

**Immortal Engines:
Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy**
George Slusser, Gary Westfahl + Eric S. Rabkin (editors)
The University of Georgia Press 1996

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 1996 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Immortal Engines is a collection of essays on one of the grand themes of science fiction and one of the oldest themes of human literature — immortality. Eric S. Rabkin's introduction suggests that immortality is necessarily to be viewed negatively, but John Martin Fischer and Ruth Curl propose a typology of immortality in science fiction in which "attractiveness" of the future life is taken as central. This is one of the divides between the different contributors; the other, and the one actually used to divide the essays into two groups, is between those which draw on scientific material and those which take a more narrowly literary approach.

Of the first group of essays, only two are broad overviews. Stephen Harris writes about how myths about resurrection have interacted with the growth in medical technology to influence science fiction. I was intrigued to read that both mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and cardiac defibrillation (!) were discovered in the late eighteenth century, only to be discarded and not "revived" till much later. Joseph D. Miller mixes some of the biology behind aging and longevity together with a survey of classic treatments of immortality in science fiction.

The other essays address more specialised topics: Sterling Blake's "A Roll of the Ice" tries to estimate the probability of cryonics being successful; Brett Cooke takes Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* as the starting point for an excursion on the idea of genetic immortality; and Stephen Potts looks at "software immortality" against the background of Rudy Rucker's novels and Marvin Minsky's popular writings about artificial intelligence (a somewhat odd choice as a sample of positions within the philosophy of mind). The final essay in this section, N. Katharine Hayles' "Taking Immortality Literally", seems out of place: as usual when William Gibson's works are asked to bear too much critical weight, the result is stronger on

jargon than anything else.

Fredric Jameson takes Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* as a starting point for a hermeneutic study of writing about immortality as a reflection of underlying class struggle. ("The longevity drama is not 'really' about longevity at all, but rather about something else, which can ... be identified as History itself." Hmmm...) S.L. Rosen suggests the term "the Tithonus syndrome" for the consistently negative portrayal of immortality in fantasy and science fiction. And Frank McConnell argues that death is essential to storytelling.

Most of the essays are more specialised. Terri Frongia explores humanist critiques of immortality in Italian science fiction (in the writings of Landolfi, Buzzati, and Calvino). Robin Roberts contrasts feminist approaches to immortality (in the writing of [Tiptree/Sheldon](#), Butler, Cherryh, and Vinge) with male science fiction (represented by Asimov, Benford, and Sterling). Judith Lee contrasts the approaches to immortality of speculative fiction (in the writings of Octavia E. Butler and Dorothy Bryant) and theology (the balance between Lucifer and Satan in early Christian mythology). James Gunn describes the background to his own novel *The Immortal* and its adaptation for television. Bud Foote analyses the character names in Simak's *Way Station*. Lynne Lundquist looks at "unaging" in the childrens' novels *Peter Pan* and *Hitty, Her First Hundred Years*, where negative concomitants (lack of memory or physical incapacity) are again foremost. Gary Westfahl's piece on death and rebirth in Super Mario Brothers and Choose Your Own Adventure books definitely suggests that he has spent far too much time playing the things himself. (Among other things he claims that "physicians... in the future... will surely be able to transplant human brains".)

Immortal Engines is a mixed bag (as such collections on broad themes almost invariably are), but I found its exploration most agreeable. Some of the essays brought revealed new aspects of old favourites among the classics of science fiction; others made me think about the entire genre in a new light. Though most science fiction readers look on literary criticism with a jaundiced eye, some of the essays in *Immortal Engines* may make them reconsider this; for critics of the genre the volume as a whole will be

compulsory reading.

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