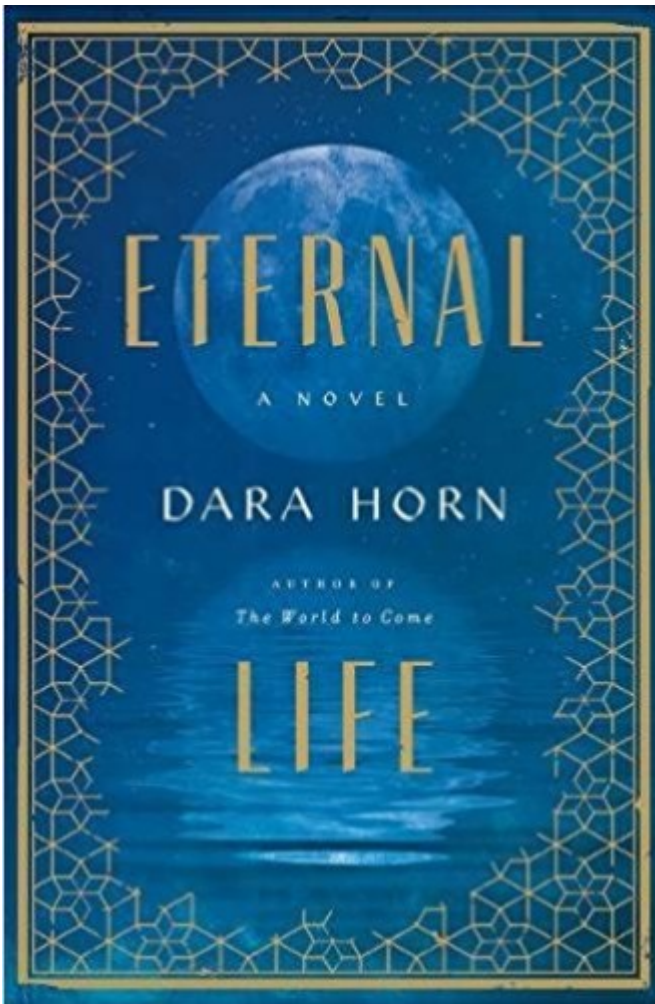


A life worth living, but for how long?

In their new novels, Dara Horn and Chloe Benjamin play with themes of mortality and free will.

by [Rachel Marie Stone](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue

In Review

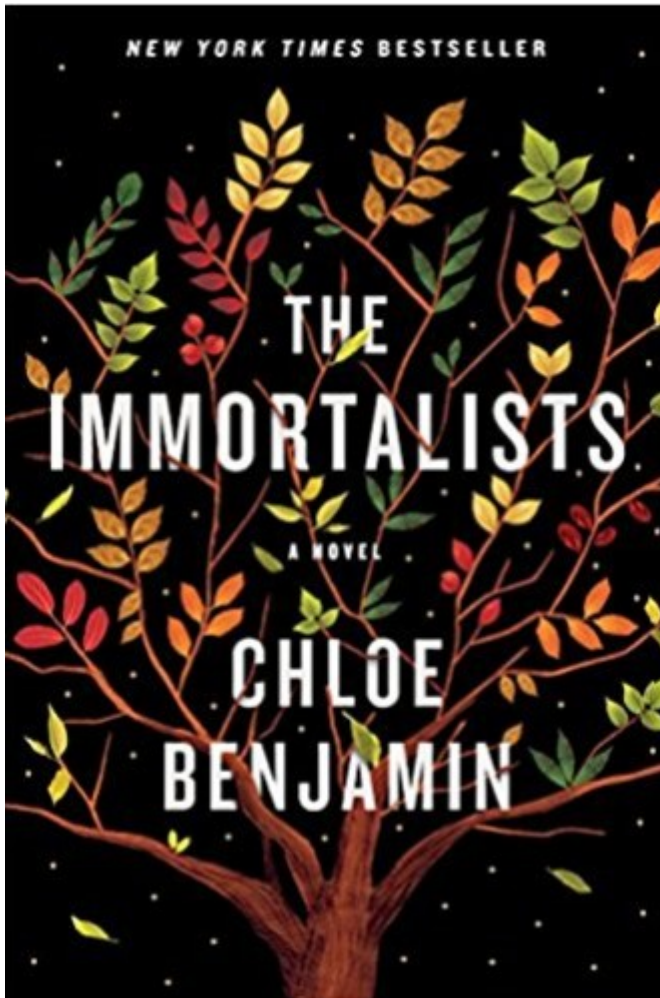


Eternal Life

A Novel

By Dara Horn

Norton



The Immortalists

A Novel

By Chloe Benjamin

G. P. Putnam's Sons

Advertisers seem to want us to want immortality. “Hope lives here,” the trademarked slogan of the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, has been bouncing around my mind for three years now, ever since I regarded it while sitting in traffic on Interstate 676. The infant son of a friend’s friend had just been found lifeless in

his crib after his afternoon nap, drowned in his sleep by the influenza virus before anyone even suspected he was ill. I had recently returned from Malawi, one of Africa's poorest countries, and was suspicious of American optimism—particularly in its Christian form, which is quick to insist that God will provide (or has a plan or will heal).

It's not that people in Malawi don't pray for healing. It's that Americans seem almost always to be caught off guard by misfortune, disease, or death and even, sometimes, genuinely offended at the idea that such things are unavoidable.

But what if death were avoidable? Novelist Dara Horn creates a fictional world in which immortality is shown to be a burden as much as a blessing. "What reasons are there for being alive?" asks Rachel, Horn's immortal protagonist, after 2,000 years of marrying, birthing, nursing, tending, and burying everyone she has ever known and loved. She lists the usual reasons people give—to serve others, to experience joy, to build for the future—but feels (and argues, plausibly and beautifully) that these reasons break down for someone who has stepped outside of the typical game of birth, growth, and death. Horn is the mother of four children, and any reader who has cared for children for any length of time will notice how especially finely grained and insightful are Rachel's observations on the nature and purpose of maternal self-sacrifice: "that first moment of holding your child, when your body became the gateway to the world, and from it, pure light."

Eternal Life is steeped in the Hebrew Bible and religion. Rachel begins life as the daughter of a scribe in Roman-occupied Jerusalem; her lover, Elazar, is the son of the high priest. Rachel is, extraordinarily for a woman of her day, literate. She and Elazar have discussions about sacred text and belief that occasionally seem more plausibly to belong to theological students in 19th-century Germany. They are doubters. But doubters or not, the two of them make a bargain with God to save the life of their son. His life is saved, and theirs are made eternal.

Now, in the 21st century, Rachel's granddaughter Hannah, supported by a grant from Google, works on technologies aiming to extend life. Rachel hopes Hannah will use those technologies on her, but in reverse—to help her die. It is for the reader to decide whether or not learning her grandmother's secret tempers Hannah's interest in the project of life extension.

One of the characters in Chloe Benjamin's vivid and ambitious novel, *Varya Gold*, is also a longevity researcher. In addition, she's a hard-core practitioner of caloric restriction—a strategy once favored by scientists as a possible way to increase the life span. I confess that Varya's meager diet strikes me as not really worth exchanging a few years of life for: "two tablespoons of high-fiber cereal," "nuts with beans, or on weekends, a slab of tofu or tuna." If pressed, I'd probably trade a few years of life for real cream in my coffee every morning.

Benjamin's story begins in 1969, when Varya and her three siblings are children living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. They meet a psychic who tells each of them, separately, the day that they will die. How and why they each meet their end at the foretold time provides the novel's plot, which opens that ageless inquiry into the relationship between providence (or fate) and free will.

Simon, the beloved youngest, runs away to San Francisco with his sister Klara. Simon is gay, and Klara aspires to be a professional magician. As she ceaselessly works to master impressive illusions and simultaneously scratch out an existence, Simon, told he will die very young, throws himself into the riotously hedonistic life of the Castro district. His end comes too soon, as predicted, and if the way it plays out seems predictable, it is perhaps only because the premature ending of the thousands of real lives cut off by AIDS tended to follow a tragically unvarying pattern (as Abraham Verghese has illuminated in his haunting memoir, *My Own Country*).

It's not clear why Varya, who, unlike Simon, receives a prediction of long life, feels the need to restrict her calories. One could imagine the opposite choice in the style of Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*—if you know you won't die, why not eat cream puffs? Somewhat less trivially, most of us accept the dangers of driving in cars, shaking hands and visiting public spaces (germs!), and more—having children, falling deeply in love. We recognize that to forgo that which might potentially shorten or complicate our lives is precisely to remove that which makes life worth living.

The real question, and the preoccupying theme in both novels, is whether a longer life is necessarily a better life. It is not, of course. Love is a risk, and love opens us to pain, because death is inevitable. But, as Rachel learns, it's not as if the details that fill her endless days are "concealing something large and still and sacred." Rather, she seems to conclude something like what Marilynne Robinson describes in *The Death of Adam*: "With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us." Here, now, and meant to be treasured. Perhaps this is where hope lives: in

learning to live within the limits we have been given.