

The Immortal Man



By Steven Yates

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Book Review, *Borrowed Time*, by John Nolte (Bombardier Books, 2023). Pp. 389.

What if you were literally immortal, not knowing how, or why?

What if you had no idea of your actual age or birthday, because you were born before anybody kept records, and you didn't age.

You could be killed or die in an accident or even end your own life, but you'd always return ... to the same place, under a Joshua Tree in what is now the American Southwest, a desert, your body reconstituted as it was before.

That's Joshua Mason's existence, in this phenomenal *novel noir*.

Joshua Mason isn't his original name, of course. It's a name he made up, or maybe found somewhere. He has no idea of his original name, if he even had one.

He's thousands of years old, though he looks – always – like a late fortysomething.

He's the central character in *Borrowed Time*, out last year from John Nolte, a name you'll recognize if you read Breitbart.com where he writes a regular column.

Borrowed Time is not a partisan screed. Politics plays a role

in the backdrop, in the form of acute observations from someone who's been around the block a few times, and then some. This book is a thoughtful and often poignant meditation on the human condition. To carry the storyline forward (occasionally backward), Nolte brings Mason into contact with a variety of characters, many of them broken by life. They range from decent folks who mean well to cutthroat opportunists to amoral, bloodthirsty killers.

Nolte's narrative also ranges across multiple ethnicities, for anyone who cares about that sort of thing.

What would you say about a man who doesn't get older?

Well, in any stable community, this odd fact about him might someday attract attention. So, such a man can't stay in one place for long.

He also risks heartbreaking loss should he fall in love. He's cursed to watch any partner grow old and die...

Joshua Mason let it happen, and this forms one of the central threads of the book: his relationship with Doreen Medina, whose husband had left her and their daughter Maya when the girl was a child. Doreen then lost her daughter, grown and with a child of her own, to a tragic auto accident that also claimed the life of her ne'er-do-well son-in-law, Tate Breslin. Her grandson, Charlie Breslin, then seven, survived the accident, but was brain-damaged and can't mature past that age.

Charlie remains a 7-year-old in a grown man's body. His damaged brain has left him with an embarrassing stutter. He's clueless with women.

His curse is that he knows something is wrong with him, and that no one he knows of can fix it.

Mason has come to care deeply what happens to Charlie. Mason

himself is a flawed character. As the saying goes, love is blind! So, he fails to see things he *needs* to see.

How does such a man earn his living? On the surface, he and Doreen managed a hotel and were doing reasonably well until a highway going in nearby relegated their location to the back roads. Now they're struggling. Their Rebel Yell Motel has become a haven for drug dealers, bikers, other lowlifes and outcasts.

Mason makes his real money selling his life on the dark web for \$50K a pop ... to psychos who get their kicks from offing someone in hideous ways. As the story progresses, he works through a degenerate named Ernest, who works for a political class nihilist whom he calls the Old Rich Pr*ck. Mason surprises him by having the money wired to an offshore bank account, and then having the offshore bank send it elsewhere, making it as difficult as possible to trace.

Mason has a broader problem: how does a guy like him survive in what he calls the *All at Once*: the novel's name for encircling modernity, which to a guy who has lived as long as he has seems to have come *all at once*: a world in which you can't do anything legally without ID.

Mason's IDs are all fakes: birth certificate, social security card, drivers licenses. His bank accounts also used fake names.

He had a system whereby he could create fake identities, but the *All at Once* has made it impossible to use. Its systems of surveillance have gotten better and more intrusive, after all, with facial recognition technology (for example).

So the *All at Once* is closing in on him little by little, threatening his worst nightmare: exposure.

What would happen? He's figured it out: the *All at Once*'s well-paid technocrats would put him through endless

interrogations and physical examinations, then finally take him apart trying to figure out what makes him tick. Why? Because the powerful want immortality for themselves. Here we get to some of this novel's more interesting messages.

Joshua Mason has had time to assess how civilizations work – outside the antiseptic cleansings of theoreticians and ideologues and “isms.” I quoted a little of it at the start of a [previous article](#):

Mason didn't believe in God, religion, politics, or country. Instead, he broke the world into two groups: *Those Who Wish to Be Left Alone* and *Those Who Push People Around*.

He was a lifetime member of the former. He'd seen it too many times.... How *Those Who Push People Around* brought only misery and ultimately war to *Those Who Wish to Be Left Alone*. He'd seen it happen within families and tribes, in cities, and across continents. So he knew the warning signs.... As *Those Who Push People Around* started to grow in numbers and a self-righteous certainty about how the other fella should live, speak, worship, and think, oppression and violence soon followed.

Everyone talked about wanting world peace. But no one was willing to do what was necessary to achieve it, which was simply this: *Mind your own gd****d business*. How difficult was that? Well, if you read a history book, you'll see it's impossible.**

Human nature being human nature, one tribe's always gotta bully the other. One group's always certain its ideas are superior and won't tolerate others doing anything different. (p. 240).

That's truly radical! It goes beyond anyone's – all of our – “isms.”

How much ideology – of whatever sort – amounts to the

ideologue's rationalization for his (sometimes its *her*) lust for power?

Nolte gives us a concrete example in another of his characters, a power-hungry weakling broken by his having lost a debate when he was in high school and ending up on meds:

If Jerome were king – and he thought a lot about being king – everyone would live the way he lived. To him, this was a moral imperative. People with large homes, gas-guzzling SUVs, campers, and big yards – people who indulged in all that selfish largess eating up the world's resources, they disgusted him. How could a great country survive if everyone was allowed to live any way they pleased? (p. 228)

Mason speaks of “cream scrapers” such as the guy just referenced, an ambitious FBI agent:

If there was one thing Mason couldn't get over about this society, it was how the All at Once made it possible for the most useless people in the world to scrape off all the cream. He knew that if you build yourself a pile of everyone you see on your TV, they wouldn't add up to the worth of a single plumber, farmer, or coal miner. But if you swept the table clear of those TV people, the world would keep turning just fine, maybe better. (p. 104)

The “TV people” – political classes, most corporate media, a lot of those whose “skill” is moving money around all day – don't really *contribute* anything. They only *take*. At some level, they know this and deeply resent the fact. Burning resentment twists them mentally and psychologically.

Nolte illustrates this by outlining in detail the differences between the Old Rich Pr*ck and the man's father. The latter earned a fortune producing: making something that benefited others. The Old Rich Pr*ck inherited it, began to squander it, producing nothing, and then – what else? – turned to the reins of power and to depravity and cleverly blackmailing members of

the political class.

The Old Rich Pr*ck (who is no match for Joshua Mason) comes to a bad end, realizing with utter despair in his last moments, that despite his inherited fortune his life has been worthless.

Because – let’s face it – we were put here to solve problems. For others, and for ourselves. Some rise to the occasion and reap the rewards; others don’t. The latter quickly succumb to the temptations of Those Who Push People Around.

Thanks to actual problem solvers, modernity – the All at Once – has provided a “bounty” only likely to be fully appreciated by someone who lived before it and saw a world of short life spans, chronic hunger, arduous manual labor, diseases long since cured, and an utter lack of the kinds of creature comforts we take for granted (air conditioning, refrigeration, designer clothing, credit cards, the Internet, other things not available even to royalty in centuries past).

Modernity’s dark side is that it has concentrated power, leaving the many largely at the mercy of the few unless they wise up. It isn’t just power that corrupts; utter powerlessness corrupts as well, as it turns the chronically weak to crime and drugs, the ambitious to depravity of various sorts up to and including killing for sport.

Mason imagines what Those Who Push People Around would say when he refused to help them:

You sound selfish and greedy, sir. Like you’re full of hate, sir. Like a national security threat, sir. (p. 104)

That fake politeness – the “sirs” – of those who wield power runs like a refrain through this book.

Power lives in a bubble, after all. Those Who Push People Around have no grasp of the mindset of Those Who Wish To Be

Left Alone, and vice versa. That always spells trouble, but would really spell trouble if the former exposed him.

Most of us fear, or at least are uneasy with, the idea of death. In his *The Denial of Death* (1973), anthropologist Ernest Becker contended that *most* human belief and action reflects the deep-seated desire to avoid the thought of death's inevitability. Cultures try to transcend the thought of death through religions, other symbolic systems including those of nationality, and through heroism – the “hero's journey” (Joseph Campbell). Ours or that of others.

Stoic philosophers counseled awareness of our mortality. *Memento mori*, they said: “Remember you must die.” The reminder that our days are numbered might help us use them more wisely.

Scripture tells us, “It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Some, though, fantasize about living forever. Would this be a good thing? Or would it turn the planet into Hell – literally?!

Mason addresses such people directly, whichever of the two groups they fall into. Nolte italicizes the whole passage ... surely to draw attention to the fact that it reflects a core idea:

Anyone eager to wrap their minds around a scenario that only ever ends in a horror show, need only picture a world where no one dies. Forget over-population, focus on human nature.

Let's start with the one thing no one ever thinks of. Not everyone's rich, you know. Most aren't. And for those who aren't, if you take an honest look over their personal horizon in a world where no one dies, there's no retirement, no pension, no social security, no rest. Living forever sentences you to grinding out a living forever. Believe me, I know.

You want to spend eternity in a cubicle pushing papers? You want to dig ditches, cut grass, change oil, wait tables, enter data, deliver mail, sell cars, drive a bus, write code, work in a factory, wash dishes, cut hair, fight fires, groom dogs, mop floors, write briefs, clean teeth, patrol streets, sell homes, stock shelves, make beds, flip burgers, and stand behind a cash register forever?

*How about a planet full of a**holes? Is that what you want, a world buried in thoughtless, judgmental, unforgiving, forever-young narcissists never compelled to wise up by the coming of the abyss?*

Don't you understand, it's the cold truth of dying that forces a man to face the fact that there's no endless supply of tomorrows. It's death's unrelenting approach that says you need to become a better man, a better husband and father – now, right now, before it's too late. Now is the time to forgive, to beg forgiveness, to say "I love you," and take hold of what matters.

Don't you get it? It's the harrowing knowledge of our limited time that separates us from animals. You want to live in a world without that? Trust me, you don't. (pp. 104-05)

Mason can pass his immortality on to another if he chooses. Only his love for Doreen tempts him. As a Christian, she turns it down. Then she is gone. And courtesy of the All at Once's encirclements which now include the war on cash which is all he has, he's faced with not even being able to put gas in his vehicle.

He's built a safehouse he can go to, well concealed, in the desert, not far from his Joshua Tree. He's stocked it with nonperishables and supplies. It is interesting that he thinks that if things get bad enough, he can flee there to wait out the All at Once. As a man accustomed to psychological isolation, the thought of physical isolation didn't bother

him. Until Doreen, anyway. And Charlie.

Charlie...

After Doreen dies, the one person Mason cares about is Charlie. And Charlie is shot in the stomach by Ernest (remember him?) who is trying to kill all those who might get wind of his employer's perverse actions. Ernest nevertheless comes to a bloody end at the hands of an enraged Charlie who then falls unconscious from the gunshot wound, and later is severely burned in a fire. He's not expected to live.

Mason then makes a mistake, and the mistake has ghastly consequences for all concerned. To put it mildly.

But no more spoilers here. I want you, gentle reader, to buy this book and read it. Read it twice. At least.

Borrowed Time is not horror, nor is it science fiction, although at times it pulls in elements from each. It's more a kind of romance, though not in Judith Krantz's sense, obviously.

I should warn you: it's full of expletives. The characters including Mason don't hold back.

Any number of scenes are graphically violent, moreover.

But Nolte can write! Holy smoke, can he write (he's *better* than yours truly)! His characters (minor as well as major) are vividly brought to life on the page, with clear pasts that inflicted damage, and we both see and feel their psychic pain. Various scenes, delivered staccato-fashion, play out like a movie in your mind as we see follow the consequences of the short-term thinking, cultural depravity, and diminishing of personal freedoms Nolte wants to portray. He's amazingly adept at integrating his points into the make-up of his characters and into the storyline. His ability to "show, not tell," the biggest challenge any serious fiction writer faces, leaves

most contemporary fiction in the dust.

This *ought* to have been the novel of the year, its author lionized in mass media. But Nolte writes for Breitbart.com. You know, that “far right” Trump-supporting news and commentary outlet?

Thus: no exposure by the “TV people.” No reviews in their elite, glossy, and well-financed periodicals.

In a culture as shallow as it is depraved, a book of this depth isn’t likely to be noticed.

Nolte doesn’t mention Trump or any other current political figures. It’s as if, in the larger scheme of things, politics doesn’t matter.

What matters is how we treat one another with the time we have, and recognizing that actions (and inactions) have consequences.

Although he’s no Luddite (see p. 190), Nolte *does* depict the All at Once – secular modernity – ending badly.

Then, Joshua Mason lives on.... And on, and on....

Borrowed Time has an ending that has to be read to be believed! Frankly, I didn’t want this book to end! I wanted to see what happened next! Because clearly, something *does* happen next. Maybe Nolte will write a sequel, although having been all but ignored, these days I can’t blame him if he’s thinking *the hell with it*.

I give this book my highest possible recommendation. If you read only one novel this year, it should be *Borrowed Time*, by John Nolte.

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Steven Yates is a (recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored three books, more than 20 articles, numerous book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself.

In 2012 he moved to Chile. He married a Chilean national in 2014. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

As to whether he'll stay in Chile ... stay tuned!

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate [here](#) and become a Patron if you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained [here](#) or [here](#).

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten [here](#).

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