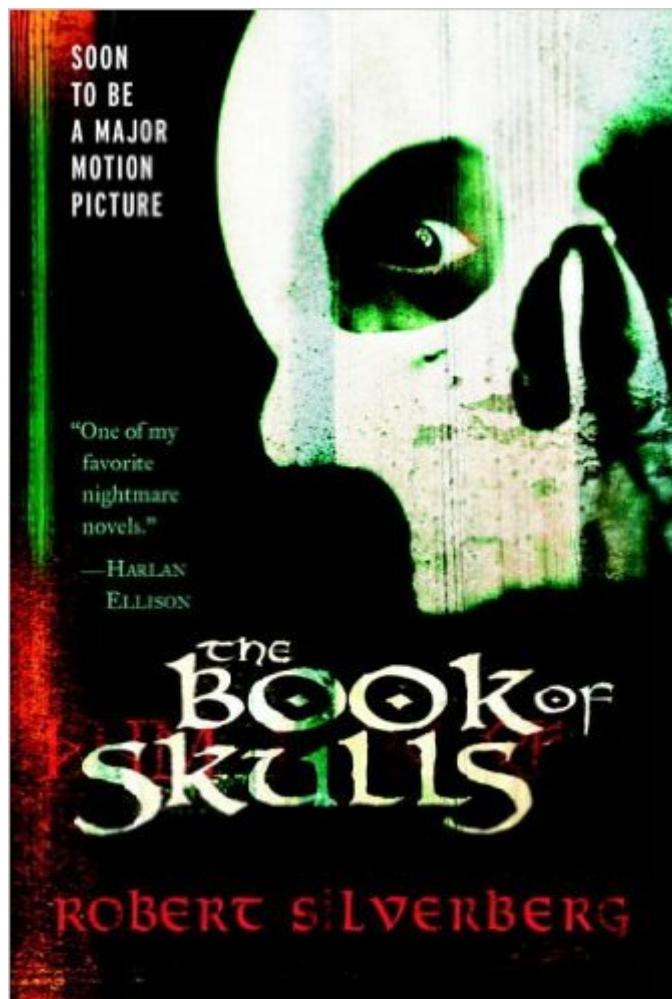


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The Book Of Skulls



Synopsis

Seeking the immortality promised in an ancient manuscript, The Book of Skulls, four friends, college roommates, go on a spring break trip to Arizona: Eli, the scholar, who found and translated the book; Timothy, scion of an American dynasty, born and bred to lead; Ned, poet and cynic; and Oliver, the brilliant farm boy obsessed with death. Somewhere in the desert lies the House of Skulls, where a mystic brotherhood guards the secret of eternal life. There, the four aspirants will present themselvesâ "and a horrific price will be demanded. For immortality requires sacrifice. Two victims to balance two survivors. One by suicide, one by murder. Now, beneath the gaze of grinning skulls, the terror begins. . . .

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (51 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

In another world this probably would have been a much bigger seller. Unfortunately the very thing that makes the book so great also works against it. This novel is the kind of intelligent, provocative SF that the genre always threaten to do but so rarely manages to make it work. However, that's also the problem. This is hardly the typical vision of "SF" with spaceships and convoluted science and aliens and rayguns. So the SF fans aren't going to be really into this. However, the publishing company probably promoted it as a SF book (Silverberg alludes to as much in the introduction) and thus the people out there looking for something sophisticated and different automatically were steered away from it because of the big "SF!" label. Gah. So what is this book about? On the surface it's about four young college men in the seventies who discover a cult in Arizona that can bestow eternal life on people, if they come in groups of four (a "Receptacle"). The only catch? Well,

only two of the people actually get eternal life. In order to finish the ritual, one person has to commit suicide and the other has to be killed by the group. All four characters know this going in. But that's not really what the book is about. In reality, it's a brilliant character study. Silverberg tries the fairly difficult trick of having all four characters take turns narrating in the first person, which is harder than you'd think (well it's hard to do really well). Silverberg manages to give each guy a subtle cadence and rhythm to his voice, so that you can honestly ignore the names and read the chapters and know exactly who is speaking. It's that good. So the book bounces from character to character, and for the most part the monologues are absolutely mindboggling, Oliver's internal rant on the unfairness of death is some of the most fiery prose I've ever seen put to paper and there are great moments scattered all throughout. It's beautiful. It's barely SF. If you interpret the cult itself as basically an extended metaphor then you can basically have a character examination on par with that of Margaret Atwood or the like. Frankly, like most of Silverberg's seventies work, it ranks as simply excellent writing in any genre and is unjustly forgotten, in my opinion. Fortunately most of those books are starting to trickle back into print (I've seen *Dying Inside*, *A Time of Changes*, and *Tower of Glass* myself), so perhaps it's only a matter of time before someone wises up and gets this book into the hands of the people who deserve to read it. That is, everyone. If you find it, don't hesitate to snap up. It's one of those rare books you never knew existed but once you read it, you'll feel like you've always had it.

I am not surprised that this book is out of print. Its message is so disturbing, and the writing so far out of kilter with the writing of that generation, it sends out clear messages that the world Silverberg is going to extraordinary pains to depict accurately is not normal. This is not a SF novel at all. There are no special effects; the story is told in the present tense, mostly, by the various members of the group. In spite of this, and their apparent good old American roots, it is clear that these roots themselves are going to lead them them, singularly, and as a group, into the abyss, and while the theme of immortality is constantly present, from the beginning it is clear that it is either irrelevant to them, and that they are simply chasing dreams of a dank and musty type, or that it is the sort of immortality which would be spent in places indistinguishable from the frontiers, if not the interior of Hell. The genius of Silverberg, and this label is thoughtfully applied - is to draw the pictures of the genesis of the characters - and their eventual actions - well before the narrative starting post. We actually hear and see more of each of them in the past than the present. The intent is show the inevitability of their journey-but it also has the odd effect, which I am sure is not accidental, of making the past and the future for these boys of far greater concern than their own shallow and

mean relationships in the present. The narrative used in the novel has the effect of making the novel skid uncomfortably across the present tense, uncomfortably fast. This is not SF in any real sense. However, It is full of allusions towards linguistics, Jewish History and Culture (a particularly rich part of the book is here), baseball culture, and even gay culture. The characters have to enter a rite of confession - ironically the whole novel is a series of damnable confessions of various types - but the apex of the novel is this specific ritual confession, which leads eventually to murder and suicide. How different this is from the cathartic prototype it might have otherwise have been! In this case, the true motive behind the long journey to Arizona is confused, not illuminated. The descent into immortality is also a descent into madness and darkness, in spite of the long, swealtery chapter at the end of the book giving some illusion of peace. You have the impression that Silverberg has met this darkness before and is giving a clear and most eloquent warning against it. Do read this if you possibly get the chance. It's a unique feat of writing which I don't think Silverberg managed to perform so well more than once.

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