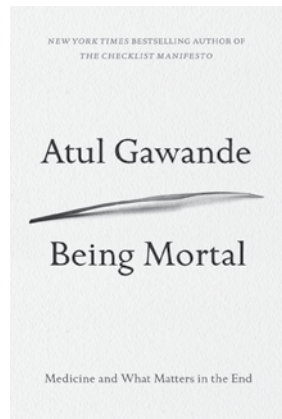


## BOOKS &amp; MOVIES

## — Books —

**Being Mortal**  
Dr. Atul Gawande

*“Being mortal is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology, with the limits set by genes and cells and flesh and bone.”*

The reader doesn't get very far into this book before being presented with a jarring scientific narrative of how our bodies finally fall apart: softening of teeth, hardening of vessels and joints, calcification of lungs, loss of bone density and muscle, thickening of the heart muscle, declining senses, shrinking brain, and so on. The author, an endocrine surgeon and professor at Harvard Medical School, tells us that the dying process was once thought to be orderly and preprogrammed. Not true, he says: it's gradual and random. As we age, something just gives out, and, as in mechanics, that failure almost always affects something else...and that gives out...and so on. One thing leads to another.

Dr. Gawande was prompted to write this book after the epiphany he experienced watching his own father's decline. He began to see that modern medicine is not always attuned to providing appropriate care to the elderly. We are living longer, sure, but at what cost and what suffering? According to the author, fewer than 25 percent of us pass away as we traditionally did—in the comfort of our own homes surrounded by friends and family. Instead we're more likely to waste away in a cold, sterile hospital bed, punctured with IVs, catheters, and feeding tubes, and surrounded by strange medical devices.

Older patients used to be able to see geriatric physicians, but this field has all but dried up. Geriatrics, according to the author, traditionally treated the aging patient holistically—with a broad understanding of symptoms and how they're related. The field was more about managing problems than trying to fix each one. Today the elderly tend to see a never-ending array of specialists with treatments that never end. The author tells us that 97 percent of today's medical students take no courses in geriatrics.

In this book the reader will learn the fascinating history and evolution of hospitals and nursing homes. While medical personnel fight to treat our multitude of symptoms, they often neglect our overall well-being. We lose privacy and control over our lives. It's like incarceration: we wear assigned gowns, eat assigned foods at assigned times with assigned roommates, with schedules that are functionally assigned for the convenience of strangers. Boredom, loneliness, and helplessness result.

Assisted living and continuing care facilities were designed to ameliorate this problem. But many come with exorbitant costs and may offer only token relief from the regimentation of institutional living. The author tells us that effective care can often be as straightforward as simplifying medications, controlling arthritis, trimming toenails, reducing isolation, and ensuring quality meals.

Throughout the book, the reader is treated to an array of vignettes that tell the heart-wrenching and heartwarming personal stories of ordinary people who have dealt with end-of-life issues in different ways. A theme emerges: those who pass most naturally and comfortably often have had frank discussions with their families and their family physicians. Planning for the end turns out to be just as important as for any other phase of life. There are formidable questions and tough issues to work through, to be sure. How much chemotherapy to endure? What are the risks of surgery? How much emergency resuscitative care is appropriate? What devices and procedures, if any, should be employed to prolong life? How can one avoid a sterile, painful death?

Death is anathema to our doctors. It represents failure. They devote their lives to preventing it in any way possible. The author demonstrates how modern medicine may have gotten it wrong. The reader of this book will appreciate not only how death is a normal and natural part of our lives, but how we can make adjustments as we age to reach this end-state as comfortably as possible. It takes courage to confront the realities of biology. We can take control.

Dr. Gawande does not suggest that all endings are controllable, but he wants us to recognize that we are not helpless. We have choices. It all starts with having the right conversations.

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**Reviewer's Note:** You can start a conversation with your family doctor by asking about Oregon's POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment). This document gives you control over what emergency medical interventions should be employed. If nothing else, it can get you thinking and possibly promote family discussion.

**Editor's Note:** For another article related to Being Mortal, see Margaret della Santina's "Response to Being Mortal" in the spring 2015 Applegater online at <http://applegater.org/pdf/2015/v08n01/v08n01x05.pdf>.

**Meursault, contre-enquête**  
Kamel Daoud

I am going to go way out on a limb and state that

Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* (*The Meursault Investigation* in English, Other Press, New York; Actes Sud in France) is one of the best novels ever written. I will be curious to see how Daoud does, Nobel Prize wise, etc. I would even be so brash as to compare Daoud's *Meursault* to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

*Meursault* is an Arab response to Albert Camus's 1942 classic *L'Étranger*. But here's the rub: you are reading along and the Arab narrator is going on about how painful it is to be searching the beaches, along with his mother, for his murdered brother's body, interviewing Algiers residents about what they might know of the circumstances of the death, the burial, and so on. Then you abruptly have to remind yourself that the narrator is fictional, the mother is fictional, and the dead brother is a fiction from a different book of fiction (*L'Étranger*). Occasionally Daoud's fictional narrator chides Camus for killing his brother, and he even chides Western readers for glorifying the writer who killed his brother! It's more mind-boggling than any Shakespearean play-within-a-play.

Readers of poetry are told that poetry is what gets lost in translation. This book is a novel, not poetry—and though my French is rather rough, I find much poetry in both the French and the English translated version. And there is at least one passage where I maintain that the English is superior, more fun, because it has a catchy double entendre that I think gets better in translation from the original French. The narrator tells of his arbitrary and capricious murder of a French-Algerian man, set in juxtaposition to the senseless murder of an Arab in Camus's *The Stranger*. "The man was there, wedged between two stories and some walls, and his only way out was my story, which left him no chance." The French do not call the various levels of a building "stories," so this passage is more intriguing in English.

There are sprinklings of comments throughout Daoud's book about the history of the French-Algerian War (not much talked about in France to this day) and—because, after all, this is a response to Albert Camus—oblique references to existentialism, to the philosophy of the absurd.

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## — Movies —

**Five top holiday movies for the family**

Are you ready to snuggle in front of the fire with your family for a holiday film marathon? Get the popcorn and holiday treats ready. By David Aronchick, *The Huffington Post*, November 2015.

**1. Elf.** Perhaps the most comedic, most appropriate and emotion-grabbing holiday film of all time? My friends and other family members like to put *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Christmas Story* at the top of their list, but my family prefers Will Ferrell over Jimmy Stewart any day of the week.



**2. The Polar Express.**

Animation at its best, along with a beautifully crafted message about brotherhood and belief. This film, starring Tom Hanks as the wise, charming train conductor, is a fascinating thrill ride to the North Pole and like *Elf*, reaffirms the true meaning of Christmas.

**3. Miracle on 34th Street.** Typically, my kids will not sit through an older film, especially one that is black and white, but *Miracle on 34th Street* is compelling theater regardless of age, or generational affiliation. The message is simple to digest—corporate greed and public fear standing in the way of belief, even as proof stares our characters directly in the face. This movie

is beautifully directed and the screenplay is spot on. If you are looking for a classic to present the kids, this is the one I would recommend.

**4. How the Grinch Stole Christmas.** I was torn between putting the Grinch here, or *Scrooged*, but the

Grinch wins because of its family-friendly nature. Who do kids love more than Dr. Seuss? From the time our kids were aware enough to be read to, Dr. Seuss has maintained a strong hold over the content we allow our children to consume. Tried and true, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* brings Dickensian themes

to a modern audience in a humorous vehicle led by Jim Carrey.

**5. National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.** When the kids go to bed, toss in this Chevy Chase classic. National Lampoon's Vacation franchise was a winner, with this third entry in the series matching the original *Family Vacation* for laughs. Cousin Eddy? Classic. Chase once again portrays the loveable, but clumsy Clark Griswold as if he were born to play the character. The language and sexual situations in *Christmas Vacation* make it adults only viewing for us. And of course, there is the everlasting allure of Beverly D'Angelo as Ellen Griswold.