



The Immortalist

Alan Harrington

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"Death is an imposition on the human race, and no longer acceptable," reads the first sentence of this extraordinary book. Within the last few years "[W]e have circled the moon, harnessed nuclear energy, artificially reproduced DNA, and now have the biochemical means to control birth; why should death itself, the Last Enemy, be considered sacred and beyond conquest?"

The Immortalist Details

Date : Published 1979 by Abacus (first published January 1st 1969)

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Author : Alan Harrington

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Kenneth says

Harrington's theme could be summed up as "if we can put a man on the moon, then we can decide to have an Apollo Project for extending the human lifespan." He gave fair consideration to a number of objections, as I recall; such as, if we lived for centuries, wouldn't we get bored? But that's not the part of this book that has stuck with me for decades and helped to define my attitudes towards life and death.

His first order of business was to demonstrate that our ideas of life after death are delusional. He made the usual sorts of arguments against resurrection and reincarnation, heaven and hell, ghostly haunting and surfing the astral plane. I'm not sure if he put it this way, but my takeaway was, if I die and find that I still exist, I'll be pleasantly surprised-- but there's no reason to plan on it.

Then he turned surprisingly subtle: We spend a lot of time thinking about how people will remember us after we're gone, as if, like Huckleberry at his own funeral, we'll be around to witness people's reactions. But of course such fantasies are pure imagination, because we simply will not exist. Whether people weep over our grave or dance, will be nothing to us, when we are ourselves nothing. And even if we can take some solace from being remembered, it's necessarily limited, because most people are essentially forgotten within a generation or two, and as centuries, millennia, and then millions of years pass, even the greatest glory will be extinguished in the vastness of time.

Harrington's conclusion: there's no substitute for actually being alive, so let's get on with that Life Extension Program. My conclusion: I will never experience the non-existence of death, any more than I did the non-existence of not yet being born, so in a sense, I'm already immortal. And while it's pleasant to imagine achieving lasting fame, it makes no real difference whether I actually shall or, as is overwhelmingly more likely, not.

A fascinating, thought-provoking book. Warmly recommended.

Seamusin says

A pretty profound book. I'd not considered death so wrapped up in everything until this book. The first part really made it clear to me. The latter parts of the book could be skipped for those who've read a lot of sci-fi: it's essentially a dry summary of some great Arther C Clarke plots, emphasising they could well happen.

Aaron Schmid says

This book was brought to my attention by Jason Silva (of YouTube's ShotsofAwe), to whom I owe my gratitude. It was a great read!

This book was extremely ambitious! But it's also suspiciously hard to get a hold of...unless you have deep pockets.

After rejecting amazon's listed price of \$900, I found that eBay offered a lightly worn first printing, in hard-cover, for forty bucks. I couldn't find the book even close to that price anywhere else (aside from e-books). Oddly enough, it seems that this supposed "non-fiction masterpiece" is something of a rare book. And The Immortalist probably deserves more attention than it's receiving. I don't say that lightly however, as I wouldn't feel comfortable recommending this book to absolutely anyone. Maybe I'm tooting my own horn here, but I think it takes a rather sturdy mind to properly interpret immortalists' worldview. While reading, I didn't always find this to be a book of hard truths, sometimes more science-fiction than non-fiction. It's a book of intriguing ideas and their implications.

What Harrington uses these 300 pages to support is rather "far-out" philosophy, albeit very well organized and obviously more than painstakingly developed. The beginning of this "trans-humanist" book is used to present the immortalist argument: that humans naturally and desperately long for literal eternal life, and that any evil is ultimately due to our frustrated state as a death-ridden race of immortals whose time it has come to eradicate their disease. The later portions of the book are used to describe what life would be like as immortals and how we ought to move forward into our rolls as such. As mentioned above, I didn't always agree with what Harrington purported. However, in no way do I wish to discredit his overwhelming insight.

The ironically late Alan Harrington was certainly a very avid thinker. The ideas put forth in this book were often more than powerful enough to stop me mid-sentence. I found myself contemplating existence more often than is typically comfortable, haha. However, discernment was perhaps not Harrington's strong-point. There were more than a few instances when I found "immortalist philosophy" to be rather redundant or even short-sighted (talk about irony). To boot, Harrington's ideology seems to unnecessarily attack even the innocuous aspects of other theologies...let's not kid ourselves, The Immortalist may as well be a "religious book". Mr. Harrington, not surprisingly, insisted that God is either dead or dying, and that we ought to view religion as an antiquated tool by which primitive man eased his state of consciousness. Some ideas presented within these pages are simply a precursor to atheistic or even satanic theology. Time and time again, Harrington discusses man's aspiration to godhood - the subtitle of the book, after all, is "An approach to the engineering of man's divinity". Harrington would say that WE are meant to be gods, much like a snake once did in another old book. It's a little disconcerting actually, how intertwined The Immortalist is with Satanic ideology. Chapter V is even titled "Satan, Our Standard-Bearer", haha. So maybe you could see why I wouldn't recommend this book to a bunch of people?

There is so much more to say and discuss about this book's content. I found it to be very thought-provoking and extremely entertaining...but maybe I'm just weird?

Physically speaking, the book is almost as interesting as its content. The jacket is weird in that it employs the book's own opening line as someone else's abbreviated review...meanwhile Harrington's headshot takes up the entire back cover. Under the jacket lies a gold-lettered spine, and some weird black-on-black designs are pressed into the front cover. You can see what I mean in this video, if you want.

In the end, this has been one of the hardest books I've ever felt called to review. I only superficially covered the ideas presented by Harrington...but he probably only covers them to a less superficial degree. The topics of this book are epic and will have massive implications if mankind ever truly defeats death. Harrington barely scratches the surface of eternity's pull on mankind. And my review probably barely scratches the surface of this book :P

I recommend it...with hesitation.
