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**Book Review - The One True Universal. Barbara Ehrenreich, Natural Causes: an Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer (New York: Twelve, 2018)**

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# The One True Universal

Norma Anderson

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes: an Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer* (New York: Twelve, 2018).

In the beginning of her most recent book, *Natural Causes: an Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer*, Barbara Ehrenreich admits that she has made the somewhat unusual decision to forego preventative medical care. Noting that most of her similar-aged peers were deeply enmeshed in a never-ending battle against getting old, including unappealing diets, exercise regimens, and a bevy of exploratory medical tests, Ehrenreich writes that she had a different response to aging: “I gradually came to realize that I was *old enough to die*,” and “decided that I was also old enough not to incur any more suffering, annoyance, or boredom in the pursuit of a longer life” (2–3, emphasis in original).

Ehrenreich endured breast cancer in the early 2000s, and a false positive on a mammogram, a decade later, leading to weeks of stress, anxiety, and distraction, helped prompt her decision. But her critical consideration of medicine began when she was a young woman expected to be quiet and pliant as her doctor performed invasive tests and procedures and delivered her children. These experiences not only awakened her to feminism but also impelled Ehrenreich to question medical professionals, rather than simply follow orders.

Lest anyone accuse her of a misguided campaign against the wonders of modern medicine, Ehrenreich assures the reader she eats well, exercises for the joy of it, and will seek care when she feels there might be an issue, but simply refuses to seek out problems. For instance, when her dentist encouraged

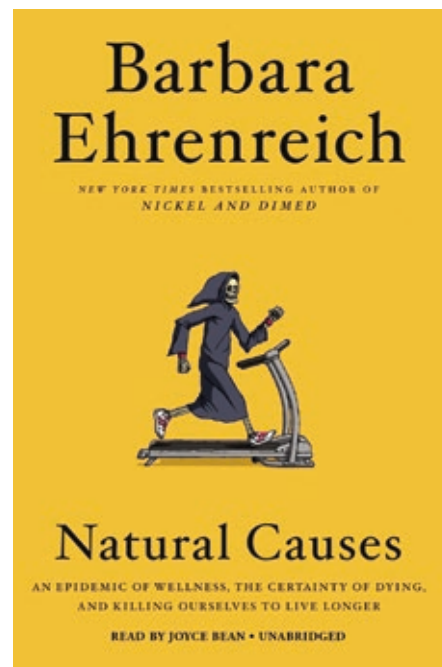
her to get tested for sleep apnea, and Ehrenreich balked, insisting she has no symptoms of the problem, “the dentist said that I just might not be aware of it, adding that it could kill me in my sleep. This, I told her, is a prospect I can live with” (7).

But it was not only her own experiences with medical care that sent Ehrenreich researching and writing *Natural Causes*, it was ongoing and enlightening scientific research, some of which she found deeply disturbing. While most of us recognize Ehrenreich for her bestselling *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America*, she earned her doctorate in cell biology, conducting research on microphages, immune cells “considered the ‘frontline defenders’ in the body’s unending struggle against microbial invaders” (XI). Her research had given her great respect for our immune systems, and

microphages in particular, so when she read an article that implicated them in assisting the growth of some cancerous tumors, Ehrenreich was dismayed, to say the least.

The breast cancer Ehrenreich suffered in 2000 is one of numerous cancer types that the immune system has been shown to abet, thus the cells she once studied and celebrated might well have played a role in her own illness. Looking further into current and ongoing research, she learned that there is growing awareness of “cellular decision making” and that “the natural world, as we are coming to understand it, pulses with something like ‘life’” (XI). Whereas we like to believe we have control over our bodies, that mindfulness, eating habits, and medicine can increase our longevity, Ehrenreich began to accept that if indeed our immune cells are neither all good nor all bad but in fact act in ways we can not understand or predict, then we don’t actually have control at all.

From these starting points, it should be clear that the book is of interest to those of us who are aging, might possibly begin aging, have parents or



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family members who are aging, or those of us who might one day die. But Ehrenreich's style is thoroughly critical: for anyone who is deeply committed to the omnipotence of science and medicine, or even the absolute power of mindfulness, positivity, and the primacy of the self, you might find yourself defensive in a few places as she takes aim at socially accepted truisms.

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criticism here, it is important to consider how often we blame poor health on people (consider commonplace social proscriptions against smoking, drinking—did you read that recent study of how *any* alcohol is bad for you?<sup>1</sup>—and a sedentary lifestyle. We are often presumed guilty, or at least complicit, in our own illnesses).

Much of the latter part of *Natural Causes* focuses on our growing understanding of immunity and cellular biology. While research scientists might grumble at Ehrenreich's simplification of complex biological processes, laypeople might grumble at her facility with scientific terminology and focus on microscopic life. But it is her explanations of cellular behavior (and a final look at the historical growth of a concept of "self") that round out the book and emphasize her argument that we should live our lives "to die into the actual world, which seethes with life, with agency other than our own, and, at the very least, with endless possibility" (208).

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For me, the richest parts of Ehrenreich's work are those that meld her personal experience and acerbic wit with social and scientific research. Unfortunately, in several places, the book strays from these. But regardless of whether we agree or disagree with her interpretations and use of research, *Natural Causes* raises interesting ideas of selfhood, health, and the absolute certainty of dying.

Her early chapters examine humiliating and sometimes even assault-like realities of medical procedures (for anyone who has ever experienced a pelvic exam or mammogram, you know exactly what she is talking about here). They also detail how medicine has, historically, been rooted not in evidence but, rather in authority and ritual, a fault not simply of the medical system but also of patients who expect certain procedures and tests (even when unnecessary).

Ehrenreich then explores the enormous commodification and inequalities of health, wellness, and mindfulness, considering gym culture, simplified meditation rituals (those two-minute mindfulness apps on your phone), the rise of various fad diets and pills, and companies' investment in "wellness" for their employees. To be open to her

Given a tendency to assign simple causality for illness, wellness culture fills a large void. Fitness guides and Silicon Valley tech gurus have all monetized the realm of living well, living long, and controlling our bodies to fight death. "Conflict may be endemic to the human world, with all its jagged inequalities, but it must be abolished within the individual" (111). Though the list of well-known fitness or tech giants felled by illness in their middle age is significant (Steve Jobs, Apple founder, Jerome Rodale, founder of *Prevention* magazine, and numerous others) longevity and holistic health have become middle and upper-class pursuits, further marginalizing those who don't have the time, money, or even ability, at the end of working multiple shifts, to devote themselves to wellness.



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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31310-2/fulltext#seccestitle70](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31310-2/fulltext#seccestitle70)