

HISTORY

The white-power boffins of air and lab

THE IMMORTALISTS

Charles Lindbergh, Dr. Alexis Carrel, and Their Daring Quest to Live Forever

By David M. Friedman
Ecco, 338 pages, \$33.95

REVIEWED BY SPIDER ROBINSON

Perhaps I can convey something of the power of New York writer David M. Friedman's second book by reporting that I finished it days ago, and am so busy thinking about it that I still have not taken the time to Google up his first book, *A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis*.

As a sixties survivor entering his sixties, and a collector of good stories, I'd have thought by now I'd at least heard of most of the great stories of the century recently ended. Especially ones about famous people, and particularly aviators, the first astronauts. But this one got past me until now, and it's a really great story, a perfect choice for Stephen Spielberg the next time he feels like making a film as powerful and important as *Schindler's List* or *Amistad*.

The Immortalists is a sweeping epic of famous people, historic events, controversial decisions and disastrous consequences, filled with triumph and tragedy, heart-break and horror, massive hubris and staggering humility, aching regret and agonizing redemption. It is the moving tale of two hugely famous, deeply flawed friends who fought side by side to conquer death itself, for all the wrong reasons, and of how one learned better and the other did not. It's non-fiction that reads like a good novel spare with dialogue, and its unexpected, unforgettable climax took my breath away.

Everyone knows Charles Lindbergh was the first to fly across the Atlantic solo, and that later his infant son was kidnapped and died. I also knew he designed and built



Pilot and medical inventor Charles Lindbergh and his partner, Dr. Alexis Carrel, share the cover of *Time* magazine in 1938. TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

the Spirit of St. Louis himself. But until now, I had not fully grasped that he was the first Beatle: the first totally famous human being, who literally could not go anywhere on the planet without being recognized. I did not know he designed and built complex high-tech medical equipment, and was in fact one of the key players who made organ transplants and artificial hearts possible with his ingenious perfusion pump.

I also did not know he argued so strongly in support of Hitler's Germany and against entering the war in Europe, and that after Pearl Harbor he was not permitted to fly combat missions against Japan because Roosevelt doubted his loyalty. I had no idea that for

most of his life, the Lone Eagle was a racist eugenicist, of the hard-core white-supremacist persuasion – that his purpose in pursuing immortality was to prevent the otherwise inevitable destruction of the strong white people by the weak but unfairly more virile brown, yellow, red and Jewish people. Learning that for the first time at this late date is enough to give me an even deeper appreciation for James Thurber's classic fictional story about Lindbergh, *The Greatest Man in the World*.

Until now, I'd never heard of Dr. Alexis Carrel, a truly great surgeon and a brilliant, paradigm-shifting medical researcher who might have been as famous as Lindbergh if the world were as fascinated

by saving and extending lives as it is by eating ham sandwiches and peeing in a bottle for two days. Well, and if Dr. Carrel hadn't gone bald so young, or been quite so arrogant and tactless. The man invented the technique still used to suture arteries. He could do it one-handed, in the dark. He was the first to keep bits of a chicken alive in culture many times longer than the chicken they came from. He won the Nobel Prize in 1912, and worked in an institution created by the richest man in the world, John D. Rockefeller. He pioneered whole-organ perfusion, making transplants feasible, with the crucial help of Lindbergh.

Neither man could quite believe the other was willing to hang out with him. They ended up making the cover of *Time* together. Unfortunately, the great flier and the great doctor helped persuade one another they were also qualified to be great philosophers, an error that would come to haunt them both, ultimately causing each to be falsely accused of collaborating with the Nazis. They were about as different as two men can be, but they both burned with the same urgent dream and worked hard to make it come true. Though their friendship was finally broken by the war, each immortalist respected the other to his dying day.

I disagree strongly with Friedman's belief that technological approaches to life extension are futile at best and inherently Frankensteinian at worst; I must, for I'd have been decades dead by now without them. Nonetheless, I'm grateful to him for telling me this remarkable story, uncommonly well. And I am more eager than ever now to learn his views on the penis. Or whatever else he thinks might interest me.

» B.C. writer and podcaster Spider Robinson's 33rd book, *Variable Star*, a posthumous collaboration with Robert A. Heinlein, will be published in December.



Lindbergh, left, with Carrel, centre, and an unidentified man, in 1936: Neither man was willing to hang out with him. TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES