



On a Pale Horse

Piers Anthony

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When Zane shoots Death, he has to take the job, speeding over the world riding Mortis, his pale horse/limo, measuring souls for the exact balance of Good and Evil, sending each to Heaven or Hell instead of Purgatory. The new Thanatos is superbly competent, ends pain when he ends lives. But Satan is forging a trap for Luna, the woman Death loves.

On a Pale Horse Details

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From Reader Review On a Pale Horse for online ebook

David Staniforth says

This was the book that got me into reading fiction many years ago, and inspired me to want to write. The reading happened straight away and I've not stopped since; the writing took a little longer to get started, and I see no sign of stopping that now either.

So, reading for the second time many years later, much of the narrative feels a little dated in regard to social references and attitudes, but I enjoyed the story just as much as I did as a young man. Now I feel compelled to reread the rest of the series.

Highly recommended, especially if you already like fantasy.

Molly McBisterson says

On a Pale Horse is the best book Piers Anthony's ever written.

Sadly, that's not saying much. Anthony has some very creative ideas, but his prose is mechanical at best and plainly clunky at worst.

Even so, some of the ideas are worth the slog. The *Incarnations of Immortality* series, though it fades at the end as all of Anthony's series do, is a clever and occasionally inspired look at religion, spirituality, and morality. In different hands it might have been pure art (see also, *Good Omens* by Pratchett and Gaiman). As it stands, however, it's merely a moderately entertaining read.

The first books of Anthony's series, before he overextends himself, tend to be the best (see also, *A Spell for Chameleon*, and *On a Pale Horse* is no exception. Zane's confusion and flawed humanity in the both sought-after and feared face of death (and Death) makes this book rise a bit above the common run of Anthony's work.

Kate says

Ok, I think it's time to delve into my long-evolving and conflicted feelings about this series and about Piers Anthony. Especially since I changed my rating for this book from a 5 to a 1.

When I was young, I loved this series. It was on my favourites list throughout high-school. I was also pretty obsessed with the Xanth series, and would get new books from that series for many christmases and birthdays. These series, and Piers in general, go into my adult category of things-I-can't-believe-I-didn't-realize-were-sexist.

As an adult, I started to revisit some of my favourite series from childhood just to see if they'd hold up. Animorphs, which blew my mind and changed my entire life from grade 4 onward, does not hold up, writing-wise, but the stories are still good and still pretty mind-blowing as the introduction for a 10-year-old

to serious (for a 10-year-old) sci-fi. The Giver does hold up magnificently. Piers Anthony just ends up being a sexist old man writing juvenile screeds couched in sci-fi and fantasy. And unfortunately, I still like his stories and ideas. There's a lot in there that's good. Alas, there's so much that's bad that it's really not worth it.

For example, in the very first scene of this book, we meet a gorgeous rich woman who will fall in love with any person who saves her life. This is not even the point of the scene: the point is that the crafty magic stone peddler stole the poor dupe's true love...as women are property and have no minds of their own. What does true love even mean if you can just swoop in and steal it from someone? Is this woman's mind so empty of her own thoughts and feelings that she counts adrenaline as love? That's about where I stopped reading and started skimming. The series as a whole (and Piers' writing as a whole) is filled with gorgeous women who all look exactly the same - big eyes, small noses, long hair, ample bosom but not too ample, just the perfect amount of ample, small waists, and above all, as young as possible without being creepy (though he sometimes just says "fuck it" and goes with creepy). There are, of course, middle-aged women, women with large noses and small eyes, and sometimes they even have brains but it's always despite their looks. Because there is no woman character ever introduced in ANY Piers Anthony book EVER WRITTEN (I haven't checked but I would bet a lot on it) whose attractiveness is not commented on in some way. Hey, a woman who has been living for 20 years on her wits in exile, I wonder what she'll say first when she meets someone from her home? "Tell me the truth, do I remain sexually appealing?" Hey, aren't you one of the aspects of FATE, one of the most powerful beings in all of space and time? What wonderful and interesting things are you thinking about right now? "I'm middle aged and therefore ugly." Ah yes. Piers, you have captured a woman's mind perfectly. I AM always thinking about how my nose could be more pert, and am also constantly looking for validation from men that they find me sexually attractive. Literally every second of every day. On the other side, it is exceedingly rare for a male character to think about his own attractiveness. Instead, he is also always thinking about the attractiveness of his female companion.

I would really love for someone to re-write the Incarnations of Immortality so that I could enjoy the stories again while cutting out all the bullshit sexism and frankly poor character development. I think that Piers actually believes he is writing strong female characters, which is pretty scary. The prospect of actually re-reading all of these books is scary too, so I'm just going to spare myself and remember the stories fondly.

Krissy says

I think this is a case of it's not you it's me. This is a very popular book but everyone that I personally know that has read and loved it say they read it way back in the 80's or 90's. I wonder if they would still feel the same way if they read it for the first time today. I've just read too many outstanding fantasy novels this year so this book had big shoes to fill. Unfortunately it fell short. I'm not sure why but I went into this book expecting it to be funny. I was actually looking forward to a humorous book. It did pick up a bit in the second half once Zane went on strike and started fighting off everything Satan was throwing his way. But by then I was only semi-invested in the story.

Stephen says

4.0 stars. Piers Anthony is a **MIND-NUMBING ENIGMA** to me. He is capable of writing extremely

thought-provoking, imaginative stories that are both original and speak to fundamental aspects of the human condition. The mystery is that he does so infrequently, despite being one of the most prolific authors in the speculative fiction. Wait....on second thought, maybe that is the answer. Quantity of production slamming right into the proverbial nuts of quality.

Well this first novel in the Incarnations of Immortality series is certainly one that resides in the relatively exclusive group of high quality Piers Anthony books. Along with *Macroscope* (which I need to re-read soon), it is my favorite of his novels and I found myself impressed by both the general concept of the story as well as his execution of it.

The *Incarnations* series is founded on the premise that humans assume the roles of 5 of the 7 major supernatural offices called "Incarnations" (i.e., Death, War, Fate, Time and Nature). The other 2 Incarnations, Good and Evil, are permanently held by the Big G and the man downstairs who are engaged in a perpetual fight for the souls of all mankind. All of this takes place in a world similar (though advanced) to ours, except that both science and magic exist side by side (e.g., flying cars and flying carpets, organ transplants and healing elixirs).

As you can guess based on the title, this first book in the series focuses on the Incarnation of Death...DUH!! Zane is a lonely, suicidal man who, while contemplating taking his own life, accidentally kills Death (I know, ironical). Zane is then tasked with assuming the role of Death. I know this may sound cheesy, but it is actually handled pretty well in the story and has some very humorous moments.

Death's role is to send the souls of the deceased to either heaven or hell (or purgatory) depending on the balance between the good and evil present in the soul at the time of death. (*QUICK NOTE: yep...turns out a person's religion has NOTHING to do with it and heaven or hell is solely (no pun intended) a matter of doing more good than harm during your life.*). Kinda comforting isn't it.

Anyway, good deeds are extremely light. In fact, they are lighter than air and actually float. On the other hand, evil deeds have substantial weight and weigh a soul down. So a good person's soul will float up towards heaven whereas a bad person's will....you get the idea. Finally, when a soul is in extremely fine balance between good and evil, Death is the final arbiter of the soul's final destination.

That's about all you need for set up. The rest of this very interesting novel involves Zane learning about how the universe is run and coming into conflict with Satan over the soul of a particular person. It seems there is an ancient prophecy that says that this individual will foil Satan's plans for the world, so naturally ole horn head wants the person dead. In addition to being very entertaining, there are some very neat discussions about the nature of good and evil.

This is Piers Anthony at his best. Taking a "big picture" concept and making an entertaining yet thoughtful examination of it in the context of a terrific story. I have read the next two books in this series and while not as good as this one, they are generally entertaining with "flashes of brilliance."

Highly Recommended!!

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

When the grim reaper shows up a few seconds early, Zane shoots him instead of using the gun on himself as he'd planned. Now, instead of being dead, Zane is Death. He has to take over the office, riding around the world in his convertible pale horse collecting and measuring the souls of those who've committed equal amounts of good and evil during their lives — those who are "in balance." In his new guise (complete with all of the accoutrements: scythe, hooded cloak, skeleton face, etc), Zane sets out to change Death's image while dealing with his own personal demons.

This is a fun premise and I expected Piers Anthony to do a lot with it, but unfortunately I found *On a Pale Horse* to be mostly illogical, trite and, worst sin of all, just plain boring. Part of the problem is that it doesn't know if it wants to be a comedy, a love story, or a heavy philosophical treatise. It tries to do all three (it should have been possible), but it fails at all three. The comedy, as usual for Piers Anthony, consists of puns, allusions, and light black humor. For example, when Zane asks Mortis (the pale horse) something to which the answer is negative, Mortis says "neigh" (that was the only one I actually laughed at). I enjoy puns in real-life dialogue (they indicate a quick wit), but they don't often work for me in print and this is one of the reasons I don't read Piers Anthony (I gave up on the first Xanth book after 4 chapters, but I tried *On a Pale Horse* because it sounded mature and interesting).

There were some things I did find funny — Death lives in a house that looks like a funeral home and answers fan mail, Satan uses his publicity budget to sponsor Hellathons, group plans, and billboard advertising, a soul's balance of good and evil is computed like an income tax, and you should hear Satan argue with a female Irish fishmonger — but mostly I found the humor and cheesy dialogue to be juvenile.

The love story is juvenile, too. Zane meets and immediately falls in love with Luna, whose main attractions are that she is beautiful, well-dressed, serious, and likes the same kind of art as Zane. After only a couple of conversations which they apparently think are deep, they are in love, but the reader certainly doesn't feel it.

The humor and the romance are silly, but the thing that really killed *On a Pale Horse* for me was that it tries to be thoughtful and enlightening as Zane attends a variety of deathbed scenarios that illustrate the unfairness, loneliness, guilt, relief, grief, and ugliness of death. In these scenes (there's a long string of them), there is a lot of repetitive introspection and pondering and some "lessons" about the selfishness of suicide, the effects of incest or rape, the tragedy of an untimely death, the positive and negative aspects of war. Sounds like it could be profound, and I know it's supposed to be profound because in the rather pompous and lengthy (one hour on audio) author's note at the end, Mr. Anthony says "it is a satiric look at contemporary society with some savagely pointed criticism. It's also a serious exploration of man's relation to death... an ambitious hard-hitting social commentary." Except it's not. It's rather superficially processed and it's all stuff that most thinking adults have pondered many times before. There's nothing new here, even for 1984 when it was published.

Just as one example, there's a long scene in which Zane (as Death) enters a medical facility where machines are keeping dying people alive against their wishes. When he shuts down the power and they all are relieved that they can now die, he thinks he has greatly sinned and that now he'll have to make up for it by doing more good deeds. Of course, we the readers recognize that his mercy is the good deed and that it's not a sin to let people die naturally, but why hasn't this occurred to him before, especially since he's had personal experience with the issue and he's been thinking about it for months? Luna tells him "I think sometimes you just have to sin in order to do the right thing" which is a profound revelation for Zane, but it makes me wonder why an adult who hasn't advanced very far through Kohlberg's stages of moral development was chosen to be Death. This sophomoric philosophizing might work better in a YA novel, but *On a Pale Horse*, with its succubi and other sexual references, is marketed to adults.

I was beyond bored with On a Pale Horse and the only reason I managed to finish it was so that I could thoroughly review it. Unfortunately, I was listening on audio and couldn't skim. The reader, George Guidall, wonderful as he is, actually seems to slow down during the introspective scenes (I guess so that I can have time to process the heavy material?).

Another reason that the attempted weightiness of the story didn't work for me is that On a Pale Horse is completely based on Christian theology. It's okay that Anthony gets some of it really wrong (purgatory is not Biblical, and neither is the idea that criminals and children of rape or incest are unacceptable to Heaven), but what's hard to overlook is that no mention is made of redemption, which is the crux of Christian belief (and a popular theme in fantasy literature). The whole point of Christianity is that Jesus paid the price for sin, so souls are not measured by the balance of good and evil deeds, but by whether or not they belong to Jesus.

Of course, a savior would completely throw off Piers Anthony's entire premise, which is that man must secure a place in heaven by doing more good than evil. In order for this to work, Christ must be excluded, but in that case it seems that it would be better to not use CHRISTianity as the basis for the story because it forces the premise to fail. Mr. Anthony knows that, he knows we know it, and he wants us to just wink it away so that his story works with all of the clever Christian puns and allusions. For the most part I was able to do that, and I could have been perfectly happy doing that if On a Pale Horse didn't ask me to think. But when it asks me to seriously consider eternal issues and the nature of sin and death, good and evil, and Heaven and Hell in the context of a Christian system, then I have trouble leaving redemption out of the picture — my thinking is restricted and I don't get very far if I have to omit key elements of the doctrine. For this reason, On a Pale Horse would have worked better as strictly a comedy

.ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

Rhonda says

Death does ride a Pale Horse but that Horse can be so much more if that is what the job calls for, or at least that is what Anthony will have us believe.

A friend of mine in high school pushed this series on me and I reluctantly started to read it. Have I mentioned that science fiction really isn't my favorite yet? Because yeah, it takes something special for me to really delve into science fiction. Not that this is science fiction per say but more like an alternate Earth with some futuristic elements because science and magic work together there.

Anyway, I started to read this book and was drawn in quickly. I think the basis is what did it for me. How could I not love the idea that Death was an office that regular people wound up performing by chance? Sure it is a kinda futuristic world but the character portrayal is what takes center stage, not the world they are in.

All in all this is a wonderful start to a great series!

Wanda says

Actual rating: 2.5 stars.

I can see where I would have been really into this series if I'd read it as a teenager. I was just busy reading at that point in my life and not very much into evaluating what I was taking in. It is a very male-oriented story, with women being mostly objects that they compete for and fight over. The male characters evaluate women by their age and attractiveness, although Zane/Death comes to grudgingly admire Luna's strength, intelligence, and morality. If I had children, I wouldn't encourage them to read this series, but if they did, we would need to talk about the role of women in it and why it shouldn't be used as a model for relationships. The female characters often say some very chauvinistic things, as if Anthony believed it was acceptable to be prejudiced as long as the female characters voice those thoughts (e.g. that as women get old, they just bag & sag and lose all their attractiveness, implying that without youthful attractiveness they really aren't worth anything anymore).

The writing is acceptable; the morality is extremely black-and-white. Having characters like God and Satan included in the list of characters plunges the reader very much into a Christian universe and there is no escaping that uni-religion slant. Since I attended Sunday School as a child, I was conversant with the details of that worldview, but I wonder how many modern young people would be? It might be interesting for non-Christian readers, although I would hate for them to get their Christian theology from Anthony, or it might be off-putting.

On the plus side, I really enjoyed the horse/car Mortis and the idea that a new person in the Incarnation of Death could shake up the job quite a bit.

I've read these books out of order (it doesn't affect their understanding all that much since they're fairly simplistic), so I've only got a couple to go. I've abandoned Anthony's Xanth series because it bores and annoys me, but I haven't made any hard-and-fast decisions about this one. Not my favourite author, although I can understand what others may see in his work.

Book number 181 in my science fiction & fantasy reading project.

Heather says

This is the first in the Incarnations of Immortality series, and probably the best of the batch. I believe I read somewhere that Anthony originally intended only to write the five (Death, Time, Fate, War, and Earth), and I think he probably should have stopped there, because while *With a Tangled Skein* is probably the best book of the series in terms of pulling the other books together, they did (as Sci-Fi series so often do) start to drag quite a bit towards the later books, and ended up just plain silly by the end of the seventh book in the series, *And Eternity*.

All that said, *On a Pale Horse* being the reader's first look at this world, it is an original concept for a novel. As a 16 year old, at least, it was a very engrossing read, as was the rest of the series as a whole.

Chris Salzman says

I first read this book back when I was 13 and loved it. Immediately tore through the rest of the books in the series and would regularly bring up the series in conversations about books worth reading. A few months

back I found a paperback copy of On A Pale Horse at a book sale for 50 cents and picked it up thinking it'd be fun to revisit the series.

Well...

This is an extraordinarily sexist book. Alarmingly so. Women are regularly--approximately every time they are talked about--described by their physical characteristics. And Anthony clearly has a type, which basically boils down to just past the age of consent (and sometimes just before it too). Older women are referred to as hags, or otherwise sexually disgusting. They are prized for their sexuality, and then looked upon as broken if they've "used" it. It's deeply alarming.

The rest of the story is shallow despite being about the balance of Good and Evil. Eternity and the supernatural are broken out into Richard Scarry like job descriptions. Death, in this case, is tasked with helping people on to the afterlife. The result is a handful of "wouldn't it be hard to take someone's soul in this circumstance?" vignettes, each more shallow and tidy than they should be.

It's rough re-reading a book you loved and realizing how problematic it's always been. What lessons or perspectives did I inadvertently take from it? Probably more than I'd like to admit. At one point I remarked to my wife how terrible the book was and how I remembered it being much better than it was. She astutely said, "Maybe you changed?" I think that's true

Laurie Anderson says

Reread this for the first time in 30 years. Enjoyed it, but not as much as books by Atwood or Gaiman

Valyssia Leigh says

Okay, I'm done. I made it 2 hours and 47 minutes into the audiobook, and this just isn't good. It starts with one of the most most blatant cases of the trope 'women as rewards' I've seen in popular fiction and just keeps piling them on. It's gross. I stopped just after the female football team with the invisible protective gear and mammary glands likened to those of goats. How that's sexy, I'm not sure, but Piers Anthony didn't spare the adjectives. He took several passes after the 'goat udder' comment to clarify that the lady footballers had large bosoms. I remain unclear as to whether these remarkable organs were on their bellies or their chests, but that's okay. I understood his key point. This is some sexist bullpoop. Moving on.

Lyn says

This was the first book I ever read of Piers Anthony and I was hooked.

Original, imaginative and told by a true story-teller, this was a gem. And best of all, this blended good science fiction with pure fantasy elements to make a very enjoyable read.

A man accidentally kills Death, an incarnation of Immortality and - shades of Tim Allen in The Santa Clause - he must don the black mantle and ride the white horse. It turns out to be a white car and a pretty cool gig

when all is settled. That is until the Hellhounds show up.

Unfortunately, I don't think the rest of the series was anywhere nearly as good, *On a Pale Horse* has, nonetheless remained timeless as I have often thought about it since.

Chris says

Piers Anthony is an author who is more conceptually innovative than literary. His writing is like puff pastry and not very substantive, but his characters are likable and the plots engaging. He has moments of preachiness mixed in, and sometimes a puerile sense of humor, but if you don't mind these things (or indeed, revel in them) you should give him a try. None of Anthony's books takes long to read, and you'll be able to tell by the first 100 pages of a series whether you're into his concept.

Though my least favorite of his series, this group is fun enough. (Often hapless) humans take the "jobs" of Greek gods...and later other deities--Death, War, Time, etc--and deal with beaurocracy and political infighting. The first book benefits from the novelty of Anthony's concept, and *For Love of Evil* is the most interesting, character-wise. Other than that, the books are just mindless entertainment.

seak says

Maybe a better title for this book would be, "Euthanasia Rocks!"

I honestly thought I would like this book a whole lot more. It doesn't help that the impetus for my reading this book was a good friend's rusty memory of reading this in high school. I feel that would have been a great time to read it, now ... less so.

My main problem was the annoying protagonist. I don't know if this was something that was a rule for fantasy writing in the 80s, but what is with the protagonist who's characterized as being intelligent, but who's as dense as a rock throughout the entirety of the book.

In just about every situation, the author draws out the explanation, whether it's magic or a plot complication, because the protagonist is the last person to understand.

Obviously, this is for the benefit of the reader, but I can tell you I'd much prefer the protagonist who knows, but doesn't let the reader know. At least it's according to character.

I can't be too harsh, because I enjoyed the ideas presented and thought it was done in a capable manner. There were plenty of inconsistencies and points where disbelief just could no longer be suspended, but it was also kind of cool to be in a world with magic alongside technology.

And I know you're not supposed to do this in a review, and that is tell the author how to do something, but I feel like there was a huge oversight in making a hilarious character out of the "pale horse," Mortis. He was dull, though horse-like ... I guess. Come on, where's the wise-cracking buddy?

I don't think I'll be reading further in this series. I enjoyed parts, but I was mostly annoyed and rumor has it this is the best installment. No thanks.

2.5 out of 5 Stars (slightly better than okay)
