



Reviews

SALT IN MY SOUL – Review by Valerie Kalfrin

📅 January 22, 2022 👤 Valerie Kalfrin 🏷️ cystic fibrosis, documentasry, Mallory Smith, salt in my soul, Will Battersby

Reading from her journals about living with cystic fibrosis for roughly twenty years, Mallory Smith sounds by turns pensive and fluid, her words and mood cresting and crashing in waves like the sea where she loved to surf.

“It’s hard to focus on anything else when you need to focus on breathing,” she says in the documentary *Salt in My Soul*, based on her posthumous 2019 memoir of the same name. “I don’t get second, third, and fourth chances. ... I’m a bird, and my choices might lead me to burn, but I don’t get to rise up, untainted, ever glorious, flying freely. I’m a burning bird that won’t rise.”

In limited release this month, *Salt in My Soul* is heartfelt and touching as much for what it shows as what it leaves to viewers’ imaginations. Longtime producer Will Battersby (*The Spine of Night*), making his directorial debut, stitches together a portrait of Smith from her extensive journals and video diaries, as well as interviews with loved ones.

Smith died in 2017 at age 25, two months after receiving a lung transplant. Microbiologists since have named a bacteriophage (a bacteria-fighting virus) BCMallory1 after her because of an experimental treatment she tried before she died.

Smith was three when doctors diagnosed her with cystic fibrosis (CF), a hereditary disease characterized by the body’s production of heavily viscous mucus and frequent respiratory infections. The median life expectancy at the time was 18. “I felt like my daughter just got a death sentence,” her father says.

Hitting various points in Smith's life, *Salt in My Soul* sometimes feels like a stone skipping across a pond. Battersby and Smith's family and friends skim over some undoubtedly wrenching times, such as Smith's diagnosis following her mother ending a pregnancy because the fetus had CF. Some viewers also may wonder how the Smiths earned a living during their daughter's frequent and extensive hospital stays.

Yet chronic illness and disability don't choose whom to strike, a point that *Salt in My Soul* subtly makes through its matter-of-fact tone about Smith's difficulties and medical care. When not on IV antibiotics for an infection that plagued her since she was twelve, she'd take dozens of pills daily and wear a vibrating vest while inhaling medication to dislodge the mucus in her lungs.

"I don't want people looking at me and pitying me, or being scared I'm going to drop dead," Smith says at one point. In another, she notes how she constantly toes the line between accepting her illness and fighting it, striving for more, then being happy with what she can do.

Smith graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford University and worked as a writer and environmental storyteller. One of her projects, *Biome*, drew intriguing parallels between stewardship for the environment and her body as an ecosystem.

She thought that her spirit was strong but her body was fragile, despite being tall, blond, and athletic. "People seek denial, reassurance in my appearance, but looks are deceiving," she says.

Moving at a brisk pace, *Salt in My Soul* strikes a graceful balance, culminating in loved ones reading her words aloud, fighting back tears. Before then, it doesn't wallow in Smith's low points or enshrine her as an "inspiration," a term often rankling for people living with disabilities. Rather, it centers itself on her voice and viewpoint, her determination not to let her illness define her while grappling with her ambitions and mortality.

"CF has given me my value system, and ultimately, no matter how hard it is, I'm grateful for it," she says. "I didn't ask for illness, but I own it because if I don't, no one else will."