who won a Bronze Star for valor while in the army and never told his kids about it. He talks about how strong and courageous Jai is and her vow to live in the moment and to make every last minute with Randy last. He also learned that it is always better to tell the truth, and many times the truth will set you free.

Section IV: Enabling the Dreams of Others—Time is important in life and Randy shares some things that he finds important with time management: do not take time doing things that do not matter, make manageable and realistic goals for yourself, ask yourself if you are spending time on the right things, stay organized, delegate, and take breaks. He then explains how he has been able to enable some of the dreams of others: as a recovering jerk he gave some honest feedback to arrogant students, he expected a lot out of his students and they were able to achieve dreams because they learned how to work hard, and he taught his students how important team work is and expected them to function well and succeed in group work.

Section V: It’s About How to Live Your Life—This section is about how he has tried to live his life and what has worked for him and helped him to succeed and find happiness. The very short chapters in this section contains that knowledge that he is trying to pass on to readers and especially to his children. Dream big and allow others around you to dream big. There are some things that are worth fighting for and others that are not, so choose your battles wisely. Complaining is a waste of time and will not make us any happier, but hard work will. Do not worry about what people think about you because that is wasting precious time. Respect others and look for the best in them. Although you will encounter many trials and brick walls, you will
always gain experience from them, even if you fail. Be grateful. Be loyal to those around you, and especially to those you care about. There is no shortcut to hard work. It is important to be prepared. Apologies have three parts: (1) what I did was wrong (2) I feel sorry that I hurt you (3) what can I do to make it better? Always tell the truth. Get in touch with your inner child. It never hurts to ask, and often the answer you receive is better than you expect. No job is ever beneath you. Never give up on your dreams. Be responsible and active in your community. You have the choice to be miserable or happy. Be optimistic about your life.

Section VI: Final Remarks—Randy’s final remarks are for his family. He talks about each of his children and the characteristics that he sees in them. He talks about his love for his wife. He explains that his lecture about childhood dreams is really two head fakes: first is that the way you lead your life will help you fulfill your dreams and second is that the last lecture was really a way for Randy to leave a legacy for his children.

Big question

There are many essential questions that you could focus on with this book. Some that I considered are:

How do you live life to the fullest?
How do you achieve your childhood dreams?
What is worth fighting for?
What’s worth dreaming of?
What makes me unique?

The one I ultimately choose was “How do you achieve your childhood dreams?” because that is what Pausch focuses on for his last lecture. I also think that students need the support from someone to help them achieve their childhood dreams especially in impoverished areas.

Background Knowledge

It may be helpful for students to have a little background knowledge on a few things before reading this novel such as pancreatic cancer, the tradition of last lectures in academia, the noteworthy things about Carnegie Mellon, and a little something about virtual reality and computer programming since that is what Pausch spends his life doing. We also may want to spend some time helping students understand the culture of the academic world (university professors and some of the jargon common in academia). Although it may be helpful to give students background knowledge on pancreatic cancer, it is not necessary to devote much time to discussing it. Instead, focus on how Pausch lived life to the fullest rather than how many tumors he had or how many months he had left to live.

Issues related to Study of Literature
Themes

Achieving Childhood Dreams

Randy Pausch focuses on this theme for the majority of his last lecture. The way he presents this concept is not as a bucket list that needs to get checked off but as a way to live our life. As you learn to lead your life in an efficient and optimistic way, you will be able to achieve your dreams more readily.

Agency

Randy discusses the need to make choices in life. Choices are always present in life, no matter what. It is the way you face those choices that matters. You always have a choice in how you live your life and whether you succeed or not. You have in choice in whether you will be happy or miserable.

Courage

It took great courage for Randy to keep living life to the fullest even though he knew he would die in a matter of months. Jai also has a lot of courage and she supports Randy as a wife and caretaker. There are many things that Randy talks about that require courage such as always telling the truth, giving people honest feedback, taking others’ criticism, and overcoming brick walls.

Enabling the Dreams of Others

This theme goes hand in hand with the ideas of selflessness and service. As you enable others dreams you are thinking more of others than yourself. You care about others’ success. To enable others dreams, though, you yourself need to be in a position to do so, meaning you will need to be successful.

Optimism and Overcoming Obstacles

Randy talks in multiple chapters about overcoming obstacles, or as he likes to call them, brick walls. He explains that the brick walls are for the other people who will choose not to fight against it. Brick walls determine how much you are willing to fight for something. Although Randy has had to overcome many obstacles throughout his life (and his final obstacle of cancer got the better of him), he discussed these obstacles in his book with an optimistic attitude and cheerful tone. He even was optimistic about failures—failing gives you great experience.

Relationships

Though this book seems to center on Randy and his life, it is very much about the relationships that Randy has developed with others over the years. He talks about his relationship with his parents, his sister, his niece and nephew. He lovingly talks about his wife and children.

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He is appreciative of his mentors and colleagues and students. He values strong relationships with others and even encourages his students to work well with others. Relationships are very important in life and Randy conveys that well in his book.

**Seizing the Moment**

This is the culminating theme of the book. Achieving dreams, helping others achieve dreams, making choices, being courageous, staying optimistic, overcoming obstacles, and building healthy relationships are all a part of seizing the moment and living in the moment. This is how Randy has tried to live his life and what he hopes readers will take away from the novel.

**Setting**

Because this book includes many different anecdotes from Pausch’s life, there are many different settings that are present throughout the book.

Carnegie Mellon
Disneyland
Virtual Reality Lab
Childhood Home

Though he briefly discusses some of these settings, Randy does not give a detailed description of any of them because the stories he is telling and lessons he is trying to convey are more important than the settings they took place in. The places that the stories take place in are also things that many of his readers (who are usually adults) will be familiar with: university campus, Disneyland, a computer lab, and a childhood home. The lack of description helps readers to place themselves in any setting that they can connect with within these more generic settings.

**Point of view**

Although this book was compiled by Jeffrey Zaslow, it is written from Randy’s point of view. It is a first person memoir of various experiences that Randy has had, thus it shows his opinion and perception on life. He does share some other people’s opinions throughout the book through dialogue, but they are always followed by how Randy reacted to their opinions in the situation.

**Characterization**

There are many characters that are weaved in and out of the book. The characterization is all based on Randy’s perception of these people and is not overt but subtle. Randy does not talk that much about his own characteristics (unless they are self-deprecating like how he is arrogant), so his characterization comes through more in the way he tells the stories about his life. It is difficult to find a lot of evidence for every single character in the book, so I will only focus on Randy and his wife, Jai.
Randy—Through the way the novel is written, many characteristics are evident in Randy such as humor, sarcasm, courage and optimism. He does not whine or complain in his book. He is not trying to hard his feelings, it is clear that he is sad to leave his family and his life, yet he always looks on the bright side of things. He calls himself arrogant, a recovering jerk, but that is not very clear in his writing, other than the anecdotes that are used to portray this characteristic. His anecdotes also discuss his dedication in life, relationships, and in his job.

Jai—Randy’s wife is first introduced in the novel as someone who is skeptical of Randy’s decision to present a last lecture. Through the stories that Randy tells about his wife, she is portrayed as a very loving, courageous, and supportive spouse. She cares enough about Randy to support him in his decision to present the last lecture, even though he has to leave on her birthday. This also shows her selflessness. Her selflessness is also characterized through Randy’s description of how she does not let the little things that Randy does bug her.

ANECDOTES

The entire book is full of anecdotes, or short stories, about Randy Pausch’s life. Anecdotes help create the genre of memoirs. Anecdotes also help connect the writer to the reader because personal stories make the writer more real and human.

VOICE

Because the book was based on Randy’s last lecture and telephone calls with Jeffrey Zaslow, it is all written in a very distinctive voice—Randy’s voice. Students should pay attention to how the novel is written in a consistent voice (done with word choice, phrasing, and tone). This will be helpful in their own writing.

AFFECTIVE ISSUES

This entire novel can be applicable to every student’s life. Achieving childhood dreams is a main focus of the novel and is important for students who live in a time where their dreams either get crushed or their dreams always come true and they never have to work for them (because they are spoiled). Pausch talks about how you can achieve your dreams, and that is done by working hard (a lesson that all high school students should remember). Another theme that is prevalent in the novel that students should learn from is that trials (“brick walls”) come in everyone’s life and it is how you react to those trials that shape you and your future.

VOCABULARY ISSUES

Most of the language that Pausch uses is common and accessible for most students. And even if they do not recognize a word, it is usually understood easily in context. However, because Pausch is university professor, he sometimes uses academic jargon that students may need help understanding. I have included an extensive list of vocabulary words from the novel, there is no need to address all of these, but some will need to be addressed (especially the Tier 3 Terms).
Implications for Students of Diversity

The lessons, questions and issues that this book raises are universal, and all people can benefit from them, no matter their age, race, social status, or background. The book addresses the fact that all people go through trials. This is a valuable discussion to have with your adolescent students. Adolescents often think that their personal problems and trials are harder than anyone else’s, it is important for them to be able to open their eyes and realize that everyone goes through trials and your own trials may not be as hard as you make them out to be.

Gender Issues

This book does not really deal with gender issues. It shows how Pausch values both men and women in his university. It also portrays how he also treats his wife, Jai, with love and respect.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

This book lends itself to more creative project ideas. However, there are a few research topics that could be fun for students to write about.

- Research a famous person who achieved a childhood dream in either an expected or unexpected way.
• Research your dream job. Have students interview someone who currently has or has had their dream job. Have them research and write about the various things they will need to do in order to achieve this dream of a future job.

• Research a Fairy Tale. Many fairy tales talk about dreams and achieving those dreams. Write an essay about your favorite fairy tale and what you can learn from it about reaching your dreams.

• Write an obituary. Students will write an obituary for themselves. They will learn the genre of an obituary as well as consider what kind of legacy they can leave for the world.

• Present a Last Lecture. Students again can consider the legacy they could leave when they write their own last lecture. They will need to ask themselves the question “What makes me unique?” (a question Pausch asked himself before writing his lecture). They can also present these lectures orally in class.

• Photo Essay—students will create a creative representation of their childhood dreams in a photo essay. This project helps to include technology in your classroom, but students can also use any other medium (collage, posters, drawings, etc) to represent their dreams.

• Make a Dream Chest (idea that goes well with the picture book *Dream*). One of the biggest challenges people have is clearly identifying their dreams and goals. Make a dream chest and collect artifacts that inspire you, interest you or relate to your dreams and goals.

**Text sets**

There are many texts that can be used in conjunction with The Last Lecture, here are a few that became pertinent to me as I thought about this book and what students should learn from it.

Poems:

*Road Less Traveled* By Robert Frost

*Dreams* by Langston Hughes

YA:*Note—read these ahead of time to decide if they are appropriate for your students.

*Deadline* by Chris Crutcher
This is a fictional Young Adult novel about a young man, Ben Wolf, who is facing a terminal illness and how he deals with the news. With only a year left to live, Ben decides to do all the things he has always wanted to do—go out for the football team, woo the girl of his dreams.

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Crutcher’s witty and sarcastic tone makes this a fun read while still questioning the idea of living life to the fullest.

*Going Bovine* by Libba Bray
This YA novel tells the story of sixteen-year-old Cameron who is forced to come to grips with his own mortality when he is diagnosed with... mad cow disease. This darkly funny novel combines elements of romance and tragedy while providing a crash course in existentialism and the examined life worth living.

*It’s Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini
Craig Gilner is one of many driven students at Manhattan’s prestigious Executive Pre-Professional High School. His lofty ambitions take their toll after years of over-achieving: Craig hits rock bottom and winds up in an institution following a suicide attempt. The book explores this generation’s pressure to succeed without getting lost in the serious subject matter.

Songs that could be included:

“Live like you were Dying” by Tim McGraw

“Unwritten” by Natasha Bedingfield

Picture books:

*The Busy Life of Ernestine Buckmeister* by Linda Ravin Lodding
This book discusses the idea of seizing the moment. It is about a young girl who is told by her parents to live life to the fullest, so they believe they must make her life very full of music lessons, karate, pottery classes, etc. It is a commentary on how busy children’s lives are becoming. This book can be used to help prompt discussion on Pausch’s time management ideas (found on pages 107-111).

*Dream: A Tale of Wonder, Wisdom and Wishes* by Susan V. Bosak
This is an inspirational picture book about dreaming big. It could be used at any point in reading the Last Lecture. There are some fun project ideas that can come out of it, so you may want to introduce it sooner than later.

Speeches:

“I Have A Dream Speech” by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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This can help students think outside the box of their personal dreams and discuss dreams they would like for their families, communities, and the world.

Randy Pausch’s Last Lecture
(can be found online via youtube or on www.thelastlecture.com)
It could be interesting to have students compare and contrast the book presentation of Pausch’s thoughts to his actual last lecture. There is also an edited Classroom Edition version of the Lecture that can be purchased online.