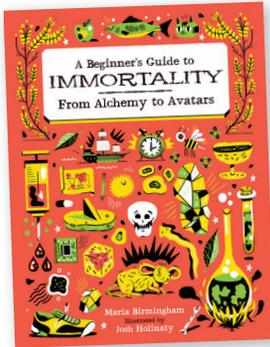


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A Beginner's Guide to Immortality: From Alchemy to Avatars A Conversation Between Author Maria Birmingham and Illustrator Josh Holinaty



ISBN 978-1-77147-045-2
HC \$17.95 CDN/ \$16.95 US

A Beginner's Guide to Immortality: From Alchemy to Avatars

By Maria Birmingham
Illustrated by Josh Holinaty

Grades

6+

Reading levels

Fountas & Pinnell: Y
Lexile © Measure: 1100L

Curriculum links

Language Arts: reading comprehension; understanding informational text
Science & technology: life science; human body; cells
Social studies: Cultures and societies; technology; history; foundational ideas and philosophies; individual contributions (scientific); understanding different viewpoints

“A visually striking, thought-provoking look at a topic that will encourage further investigation.”

— SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

About the book

Is it possible to live forever? This book takes readers on a fast-paced tour of various wacky and wise methods humans have used to try prolonging their lives, from ancient immortality elixirs and quests for a fountain of youth to modern-day research into cryogenics and robotics. Each page is a mix of fascinating facts that open up cross-curricular topics in history, science, and social studies for exploration.



Maria Birmingham



Josh Holinaty

Beyond the book

When a book is written and illustrated by two different people, sometimes they don't meet in person before their book is published. Editorial and design staff at Owlkids Books work together to find an artist whose style complements the text of a book.

In the summer of 2015, author Maria Birmingham and illustrator Josh Holinaty wrote back and forth in anticipation of their book's release. They reflected on the process of creating the book, how they work, and their own thoughts on living forever.

Here is their conversation.



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▲ Some of Josh's rough sketches for the book

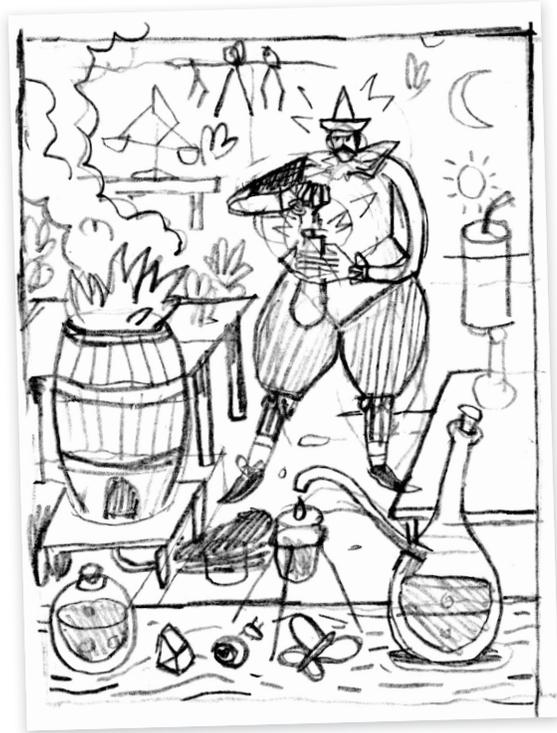


MARIA: I was going through my bookshelf the other day and realized that we actually worked together on another book before this one. Well, in a roundabout way. I was one of two editors for the book *You Just Can't Help It!* (Owlkids Books), which you illustrated. Great job, by the way! I worked with the author, Jeff Szpirglas, in the book's preliminary stages, so you and I were never in direct contact. But fast-forward to today and here we are creating another book together—only this time as an author and illustrator. Small world!

As I was writing this book, I wondered how an illustrator would handle the subject and the wide variety of information. When I first saw your rough art, I loved it. I thought it was a perfect fit for the text. Your illustration style is so distinctive. How did you develop it?

JOSH: Small world indeed! I had no idea you were one of the editors for *You Just Can't Help It!* That was a really fun project for me as it was my first time contributing illustrations to a full-on, 100% real book. I thought it was so cool and my mom was so proud!

I'm really glad you like how the illustrations turned out for *A Beginner's Guide to Immortality: From Alchemy to Avatars*. Now, how



did I develop my style? That's always been a tough question to answer, because I feel that my work has always been stylistically all over the place. Usually it's the result of whatever I happen to be interested in at the time — paint, collage, pixels, and so on. In short though, I think it's all about being sincere and following that inner voice in your head, as it can be really easy to emulate what's popular or in style.

I'm attracted to illustrations that seem crudely executed—they just have a carefree, fun and welcoming spirit to them. After reading your manuscript, I felt it was important to make sure that the illustrations were fun and lively—not too serious—as we're dealing with a rather dark subject that our culture really doesn't talk about much: death.

Which brings me to ask: what compelled you to write a book for kids about our quest to prevent the unavoidable?

MARIA: The idea originally came up during a meeting with Karen Li, editorial director for Owlkids Books. I went away and did some preliminary research to see if there was enough there for a book. I wasn't sure what I'd find aside from maybe elixirs, the fountain of youth, and cryogenics. But when I started reading articles about mind uploading, I knew there was a book to be written! Honestly, I'm still amazed that there are people dedicated to finding a way to upload the content of our brains onto a computer chip.

When it came time to write, I tried to keep it as lighthearted as possible. As you said, death is often a taboo topic. I wanted to make sure it was an interesting read for kids, but that it didn't leave them worrying about their own mortality. I often kept my two kids in mind while I was writing, as a gauge. Hopefully, kids will find the book intriguing and it'll make them think about the possibilities. I found some topics were really tricky to write for young readers. Was there a particular topic that was more challenging than the others to illustrate?

JOSH: I'd say the toughest subjects to tackle were in the section about the afterlife, and how different religions perceive it. Some ideas of the afterlife have developed sort of stereotypical imagery associated with them, such as a cloudy heaven for Christianity. Other religions deal with the afterlife in more abstract ways, be it reincarnation or the many interpretations of an eternal paradise. What do they look like!? I know how I perceive and interpret these ideas in my head, but how do I depict it to a larger population (e.g., the readers) and still have it make sense, while not excluding anyone? It's tough, really!





At the same time, it's pretty fun to illustrate these things that we don't see every day or don't exist yet. I mean, who doesn't want to draw a little crane dropping a brain into a robot body? Sounds fun to me.

With that said, if the technology exists in our lifetime—would you prolong your life, or your cat's, via brain transplant into a shiny new robot body?

MARIA: I've contemplated that a lot, the whole concept of living forever. And I've got to go with: no way! Of course, I hope to live a long, healthy life—making it into the three-digits would be fantastic. But the idea of having my brain implanted into a robot is just too out there. I feel like that wouldn't really be "me." And, in the end, I just don't believe we're meant to roam this planet forever. But putting my cat's brain into a shiny robot body, well, that's another story... Just kidding! Cuddling up with a robotic cat that has a brain seems a little creepy. Although it would mean less fur on everything...

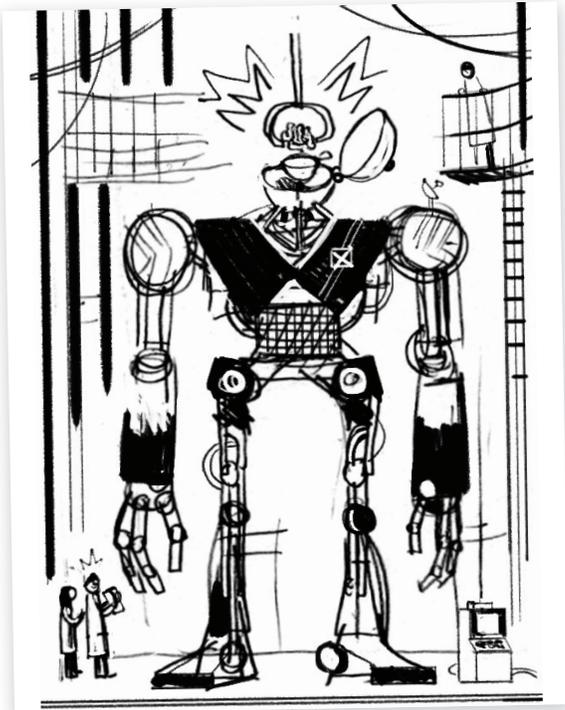
That brings me to the inevitable question: what about you? What do you think about the idea of living forever? Would you ever consider prolonging your life by uploading your brain into a robot or even a holographic body?

JOSH: I also thought about this quite a bit while working on the illustrations and I totally agree with you: living forever just isn't for me! I'm happy with who I am and feel pretty confident that I won't want a robotic body to exist beyond my means.

I think the real beauty in life lies in the fact that we don't live forever. Art, I feel, is the result of mankind's understanding that we won't live forever. When we create paintings, write stories, compose songs, or create anything, really, we are leaving something of ourselves behind that will potentially exist for hundreds or thousands of years. In a way, artists are already immortal thanks to the many works they've left behind. I think that's pretty cool!

Many things would lose their meaning if we were immortal. Like, would birthdays even matter anymore? "Yay, I'm 12,587 years old. Yawn."

Out of all of the ideas and attempts for immortality that you wrote about in our book, which one was your favorite, or the one you found most intriguing?



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MARIA: First off, I've got to say that was a profound answer to my question! It's an interesting take on immortality—the notion that artists live forever because of their work. I suppose one of the goals in life is to leave something of yourself behind no matter who you are—whether in your art, your work, or your relationships. It's such a cliché, but instead of thinking about living forever, we would do better to put our efforts into the here and now. That may be why I love your final illustration in the book so much (I'd like to frame it and hang it in my house!). For me, there's a quietness in it that speaks to accepting where you are at this particular point in time. I'm so glad that it's the image that ends the book.

OK, now that I've gone off on that tangent... Let me answer your question! My favorite attempt at immortality in the book is probably cryogenics. The fact that people have put their faith in the technique and have allowed themselves to be frozen solid until a later date is pretty bold. They are not going down without a fight! Were there any ideas that stood out for you?

JOSH: I really like that final illustration, too. To be honest, I was a little scared to pitch it, because I felt it might be too sad and somber, when it's really about thinking about all the possibilities and just slowing down and enjoying life. I'm so glad we ended up running with it! I'll be sure to get a copy of the illustration your way so you can frame it, too!

My favorite concepts in the book were usually found in mankind's past attempts at immortality. My personal favorite would be about the girl that consumed the flesh of the ningyo, an ugly half-human/half-fish hybrid, and went on to live to the age of 800. I just love the idea of trying to catch, and eat, a deformed, ugly mermaid. Not that I'd actually try to hunt one down or even try to eat it—it's just a wild concept and perfect fodder for illustration.

MARIA: The book is definitely packed with wild ideas! And your illustrations helped bring them to life for readers. I've enjoyed hearing your take on the topic. Hopefully, we'll work together again sometime and make it *three* books. In the meantime, I might have to hold you to your kind offer of the illustration!

JOSH: It was great chatting with you and getting a behind-the-scenes look at the ideas in our book. It was a blast working on it with you and I definitely hope to do it again, especially if there are more weirdly deformed mythological creatures to illustrate!



▲ The final illustration in *A Beginner's Guide to Immortality: From Alchemy to Avatars*

THE END