



The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death

By John Gray

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A *Globe and Mail* Best Books of the Year 2011 Title

At the heart of human experience lies an obsession with the nature of death. Religion, for most of history, has provided an explanation for human life and a vision of what comes after it. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such beliefs came under relentless pressure as new ideas—from psychiatry to evolution to communism—seemed to suggest that our fate was now in our own hands: humans could cease to be animals, defeat death, and become immortal.

In *The Immortalization Commission*, the acclaimed political philosopher and critic John Gray takes a brilliant and frightening look at humankind's dangerous striving toward a scientific version of immortality. Probing the parallel faiths of Bolshevik "God-builders," who sought to reshape the planet and psychical researchers, who believed they had evidence of a nonreligious form of life after death, Gray raises fascinating questions about how such beliefs threaten the very nature of what it means to be human. He looks to philosophers, journalists, politicians, charlatans, and mass murderers who all felt driven by a specifically scientific and modern worldview and whose revolt against death resulted in a series of experiments that ravaged whole countries.

An urgent examination of Darwin's post-religious legacy, *The Immortalization Commission* is an important work from "one of Britain's leading public intellectuals" (*The Wall Street Journal*).

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Man™s dream of immortality is a foolish, sinister nightmare, argues this gloomy, tendentious meditation on scientific hubris. Gray (Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern), a professor of European thought at the London School of Economics, examines two oddly paired movements of deluded immortalists: the Victorian Society for Psychical Research sought scientific evidence of an afterlife in the oeanautomatic writing• of mediums, and the œGod-builders,• an elite circle of Bolsheviks (such as Maxim Gorky) who believed socialism could re-engineer humanity to abolish death. From these studies, Gray distills intriguing insights into Darwinism™s impact on philosophy and the similarities between religion and the scientific worldview; he finishes with a nakedly scornful, fatalistic attack on human efforts to avoid extinction, both individual (cryonic preservation) and collective (anti-global warming initiatives). The historical underpinnings of Gray™s argument are rickety, especially the confused God-builder section, which swirls pointlessly around the story of H.G. Wells and a beautiful Russian spy. His argument that Soviet atrocities flowed from a mad longing to transcend death is free-associated rather than reasoned, and his implicit yoking of dotty British psychics with Stalin™s executioners reveals little. (Apr.)

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Review

“Beautifully conceived and executed . . . Deftly blending philosophy and history, [*The Immortalization Commission*] rips along with the narrative drive of the most vivid fiction.” —Malcolm Jones, *The Daily Beast*

“A chilling reflection on the post-Darwinian world.”—Jill Lepore, *The New Yorker*

“The British philosopher and freewheeling intellectual John Gray is in serious danger of making philosophy exciting and fun to read . . . Gray captures the hilarious audacity and absurdity of the search for immortality, one that could be conceived only by such charmingly quixotic creatures as human beings . . . A fascinating piece of intellectual history.”—Clancy Martin, *The New York Times*

“John Gray is a connoisseur of human idiocy. In this brief, modest-seeming yet profound book he makes his most compelling plea yet for man to come to his senses and stop dreaming of immortality, for himself and for the earth.”—John Banville, *The Guardian*

“Enthralling. . . John Gray's superb meditation on our desire for immortality makes for an enthralling read.”—Richard Holloway, *The Observer*

“An engrossing double-act play about scientific hubris.”—Thomas Meaney, *The Wall Street Journal*

“A core strength of this engrossing book lies in his readiness to take absurd endeavours seriously and to consider morally complex individuals sympathetically.”—Marek Kohn, *The Independent*

“The author is undoubtedly one of the most important and insightful polemicists currently writing in English. Like most of Gray's work, this book is filled with diverting anecdotes and ironic asides, yet swells to a powerful philosophical conclusion . . . An engaging additional chapter in its author's long-running campaign

to expose the quasi-religious and magical thinking that underpins our visions of progress.”—Stephen Cave, *The Financial Times*

About the Author

John Gray is the author of many critically acclaimed books, including *Black Mass*, *Straw Dogs*, and *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*. A regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, he is Emeritus Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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