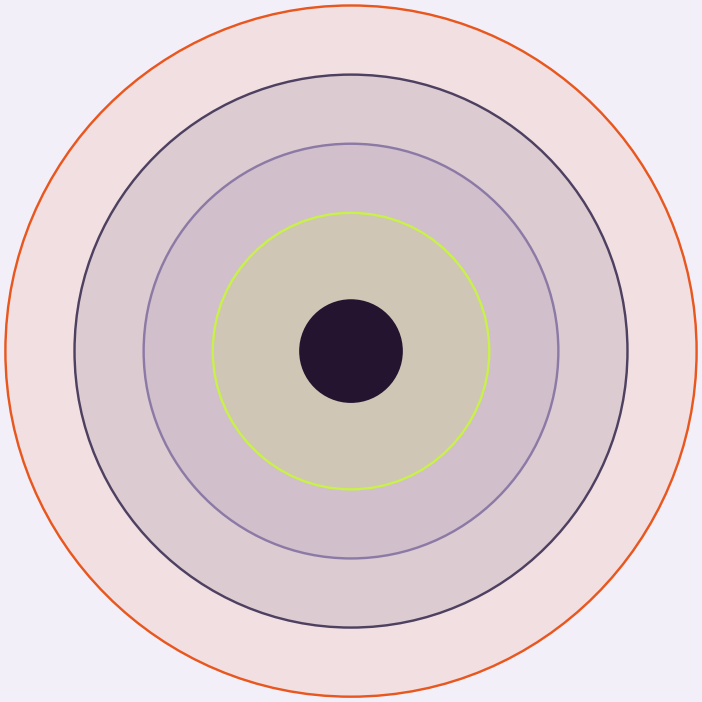
NOVEMBER 6, 2026



The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer

A reading of the book by Siddhartha Mukherjee (2010)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Siddhartha Mukherjee is a cancer physician and researcher at Columbia University. The Emperor of All Maladies tells the history of cancer as a biography, from the first written description of a tumour in ancient Egypt to the targeted drugs of the early 2000s. Its central argument is that cancer is not one disease but many, and that it grows out of the body's own cells, which is why every gain against it has been partial and hard won. The book moves through surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, prevention, screening and molecular biology, showing what each era got right and where it overreached. It is built on the stories of doctors, scientists, campaigners and patients, and on Mukherjee's own year as an oncology fellow, including his care of Carla, a young teacher with leukaemia.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Cancer is not an invader from outside but our own cells, changed so they keep dividing.

This is the idea the whole book turns on. Cancer cells use the same machinery as healthy ones, which is why it has been so hard to kill them without harming the body around them. It also explains why the disease can adapt to treatment.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Cancer is many diseases that share one name, so a single cure was never likely.

Early campaigners hoped for one breakthrough that would end cancer, the way a vaccine ends an infection. The book shows leukaemia, breast cancer, lung cancer and others behaving very differently, each yielding to different tools and at a different pace.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Cutting more did not save more lives, and it took a trial to prove it.

William Halsted's radical mastectomy removed more and more tissue on the belief that cancer spread outward from one centre. For decades surgeons trusted the logic rather than testing it. A controlled trial led by Bernard Fisher later showed that less extensive surgery did as well for many women.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The first chemical remissions came in children with leukaemia, and they did not last.

In 1948 Sidney Farber in Boston reported that aminopterin, a drug that blocks folic acid, could push acute leukaemia in children into remission. The cancer came back within months. Brief as they were, those remissions showed that a drug could make cancer retreat.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Drugs given together worked where single drugs failed, because cancer adapts.

At the National Cancer Institute in the 1960s, Emil Frei and Emil Freireich combined several drugs against childhood leukaemia so that cells resistant to one would be caught by another. Combination treatment helped make childhood leukaemia and Hodgkin's lymphoma among the first cancers that many patients survived.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Preventing a cause can save more lives than any cure, and tobacco is the proof.

In 1950, studies by Richard Doll and Austin Bradford Hill in Britain and by Ernst Wynder and Evarts Graham in the United States linked smoking to lung cancer. The book follows the long fight that came after, as the tobacco industry spent decades casting doubt on the evidence.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A confident theory is not a result until it has been tested against the alternative.

The book returns to this lesson again and again: the radical mastectomy, the early hopes for a single cure, and the high-dose chemotherapy with bone marrow transplants given for breast cancer in the 1990s, which trials later found did not help. Randomised trials are how medicine tells hope from benefit.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Public pressure and money changed how fast cancer research moved.

Mary Lasker, a New York philanthropist, built a campaign that pushed cancer research up the national agenda and helped bring about the National Cancer Act of 1971. Mukherjee shows both sides: the energy and funding it brought, and the promise of a quick victory that the science of the time could not keep.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Once you know which gene is broken, you can build a drug aimed at it.

Chronic myeloid leukaemia is driven by a fused gene created when two chromosomes swap pieces. Imatinib, sold as Gleevec, blocks the protein that gene makes, and Brian Druker's trials around 2000 showed striking responses. Mukherjee also notes that cancers can find ways around even a targeted drug.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Write down your family health history
- [ ] Ask which screenings apply to you
- [ ] Bookmark one reliable source
- [ ] Find your local quit service
- [ ] Trace one cancer's history

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask where a health headline came from
- ◯ Offer one specific kind of help
- ◯ Read one era a week

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Write down your family health history

List the relatives who have had cancer, what kind and roughly at what age.

Bring the page to your next appointment and ask whether it changes anything for you.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Ask which screenings apply to you

At your next check-up, ask your doctor which cancer screenings are recommended for your age, sex and history.

Put the next due date for each in your calendar.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Bookmark one reliable source

Save the site of your country's national cancer institute or a major cancer charity.

When a question comes up, start there instead of with search results.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Find your local quit service

If you or someone at home smokes, look up your national or local stop-smoking service and save its number.

Booking one call is enough to start.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Trace one cancer's history

Pick one cancer that has touched your family or friends.

Read a reputable overview of how its treatment has changed over the last fifty years, and note what made the biggest difference.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask where a health headline came from

When you read about a cancer breakthrough, check whether it came from a trial in people or from cells and animals.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Offer one specific kind of help

When someone you know is in treatment, offer something concrete, such as a meal on Thursday or a lift to an appointment, instead of asking them to tell you what they need.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Read one era a week

Read one part of the book each week.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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30 ○						

December 2026

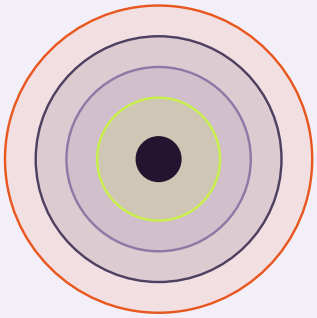
MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Cancer is made of us, so every gain against it is partial, hard won and real.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER SIDDHARTHA MUKHERJEE