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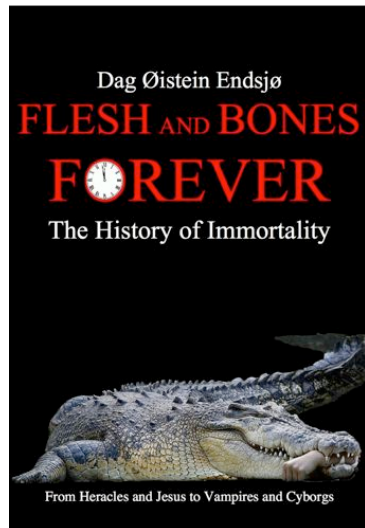
Dag Øistein Endsjø

FLESH AND BONES FOREVER

The History of Immortality



From Heracles and Jesus to Vampires and Cyborgs



Dag Øistein Endsjø
FLESH AND BONES
FOREVER

The History of Immortality
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Vampires and Cyborgs

Cappelen Damm

‘Who wants to live forever?’ With this immortal lyric from the 1980s as soundtrack, this book goes in search of eternal life, retraces ancient beliefs, and examines how this conviction has shaped our world. The dream of immortality is perhaps as old as humanity itself. One of the few things we all have in common is the knowledge that we shall die. The alternative appears as simple as it is unachievable. Is it possible to stop our bodies from changing and to preserve them forever? What would happen if time lost its power over us? Time and again this has happened, according to both ancient and current beliefs. But then, what distinguishes the physical immortality of Mesopotamian Utnapishtim and Greek Heracles from that of the resurrected Jesus, or for that matter from medieval undead, contemporary vampires, or the eternal life promised all Christians with the second coming of Jesus.

Flesh and Bones Forever does not provide the singular recipe for eternal life but several, as they are found in the widespread conviction that life really can go on forever. It is a story yet to be told.

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The belief about physical immortality goes all the way back to how our most ancient tales telling of certain men and women being made physically immortal by various gods. It is about divinities with bodies of flesh and bones, men and animals cut up and resurrected from cauldrons, children made immortal by fire, and the quest for miraculous drugs. It is also about how the breakthrough of Christianity is inextricably tied to the promise that all may achieve eternal life with both body and soul. The convoluted story includes almost invulnerable saints, incorruptible corpses, revenants, cyborgs, people condemned to wander forever, and how nothing but immortality really is the limit of modern medicine, as seen in its endless pursuit in pharmaceuticals, surgery, and, more recently, genetics.

The book is originally published in Norwegian by Cappelen Damm under the title *Udødelighetens historie*, and may be translated with grants from NORLA – Norwegian Literature Abroad. So far the book has been published also in Latvian, *Nemirstības vesture*, by Un Citi.



Dag Øistein Endsjø is Professor in the Study of Religion at the University of Oslo, Norway. He works on a variety of topics connected to religion, is an acknowledged voice in public debate, and his books have been published in twelve languages.

Dag Øistein Endsjø **Flesh & Bones** **Forever** **Chapters**



Chapter 1 – In the beginning were the immortals

In the beginning were the immortals. In the beginning were the gods. For originally Ishtar, Osiris, Zeus, and Odin, all had the most perfect physical bodies with both flesh and bones. Their immunity from age, death and decay was simply the main way they differed from mere mortals.

These beliefs transcended the notion of divine spirituality also by how the gods at times even let humans experience their physical bodies through both blunt violence and sex. It was only later that the gods became more immaterial figures. Even the Biblical God, who had created us in his image, seems originally to have had a physical nature as he walked through the Garden of Eden, shared meals with Abraham, and wrestled with Jacob.

According to some traditions, humans, too, had originally been physically immortal. Certain Greek and Egyptian myths told of a primordial era when humans shared the existence of the gods. The Mesopotamians held that our oldest ancestors were close to immortal, living for tens of thousands of years. Early Christians were convinced that humans were created to live forever, only succumbing to mortality through the Fall.

This emphasis on divine and original human immortality also meant a belief in the flesh, in immortal flesh, and in the possibility of eternal life. And as such it represented a seed of hope for us to somehow, sometime, attain this.

Chapter 2 – Immortalization and resurrection B.C.

Almost as long as we can go back in time, the gods made certain men and women physically immortal. When people in antiquity first learnt about how Jesus was said to have resurrected to eternal life, this was nothing new.



The Mesopotamian gods made Ziusudra-Utnapishtim and his wife live forever after surviving the world-encompassing flood. Up through the centuries several men and women were made physically immortal while being brought to the most distant areas of the world, according to the ancient Greeks. Just that someone disappeared inexplicitly could be an indication that he or she had been translated by some deity and given eternal life. A few, like Asclepius, Achilles, and the seventh century sage Aristaeas of Proconnesus, achieved immortality as they were resurrected from the dead.

In spite of the repeated insistence of various philosophers that only the soul mattered, most Greeks seem to have considered eternal life with flesh and bones the best fate imaginable. At the same time this ultimate existence reflected a futile hope for almost everybody, as the moment one's body was destroyed not even the gods were able to mend it and, thus, any possibility of physical immortality was gone forever.

Chapter 3 – Do it yourself. Recipes for immortality

If the fickle gods could make people live forever, if immortality really was possible, why not just try to achieve it ourselves? Already thousands of years ago Gilgamesh asked himself this fundamental question, as he set out for the end of the world in search for immortality. Almost succeeding in his quest, he found a miraculous plant at the bottom of the ocean that offered both rejuvenation and eternal life. But then he lost it just before he got to eat it.

Indeed, according to various traditions there is a number of victuals that could make you immortal, but like the plant of Gilgamesh they are all almost impossible to get hold of. The hope of eating or drinking one's way to immortality nevertheless endured for millennia, and, along with it, the conviction that there dwelled among us certain secretive humans that had already gained eternal life exactly this way.



But there were other ways beside a wondrous diet. Ancient myths told about how fire could render one immortal, although with considerable risk as these renditions about this involve numerous infants killed by the flames in the attempt. If one was unable to secure immortality once and for all, one could hope for the less drastic alternative of rejuvenation, a procedure that subsequently could be repeated

forever. There were the perennial tales found from Siberia to the British Isles about how both humans and animals were brought back to life in the most pristine state, after having been cut up and their bones reassembled. And there were the adamant rumors that somewhere, in the most distant periphery, there was a fountain of youth, the miraculous spring of water that would change one's very nature.

Chapter 4 – Flesh and bones. Jesus and the rest of us

Contemporary sources show that the Greeks had little problem accepting the resurrection of Jesus. Although certainly miraculous, such an act of immortalization through divine means was all too familiar, in complete accordance with the ancient pattern which they had held to be true at least since the time of Homer. Even the way the resurrected Jesus would forever keep his stigmata and wound in his side was in line with how the Greeks held that not even the gods could recreate the flesh if it in some way had been annihilated. For the same reason, the Christian promise of the *general* resurrection of the dead was deemed impossible. How could bodies long time gone in any way be restored?



However, by insisting that human flesh never truly disappeared but merely dissolved, early Christians managed to convince many Greeks that it really was possible for God to recreate the body of anyone who had ever lived, through reassembling all these minute pieces that once had constituted the body. Even if you were devoured by beasts or cannibals, Christians insisted, it could not keep God from resurrecting you, as human flesh allegedly was of such an immutable nature that it could not be absorbed into any other body.

Promising eternal life with both body and soul, and even proving how it was possible according to contemporary science, Christianity fulfilled that most intense desire of the Greeks, which their own gods had always denied almost all of them. As such, the Christian belief in the general resurrection may have been one of the main reasons why the Greeks turned to this new creed.

The numerous depictions found in churches and monasteries, of beasts, birds and fish regurgitating human body parts for God to reassemble at the Last Judgment, reflect how the idea of the immutability of the flesh remained intimately tied to the Christians resurrection beliefs.

Chapter 5 – Near-immortality-experiences

Several of the most pious saints were apparently almost impervious to death. Burnt, stabbed or boiled, their bodies took no harm from any of this before their persecutors in the end, nevertheless, managed to kill them. Some even survived decapitation, at least for some time, walking around with their heads in their hands still preaching the Christian gospel.

These nearly invulnerable saints mirrored those perfect bodies all true believers were promised after the resurrection. Although immortality was a thing of the future in the Christian universe, the world was still full of holy portents indicating how it was possible for God to make us immortal at the end of time. This was also seen in the many incorruptible corpses of holy men and women, which remained more or less intact for centuries.



Healings, the miraculous restoration of the body from even the most dreadful ailments, also demonstrated God's wondrous abilities and his

desire to foreshadow those perfect bodies all could achieve in the end.

As another reminder, various figures eluded death by sleeping through the centuries. Arthur, Charlemagne, Frederick Barbarossa and Ogier the Dane were all said to have withdrawn to certain inaccessible sites, ready to return the moment they were needed. The borders between life and death were never absolute.

Chapter 6 – Unwanted immortality

That Christianity promised all true believers immortality only in some distant future, did not stop many from returning from the dead long before this. Revenants, vampires, and other undead kept on coming back. But these early returns made few if anyone happy.

As these figures so definitely re-appeared contrary to the proper divine timetable, their very existence were generally considered highly undesirable, if not outright demonic. Their immortality was normally also blatantly imperfect. Often partly decayed, semi-conscious, and not quite independent of their graves where they slept through the days, these returned ones gave little to rejoice about. Their ability to make other people just like them only made people more terrified of them. Who wanted to be what was essentially a living corpse forever?



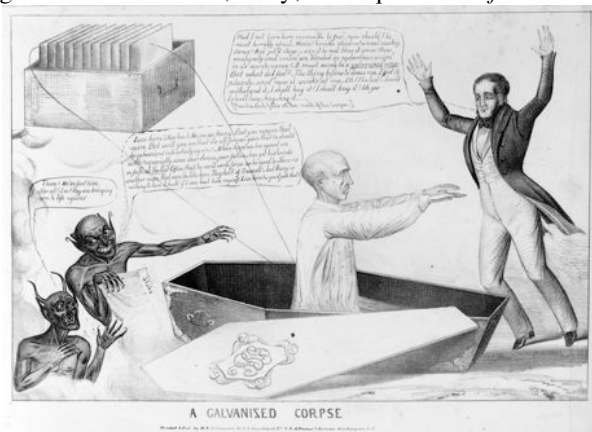
As these undead entered literature and the silver screen, the ultimate terror for becoming one of them was the secret of their success.

Forever ostracized, and in a miserable state, eternal life itself could absolutely be a burden. Some were also condemned to wander forever, eternally seeking the quietude of death, like the Eternal Jew and the captain of the Flying Dutchman.

But as the Christian imperative on the horror of this damned existence faded, the question became instead: Why not? What is there to fear if this means never aging and often achieving superhuman powers and an irresistible erotic appeal as well? As the most fundamental premises changed, people also became more prone to embrace these previously dreaded immortals, like in popular narratives as *True Blood*, *Twilight* and *iZombie*.

Chapter 7 – DIY 2.0

As the conviction that we shall be made immortal by some miraculous intervention has faded, that other ancient hope has been reignited, that this is something we can do ourselves. But although humanity has beaten off death in so many areas through medicine and science, it is never more than a question of only postponing the inevitable. Immortality through scientific means is, today, still a question of *faith*.



Cryonists, those who have themselves frozen down immediately after death, are perhaps the most optimistic believers in the future possibility of immortality by scientific means, as they expect not only to be

resurrected from the dead, but to have whatever ailment that killed them in the first place healed before they are made immortal.

The immense progress that has already been made in such fields as genetics, medicine, and nutrition, indicates that eternal life really may be within our grasp. As has been suggested, perhaps the first human who will live forever is already born. For even according to nature, death is not inevitable. Immortal animals are even now out there, and have been so for millions of years, like the jellyfish *turritopsis dohrnii*, the cnidarian hydra, and the planarian flatworm.

Chapter 8 – How to live forever

The earliest depictions of eternal life promised eternal leisure and inaction. If this, perhaps, seems distant from the ultimate existence

today, it would have been different in a world where every day equaled great toil just to survive. The peripheral lands, where many of those immortalized by the Greek gods ended, offered forever games, sex and the absence of sorrow as well, in a beautiful landscape with eternal spring and an always pleasant breeze. The never-ending life promised by Christianity was an existence of bliss and immediate proximity to God.

Immortality, however, could also be a curse. Some unfortunate Greeks ended up being tortured by malignant gods for eternity, while Christianity assured that endless pain and misery in a place where worms



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never die and fire is never quenched was the inevitable fate of all those who did not accept the gospel of Jesus.

Even if we become immortal by our own effort, our existence would be fundamentally different. It would be either a world where only the most affluent would be able to live forever, or where there would be us and just us forever. The earth's limited resources simply make it impossible for us to have children if we were all to have eternal life.



Another question would, of course, be what shall we do with all this time, when so many of us do not know what to do with ourselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon. Already Odysseus turned down the offer to become physically immortal far away from his home. He did not want an eternity. He wanted his own finite existence, to become old together with his loyal wife, and to see his son grow up.

If we really are to face the option to become immortal, maybe we, too, will choose just this one existence, live it fully, only to return to the cycle of all living things where we all come from.

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