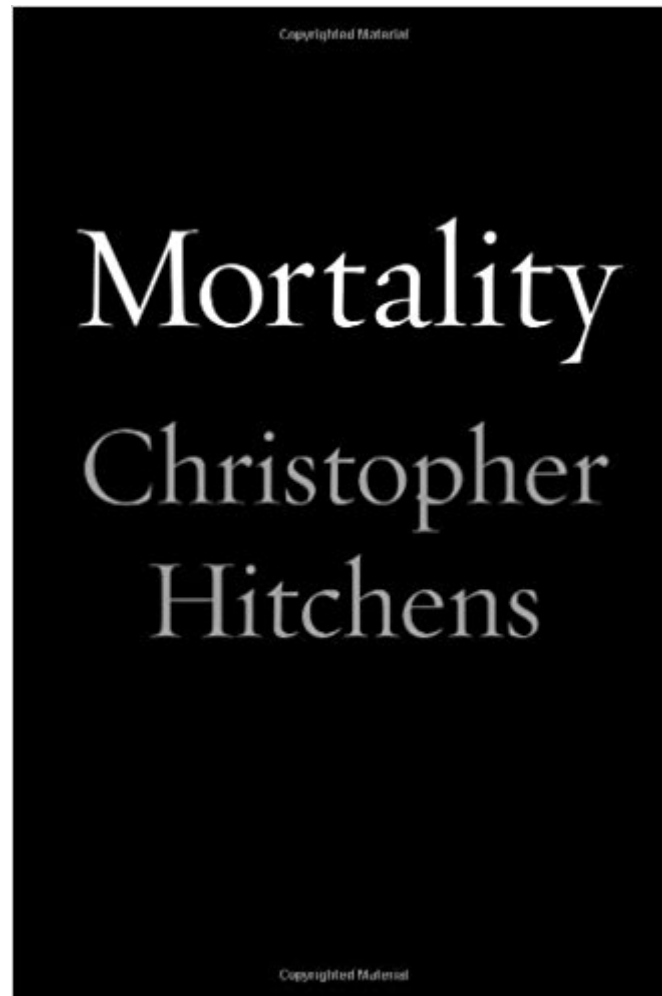




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# Mortality



## Synopsis

On June 8, 2010, while on a book tour for his bestselling memoir, *Hitch-22*, Christopher Hitchens was stricken in his New York hotel room with excruciating pain in his chest and thorax. As he would later write in the first of a series of award-winning columns for *Vanity Fair*, he suddenly found himself being deported "from the country of the well across the stark frontier that marks off the land of malady." Over the next eighteen months, until his death in Houston on December 15, 2011, he wrote constantly and brilliantly on politics and culture, astonishing readers with his capacity for superior work even in extremis. Throughout the course of his ordeal battling esophageal cancer, Hitchens adamantly and bravely refused the solace of religion, preferring to confront death with both eyes open. In this riveting account of his affliction, Hitchens poignantly describes the torments of illness, discusses its taboos, and explores how disease transforms experience and changes our relationship to the world around us. By turns personal and philosophical, Hitchens embraces the full panoply of human emotions as cancer invades his body and compels him to grapple with the enigma of death. *MORTALITY* is the exemplary story of one man's refusal to cower in the face of the unknown, as well as a searching look at the human predicament. Crisp and vivid, veined throughout with penetrating intelligence, Hitchens's testament is a courageous and lucid work of literature, an affirmation of the dignity and worth of man.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, September 2012: Curious and prolific to the end, combative writer

Christopher Hitchens leaves us with a posthumously published analysis of his dying days. Mortality

is the anti-Last Lecture: Stripping away semantics and sentimentality, Hitchens treats his cancer as he would any other topic--with dogged inquisitiveness and brutal honesty. Which makes it all the more poignant when he begins losing his voice, his "freedom of speech," and sinks deeper into his "year of living dyingly." Funny, smart, irreverent, and surprisingly moving, this lucid, unflinching end-of-life journey through "Tumorville" is brave and powerful stuff. The unfinished jottings that comprise the final pages are a heartbreaking display of a mind that never stopped till the very end. --Neal Thompson

Mortality is an odd little book, neither fully a cancer memoir nor a meditation on the meanings we attribute to the disease . . . More honestly ironic, more like the Hitchens of old, before the religion wars and the war on terror and the gonzo grandstanding. It is Mortality at its most generous and most human: just another man dying, making a joke and telling a story. •Jeff Sharlet

Christopher Hitchens never shied away from telling the truth - at least the truth as he saw it - and when he was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in June, 2010, he started "living dyingly," writing about his experiences with the illness. The stoicism with which he wrote, and the lucidity in the face of immanent death ("there is no stage 5"), go very well with the way Hitchens faced the rest of his life. Having only recently completed a memoir, Hitch 22, and on his book tour when he had symptoms which led to his diagnosis, Hitchens realized that he needed to tell the story of this cancer as he had just told the story of his life. If you're familiar with Hitchens' writings, you'll certainly recognize the trenchant approach here to becoming a resident of "tumortown." In this brief book, composed of essays he wrote for Vanity Fair, Hitchens explains what it feels like to be dying, yet doesn't feel sorry for himself or for his lifestyle that may have contributed to his cancer. (His father died of the same cancer as well, so part may be genetic.) You'll read this book in an hour or two, but you'll also want to come back to it from time to time. While the chapters are composed - these are articles, not journal entries - there is a spontaneity throughout them, as his condition worsens, and as hope seems to recede. Hitchens again shows with his words that cut like scalpels that he was one of the finest voices of his generation, and we're not likely to see another like him for a very long time.

I had the pleasure of corresponding briefly with Christopher Hitchens a few years before he died, and although I never had the pleasure of meeting him in person, I felt his death was a particularly painful loss for this world. Many of these essays are republished in slightly edited form from articles he wrote in Vanity Fair, but reading them now offered a new emotional meaning for me. In them,

while Hitchens remains politically sharp and critical of religion, there is also a deeper reflection that is not possible except when writing on the only subject that really matters: life itself. He describes what it was like being diagnosed with esophageal cancer (the same type that killed his father) that had metastasized before it was even discovered. Soon, he begins chemotherapy and in the process loses his hair, body mass, ability for physical intimacy, and strength. It is made most real in those moments he discusses losing even the ability to grow five o'clock shadow. The worst deprivation, however, is the intermittent loss of his voice. While he admits it is occasionally hard to think while a needle pumps strong poison into one's arm, he fortunately never lost his ability to write. In total, there are seven previously published essays. Besides the first one announcing the cancer's early stages, the best essay in the collection is his one on Friedrich Nietzsche. It also happens to be the last one he published before he died. After that, the book includes some final, random jottings; little bits of fleece he shed here and there that were collected into a fine coat. The last writing in the book comes from Carol Blue, his wife of many years, and she reveals a side of him that many did not get to see. I cannot say this is a book I enjoyed reading because it was born from the death of a very fine man. It is, however, the best tombstone a man of his talents could offer.

This week, I read an autobiography entitled, "MORTALITY," by one of my favorite authors, Christopher Hitchens. This biography held a bit of a strange format for me, because it was written from the point of view of a prominent atheist writer/columnist that had just been diagnosed with terminal esophageal cancer. The (admittedly short) biography that would follow was full of humility, admittance of mortality, and wry humor. Anyone who knows Hitchens work knows that he was a commanding orator, as well as a staggering (and oft times acerbic) conductor of the English language. This book bleakly depicts his swift acquiesce to the disease. Painfully, it points out his loss of speech, ability to form a collective thought, and eventual loss of ability to write altogether. He sees the irony in this: "the blasphemous atheist stricken with throat cancer," etc, etc. But what I found most compelling about this book was the very last chapter. The last chapter is filled with his notes on how the book came to be. An idea scribbled between agonizing treatments or glad-handed meetings. Seeds planted in an ailing mind. No paragraph is longer than two sentences. Having been a first hand spectator to cancer, I can attest to the 'wide eyed' energy that comes to the patient in short waves. To me, it was an easy reminder of my own humanity to read these notes, and see their cohesiveness slip as time progressed. Hitchens, who died peacefully at a hospice facility on 12/15/2011 (my 26th birthday) argued that atheism gave us a sense of urgency. Our actions do not, in fact echo in eternity; so it is always up to us to be fair minded, philanthropic, and always skeptical

citizens in a world that tries to make us anything but. Nothing is guaranteed, so do the most you can with what you have, while you can. Hitchens never apologized for the lifestyle that likely led to his cancer, nor does he blame any deity for it's heredity (his father died of the same malady.) One review called this book a "crash course in humanity." I call it a rare glimpse into a person that really dives into their fate, and unflinchingly tries to convey appreciation for the beauty of living a fully cognizant life.

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