



Freezing People Is (Not) Easy: My Adventures in Cryonics

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Bob Nelson was no ordinary T.V. repairman. One day he discovered a book that ultimately changed his entire life trajectory --*The Prospect of Immortality* by Professor Robert Ettinger. From it, he learned about cryonics: a process in which the body temperature is lowered during the beginning of the dying process to keep the brain intact, so that those frozen could potentially be reanimated in the future.

A world of possibilities unfolded for Nelson, as he relentlessly pursued cryonics and became the founder and President of the Cryonics Society of California. Working in coalition with a biophysicist, in 1967 Nelson orchestrated the freezing of Dr. James Bedford, the first human to be placed in cryonic suspension. Soon thereafter he began freezing others who sought his help, obtaining special capsules and an underground vault. Underfunded, Nelson struggled desperately, often dipping into his own savings, and taking extraordinary measures to maintain his patients in a frozen state. His fascinating memoir reveals his irrepressible passion for life and chronicles the complicated circumstances that comprised his adventures in cryonics.

Freezing People Is (Not) Easy: My Adventures in Cryonics Details

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Kimberlee Bach says

Interesting history lesson

This book is an interesting first person account of the sacrifices made when you believe truly in something and have the intention to help people. I enjoyed learning the historical aspects of cryogenic and about how the first man was frozen as well as the struggles and losses. It really was and can still be a science experiment that is being worked out. Who knows, someday they may really make it happen.

Jennifer says

Bob Nelson had a fairly sad life, IMHO. And, if he were just a little less sentimental, maybe it wouldn't have been so. But at least the book ended on a good note:

“...we should not dampen our optimism about the great benefits that future discoveries can deliver. Two hundred years ago, flying the clouds would have been among miraculous, an astonishing gift of the gods. Now it is ordinary, even boring. With each new invention and discovery, our perception shifts. If you could talk to a caveman today, do you think he would be convinced that airplanes, skydiving parachutes, and submarines are now commonplace?”

Brian says

What a crazy read. Very few nonfiction books I grab randomly at the library end up grabbing me back. But this one blew my mind. It's so poorly written. It's filled with so many exclamation points and misguided logic. But ... CRYONICS! Hello? To see such passion lead down so many shaky slopes. To learn a bit about something I didn't know. Remember the saying about how some people get so caught up thinking about whether they COULD do something that that never stopped to think about whether they SHOULD? That is the life of Bob Nelson. I couldn't put this down ...

Michael Burnam-Fink says

I've always had mixed feeling about cryonics: on the one hand they're the oldest and most established Transhumanist branch; on the other, I can't believe that the unfreezing process will ever work, and that if it does the post-Singularity 25th century (or whenever) will be a friendly place for 21st century primates. That said, Nelson's book gave me a lot more sympathy for the movement.

It was not science, it was bunch of 1960s lunatics and optimists who had read a book (The Prespect of Immortality-Robert Ettinger) and thought that they might stave off death. Nelson, a 30 year old TV repairman without even a high-school education, but with plenty of charisma, was elected President of the

California Society for Cryonics. It was his optimism that lead to disaster, as his ramshackle organization froze several people that they could not keep on ice. Nelson ran himself ragged filling jury-rigged capsules with dry ice and liquid nitrogen, depleting his bank account and destroying his marriage. Finally, in the early 70s the capsules failed entirely and Nelson abandoned the business, only to be dragged through a torturous lawsuit by the children of some of his former clients.

Nelson's book is obviously favorable to his side of the lawsuit, and much of the 'he-said-she' back and forth has been documented elsewhere, particularly on a recent episode of This American Life. Personally, I don't judge Nelson too harshly: he was operating at the frontiers of knowledge (and financial organization), and I believe his claim that his participants signed over their bodies under medical donation laws which should've protected him from liability with a competent lawyer. That said, terrible mistakes were made.

Jackie says

This is a really interesting story that you rarely hear about. Definitely worth reading to get the back story on an important part of LA history.

Colette says

I'd give this 3 1/2 stars. Fascinating.

Bronwyn C Rideout says

Focuses more on the business side of cryonics and what happens when you don't get people to pay up front.
