



# The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power

*Travis Hugh Culley*

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## **The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power** Travis Hugh Culley

Travis Hugh Culley went to Chicago to make his name in its thriving theater scene, yet found in his day job a sense of community and fulfillment—and a brotherhood of like-minded individualists—that he encountered nowhere else.

In *The Immortal Class*, Culley takes us inside the heart and soul of an American urban icon: the bicycle messenger. In describing his own history and those of his peers, he evokes a classic American maverick, deeply woven into the fabric of society—from the pits of squalor to the highest reaches of power and privilege—yet always resolutely, exuberantly outside.

Culley's voice is at once earthy and soaringly poetic—a Gen-X Tom Joad at hyperspeed. *The Immortal Class* is a unique personal and political narrative of a cyclist's life on the street.

## **The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power Details**

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Author : Travis Hugh Culley

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## From Reader Review The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power for online ebook

### Jenifer says

I was looking to enter a world totally foreign to me. I was looking for likable characters with great stories and unique personalities. I found this author to be a arrogant and one-sided. I know, I know. He's been fighting the fight against conventionality and conformity all his life and gets nothing but grief for it. He's all alone out there with only his talent and anger (and his U-lock) to protect him against everyone who wants to hurt him and rob him of his disdainful way of life. He's an anarchist, he's a rebel.... And still, I could have overlooked all this had he managed to spark my interest with some good writing or some consideration for the reader. The parts about actual messengering with its intriguing lingo and social structure were completely undecipherable to me. And that's the writers fault. I wanted to come in to his world and he kept me out with all his ranting and railing and "insiders only" writing style.

I gave him a chance, but he didn't give me one. But then who am I but a completely clueless and ignorant motorist out on the road most likely bent on manslaughter or at the very least the total corrosion of society and the environment?

Also, it was too long.

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### Paul says

Culley uses his time working as a bike messenger in Chicago to weave together several narratives: the worklife of a messenger, the dysfunction of an automobile-based urban architecture, the people and ideas behind bicycle activism, his own growing up, and even a bit about Chicago's architectural history.

The book's vibrant center is the tale of his adventures working as a bike messenger. In Culley's impressionistic telling, it's frantic work from morning to night: dodging cars, attempting to stay fed and hydrated, keeping up with the scat slang of the messenger's radio, maintaining a mechanically sound bike, enjoying the camaraderie of other messengers, and weaving a way from package pickup to destination. His descriptions of these events show a manic pace in the messenger's life and work in a city as large a Chicago.

Sometimes it's almost too much. How could anyone endure working with that sort of pace for any length of time? One suspects there were also times of boredom or work slowdowns, but they don't show up much here. He spends a little time on the frustrations of cold and wet weather, but I got the impression he was more concerned with romanticizing his work than simply telling it.

Spending a lot of time on a bicycle will almost certainly lead anyone to question America's complete and total love of the automobile. Culley points out many of the absurdities of automobile culture, including some drivers' inability to conceive a good reason why a bicycle might want to use the road. Going further, however, he calls for a complete reconception of urban space. In one way, it's a compelling vision: cleaner, quieter communities connected by human-powered transportation. On the other hand, he ignores those cases when assisted travel is required: commercial trucking, transportation of the infirm or elderly, emergency vehicles and the like. Nor does he offer anything resembling a sustainable future. There's a good start here, but nothing approaching a well-developed idea.

The narrative of his becoming part of the community of bicycle activists is interesting. He outlines some differences between the “bike commuters” and the messengers. In particular, it’s interesting that he sometimes found the messengers, who have a semi-outlaw reputation, to be more conservative than the commuters.

In all, I’m glad I read his story. It certainly opened my eyes to a subculture of which I was previously unaware. His thoughts on an automobile-free urban core are a good start, though I wish his vision were more complete.

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### **Marilyn Geary says**

There is something about becoming one with your Wheel. The freedom, the power. It can become an obsession. And when you find your group, others who share this life, well...

You don't have to agree with ANYTHING in this book. But it will give insight into one bicyclists heart.

Recommended to those who like bicycling books.

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### **David Dunnem says**

I'm sad I didn't make it into this book, as probably the worst messenger ever for Service First I met the author several times throughout the late 90's. My girlfriend at the time (an amazing messenger) worked for Velo (Velocity) and was just an awesome tech messenger. Brings back memories for me, some good , some not so clear. Long live Tuman's and the Fireside crew (Scott Anna you really do know everybody in the world!)

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### **Gil says**

There is a funny personal story behind this book for me. I met the author- twice. I purchased my copy from a small new/used bookstore on Broadway in Chicago called Afterwards. It's still my favorite bookstore. My copy happened to be autographed- apparently Travis would come in every so often and autograph some books for them. They would up the price slightly and he'd let them keep the difference. For a store like Afterwards every little bit helps if you're to keep a Barnes & Noble or Borders out of your neighborhood.

The first time I "met" Travis I was biking home at night from the grocery store in the rain, burdened down by a not only a messenger bag full of groceries but three plastic bags distributed around my bike's handlebars. I heard another bicycle behind me and could tell it was going at a pretty fast clip. I pulled to the right so they could pass and the cyclist whizzed by. For whatever reason between the face and the bike I was pretty sure who it was so I yelled out "Hey Travis!" who looked back and waved. I had happened to think the book was great because of advocacy of bicycling as a means of transportation, the history it gave of Chicago, the transportation industry, and its description of the places (and sometimes people) that I knew in the city. He really captured what it was like to use a bike in the city as your main mode of transportation- the places you could go that weren't accessabile by car, the damn near mystical experience of cycling down the lakeshore path in the early dawn when all you can hear is the lapping of waves, singing of birds, and the sound of your chain going around the gear cogs with the Hancock Center and Sears tower in front of you. How lucky you

felt to be in a city that where you could always find a place to lock your bike up but knowing they could do more so riding wouldn't be so dangerous. All of the different kinds of people you got to meet and have great conversations with, the nods from the bike messengers (even dude w/ the bmx bike and hockey helmet), the contentment of riding home at 3am after a pub crawl.

The second time was at a Green Party rally at a park on the west side. The daytime featured speakers and information booths. That night featured Eryka Badu and some of the best hip-hop no one has heard of- I still wonder what happened to Medusa, a female MC who SMOKED the mic- but anyway I ran into Travis again. This was the first time I had had a chance to talk to an author of a book I liked one-on one. Had a good conversation, he had lived in Philadelphia for a while (where he was off to in the book) and had come back to Chicago. Great book, cool guy.

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### **Ben W says**

fantastic book, very interesting read. Just as the book starts to get monotonous, he takes you on an exciting trip to a different aspect of the life of a bike courier. It was a quick read and amazing

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### **A.K. Klemm says**

My bike club went camping this weekend. I love bikes and I love camping, so it was excruciating knowing I had a pre-Halloween event at my store, bills to pay, and a general inability to leave my husband and child to go on a frivolous trip that would inevitably involve a lot of drinking and riding.

I love books more than anything, and I adore Chris Rogers (the author we had in the store Saturday), but my mind was off in the distance with my new friends – family really – their tents, their bikes, and the dirt and grit far away from my rows and stacks of books.

This isn't about me whining about not getting to go on a camping trip, though. This is about the discovery I made because of where my mind was not and my body was... in the city, longing for my cycling friends who were partying it up and having a blast.

The stars aligned, the shelves at the store all seemed to point me in one direction, and a copy of The Immortal Class seemed to fall from the heavens.

So overly marketed as to appeal to the counter culture, zine reading crowd, The Immortal Class is one of those small square-shaped trade paperbacks. With phrases like “adrenaline-spiked” and “frenzied rawness” slapped across a black and grey jacket in egg-yolk yellow.

Months after becoming obsessed with the world of cycling and setting goals to really hunker down, figure it out, and join this world – I discovered this weekend why it appeals to my soul so completely...

Read the full review here: <http://anakalianwhims.wordpress.com/2...>

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## Rogue Reader says

The author, Travis Culley, is obsessive, ecstatic, compulsive - in general just nuts. He's in Chicago, writing through the night, broke and just about to be evicted so takes a job as a bike messenger. The Immortal Class is Culley's narrative of his weeks? months? in the job, riding so hard and so often that he blows out his knee.

The Immortal Class is a series of essays that span Culley's time as a bike messenger. The essays are wide ranging, thoughtful and beautifully written and they shine with manic brilliance. Culley's life, behavior and very existence is defined by this job. The bike messenger crew provides Culley with a brotherhood, the deliveries a competitive goal, his delivery routes give him a neighborhood, the people and sights of the city offer him an abundance of content and cars and their drivers are targets for his aggression and grievance.

The Immortal Class is about physical, intellectual and spiritual freedom - freedom from fear, freedom from rules, freedom from gravity -and the possibility of existing on an exalted plane fueled by adrenaline.

What I like best of Culley's writing is his perspective on the city, of Chicago sure, but these are observations that can be more generally applied to the city as a construct. Physical movement, traffic patterns, human behavior, building - cities are designed to manage movement with roads, elevators, doors, signs.

Culley writes of the tension between drivers of cars and bikers, violence that is reflected by messengers who pride themselves on bike gymnastics and impossible feats of traffic evasion and drivers of cars who are threatened and fearful of the fast and unpredictable behavior of the bikers. He writes of a biker's vulnerability, the lightening speed of an injury and the destruction of the body that occurs.

I'm glad I read this book, and I'm glad that I don't like to ride a bike. Thanks to Oddmonster who reviewed it first - I saw it on her feed - and thanks to PaperbackSwap.com where I was able to pick up the book.

--*Ashland Mystery*

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## Dee Styma says

This book changed my life!

I was approaching a birthday and said in my head: I want to choose a book that is different, one that will impact me. I used to love Puck on M T V Real World. No one else liked him and yea he did some bad things but I love bikes and the idea of a Bike Messenger was something that also was heroic to me. Then I saw that Travis did his work in Chicago. I think I read the first sentence and fell into the book. I re read parts of it often. And one day when I saw him online I commented on his work, and he FRIENDED ME! To be friends with a role model and writer floors me!

It is a book I love to re read. Now days that is unusual. As an English words lover, I wish I could read more but what a joy to just sit back and enjoy Travis' writing.

Diane L. Styma

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### **Chris Termaat says**

A fascinating insider view of the bicycle messenger subculture. Bicycle messengers are like musicians and gypsies. They occupy a unique social niche outside the normal class hierarchy.

The author was a bicycle messenger in Chicago in the 1990s, delivering packages to high-rise business suites in the Loop. To deliver packages, he routinely boarded elevators in his spandex, surrounded by "suits." I was one of those suits. We might have felt smug, looking at the spandex man and his package, but we were also jealous. Who doesn't want a bod that looks good in spandex? And, while the rest of us returned to our spreadsheets, he was darting around the Loop breaking all the rules.

Some pearls of practical wisdom here about urban cycling. Taxis are safe and predictable when they have a passenger but dangerous and wildly unpredictable when they don't have a passenger because they will dart across lanes suddenly when hailed by a pedestrian. Where else do you learn this kind of thing?

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### **J.K. Grice says**

This is a fascinating look not only into the world of bike messengers, but also into the history of large cities like Chicago that were originally designed to be pedestrian and bicycle friendly. As an avid cyclist myself, this was a superb book.

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### **Jtomassetti says**

THE IMMORTAL CLASS: BIKE MESSENGERS AND THE CULT OF HUMAN POWER by Travis Hugh Culley.

The immortal class is the bicycle messengers who must have immortal confidence to rationalize the danger they face every time they venture out on the traffic pack street of major cities. I enjoyed this book. While reading I could easily imagine being the messenger floating through the Chicago traffic and skitching rides off the bumpers of taxis. In addition to the gritty cycling story is thought provoking commentary on bicycle advocacy.

The book is not a straight story from beginning to end. The writing wanders through the traffic of various subjects. Some insignificant events are described in great detail while other bigger events pass by like a thousand blurred cars on a freeway. The detailed stories are often interrupted by other stories only to go back to the original tale. Nevertheless the book is readable and enjoyable.

**STOP READING THIS REVIEW IF YOU WANT TO FULLY ENJOY THIS BOOK.** After completing the book I went online to find out more. I found that other messengers consider the author, Travis Culley, to be a poser. He was only a messenger for 8 months. Apparently he had gathered stories from many other messengers and inserted himself into the main role. This was a big letdown for me. While reading I thought book was an autobiography about an extraordinary person. Instead it is a fictional compilation of many messengers. However should you read? Yes.

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### **Evan says**

This is a book that has never been written before about a subcultural part of a larger revolution. I love reading books about things that have never been written about before.

Every asshole driver who won't share the road should be strapped down and forced to read this. Having said this, bike couriers, like most bikers, obey their own laws--selectively citing the rules of the road when it is to their favor and flouting them similarly--yet all based on a defensive survivalism steeped in the reality that the roads and the road laws are made for gas-powered massive weapons wielded by garden-variety sociopaths and not for those teetering aboard fragile and relatively slow leg-powered toys.

This is the story of a young starving artist who took a job as a package-delivery boy in the heart of Chicago, racing through the bustling streets day after day to pickup and dropoff points to the crackling rhythm of jargon-coded radio commands. The longer he's on the bike--the greater his "exposure time"--the greater the danger, as Culley describes in vivid, evocative stories of his adventures on the streets--often in eloquent prose. And he wraps the stories of a million street hazards inside a thought-provoking philosophical context in which he ponders the modern world, the design of cities and the human interplay with them; his own attitude to the idea of work and independence and "owning" one's own genuineness in how one chooses to exist and "make a living." There are "pastoral" moments in which he describes bike races and other biking events, but always he ties them into the larger picture--often stressing the heroic and mythical qualities of the biker as a sort of cowboy of the modern world.

I have a personal interest in this book, truth be told, since I bike daily to and from work partly in downtown Louisville, so I identify with a lot of the things herein.

Near the end, Culley discusses an incredible car vs. bike road-rage chase that ended in a courier's death. As with many things in the book, it leads to ruminations on social interactions, democracy, the evolution of cities, and the devastating effects of the automobile on our society, among other things.

This was an illuminating, fast-moving read. Recommended.

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### **Elaine says**

This is an amazing read. Culley doesn't just tell us what it's like being a bike messenger and its attendant dangers and pain, although he does do that. But, he writes lyrically and passionately about his *Umwelt*, the personal space surrounding him: art, architecture, justice, city planning, the politics of creating a culture, the psychology, sociology, and anthropology of the clashing cultures of car vs. bike riders. It opened a whole new world for me, a way of looking at street I had never done before. The nearest thing to this that I have ever read is *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but this is not that. It seems to me to be *sui generis*, although the website I bought this on did list other books by bike messengers. I hesitate to buy one, however, for fear it couldn't match this.

This is another book I found out about on Goodreads from a review by Evan Gillings. I never would have come across this on my own. Thank you Evan. Thank you Goodreads.

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**Risa says**

Here is what i learned from this book: that no matter how shallow, no matter how hideous the hours, how pandering to The Man it is, i will do whatever it takes to have a job with health insurance because Travis tells you xactly what it is like to NOT have it and need to have stitches. Yes, you install them on yourself. As long as i have a bike to ride, i iwll sell my soul for health care if this is the alternative.

A fun read, no too macho and decent, if not good at times, writing.

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