



The Incrementalists

Steven Brust , Skyler White

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"Secret societies, immortality, murder mysteries and Las Vegas all in one book? Shut up and take my money." —John Scalzi

The Incrementalists—a secret society of two hundred people with an unbroken lineage reaching back forty thousand years. They cheat death, share lives and memories, and communicate with one another across nations, races, and time. They have an epic history, an almost magical memory, and a very modest mission: to make the world better, just a little bit at a time. Their ongoing argument about how to do this is older than most of their individual memories.

Phil, whose personality has stayed stable through more incarnations than anyone else's, has loved Celeste—and argued with her—for most of the last four hundred years. But now Celeste, recently dead, embittered, and very unstable, has changed the rules—not incrementally, and not for the better. Now the heart of the group must gather in Las Vegas to save the Incrementalists, and maybe the world.

"Watch Steven Brust. He's good. He moves fast. He surprises you. Watching him untangle the diverse threads of intrigue, honor, character and mayhem from amid the gears of a world as intricately constructed as a Swiss watch is a rare pleasure." —Roger Zelazny

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The Incrementalists Details

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From Reader Review *The Incrementalists* for online ebook

Kelly says

Started out okay, but I found the plausibility of the plot thin. Characters accepted too much at face value and, as more folks were introduced, I had a hard time distinguishing them. Ren and Phil felt interchangeable and their romance convenient and rushed. Weird.

The plot is interesting, but left high and dry while characters run around eating pizza and drinking coffee. The idea of the *Incrementalists* is also pretty damned cool, but not explored enough for my satisfaction.

I kinda had to force myself to keep reading this one, hoping my effort would be rewarded. Not so much.

I don't like giving unfavourable reviews, but not everyone is going to enjoy every book.

Tez says

As a left-brainer, my thoughts often stop me from fully enjoying stories. I don't need every little thing explained in extensive detail, but something more than vagueness. For a novel filled with symbols and analogies, my experience was less than optimal.

Logic-fail kept me from falling under *The Incrementalists*'s spell. When even immortality sounds more believable than the concept herein, it's a sign the world-building is somewhat flawed. An incrementalist's memories can be implanted into someone else via A BURNING SPIKE TO THE FOREHEAD. Only because there's no mention of seared flesh or brain damage, the burning memory-spike may be symbolic/analogous and therefore not real. And that kind of stuff really gets my goat.

The whole novel takes place over a week, so there's insta-love. That could be explained due to meddlework, but the two parties seem relatively cool with the fact they were basically pimped, minds meddled with so they'd fall in love with one another. That's hella creepy, and yet our characters seem nonplussed. Huh.

And for a secret society dedicated to making the world a better place, a little bit at a time, they do no such thing in the main storyline - they just focus on themselves. Sure, they may have done some bettering in the past (though the references to real life events really irk me - YOU BROKE THE FOURTH WALL, BOOK!), but apparently nothing in connection to the major plot.

P.S. Early on a character checks their Google Reader, and I immediately thought, "Ha! You just dated yourself, book!" Then I realised the email above the reference is dated...2011. Yep, listing the year in the emails dates the book even more than Google Reader. We really only need to see the messages, and the to/from section. Dates are irrelevant. (Unless there's a particular reason the novel's set in 2011, other than that's when the authors wrote it. If there is a story-based reason, I missed it.)

Karyn says

I hadn't purchased a hardcover new release in years, but the flashy cover grabbed my attention in Powell's and it jumped into my cart. The cover (with it's impressive John Scalzi quote) might have been the best part.

Biggest issues:

The book is written in the first person, which is fine, but it jumps between POV several times in a chapter. That would also be fine if it added to the story. But, since the main characters are in a passionate, lust-filled relationship and unable to leave each other's side for more than five minutes without whining about it, two points of view are unnecessary for all but one chapter in the book.

The romance comes from out of left field and is so obnoxious I was rooting for the so-called villain. You know that couple that can't stop fondling each other? They're prudes compared to the amount of touching and rubbing going on between these two at insanely inappropriate times.

For me, the Garden was poorly executed and seemed to have multiple loopholes that no one realized could happen despite their being around for the entire history of humanity.

The entire collective remains unexplained. There's definitely a back story somewhere, and it could be great, but I guess the writer was more worried about creating a Twilight-ish romance than exposition.

Don't be me. Save your money for a story worthwhile.

Hallie says

When I get on with Steven Brust, we get on extremely well. Although it doesn't happen as often, when I don't get on with him, I get really, really aggravated, as happened here. (No idea how much of that was the co-author.) The book sounded very interesting, but I didn't kill it with high expectations - just couldn't understand why this group of special people was supposed to be anything other than arrogant creeps. Add to that writing that seemed designed to leave the reader following with maximum difficulty and alternating first-person narrative voices that were far too often indistinguishable, and this one was a big miss for me.

Andrew says

40000 years ago, some folks figured out how to archive memories in the collective unconscious -- up to and including their own personalities. Result: a gang of more-or-less immortals, slipping under the radar of civilization, not trying to rule the world (their hold is not so sure) but to make it suck a little less.

This is a strange, low-key book. It doesn't much resemble SF or fantasy, although it works hard to make the memory-architecture of the Incrementalists feel like an interesting "magic system". Perhaps it's more of a cozy murder mystery?

My usual gag about Gene Wolfe is that, having written the last word on the Unreliable Narrator, he went on to invent the Incompetent Narrator. Now Brust has found the next step, the Narrator Whose Head Has Been Deliberately Screwed With. All our narration comes through Phil (the oldest immortal) and Renee (new recruit), but if you're expecting a traditional rookie-eye info-dump, guess again. Renee winds up implanted with the personality of the dead immortal Celeste, which means that by chapter 5 she's explaining things *to*

Phil. Only Celeste is more involved in the situation than either of them initially suspect. Quite a lot of the storyline involves recalling first-person narration and trying to figure out who has *influenced* it, and how. Do you see what I mean?

Let me put this a different way: the book is, among other things, a romance between Phil and Ren. It is, to my mind, a singularly unconvincing romance. But is there a *reason* for that? It turns out that there is. Maybe that doesn't reconcile you to reading the thing, but you can't say the authors didn't think about the question.

So: very sneaky use of narrative convention. Whether that makes the book... I enjoyed it but wasn't swept away. Unsurprisingly, I worry that I've just missed some fraction of the point. (Wolfe has the same effect on me.)

The metatextual twist at the end hardly requires comment; Brust can do that sort of stuff in his sleep. (I don't mean to neglect Skyler White, his co-author; I just don't know anything about her beyond this book.) Browse through incrementalists.org if the mood strikes you. I approve of the challenge ("what can *you* do to make the world suck less?") but I'm not sure how the book (and site) can help such a mentality snowball. But then, on the third hand, can I complain that the authors are trying?

carol. says

Let me be honest: I'm a fan of Steven Brust. I like his complex world-building, his characters and his willingness to integrate challenging issues of race and class (and occasionally gender) into his writing. Unfortunately, while I was predisposed to love *The Incrementalists*, it fell flat for me.

Narrative is first-person, shifting between Phil and Renee, often multiple times in the same chapter. Someone decided to use some pretty cursive typeset to head the sections with "Phil" or "Ren," and to my (apparently) aging eyes, sometimes I had to look twice to verify who I was reading. You should infer, then, that there was a problem in characterization, that I needed to consciously identify narrator when the options are a two-thousand year old personality who is currently a male poker player living in Vegas or a thirty year-old single female program designer with a penchant for telling people off. Or something. Characterization never really succeed, and worsened when it evolved into mutual longing. Besides Phil and Ren, there's a group of main *Incrementalists* (Oskar, Irina and others), the personality that is grafted onto Ren's, Celeste, and a brief appearance of a couple of Ren's connections. Celeste is by far the most dimensional; the rest feel like the 'not-Brad, not-George' remainder of the team in *Ocean's Eleven*.

Continued at:

<http://clsiewert.wordpress.com/2014/0...>

OR, if you prefer, here:

<http://carols.booklikes.com/post/7632...->

Because that way, it won't ever be deleted.

Dave says

THE INCREMENTALISTS is not an easy book to talk about. From the blurb, you get pretty much everything you need going in: secret society, two main characters, subtle magic, modern day.

What you don't get is the beauty. The way the early confusion unfolds like a night-blooming desert flower, revealing not just cleverness but compassion for the reader. You don't get the laugh-out-loud jokes and the quiet harmonies. You don't see two masterful writers using all of their art to create a work of tremendous humanity.

Brust's admiration of the work of Roger Zelazny is well known. As I read THE INCREMENTALISTS for the first time, I realized that this is his & White's CHRONICLES OF AMBER. A reader familiar with Zelazny's masterwork will recognize dynamics, thematic elements, and structural decisions. It's not an overt relationship, and will not hinder anyone who's not read the earlier work. It does provide a beautiful counterpoint nonetheless.

THE INCREMENTALISTS is not an action-packed thrill-ride through bizarre worlds. It doesn't boast a high body count or world-shaking threats. It is a quiet, deeply-thought exploration of memory, identity, and love.

It's not a book that will please everyone. It is a book that profoundly pleased, and moved, me.

An aside: the audiobook, read by Ray Porter and Mary Robinette Kowal, is one of the finest I've ever heard. If you have the opportunity to listen to it, do.

All Things Urban Fantasy says

Review courtesy of All Things Urban Fantasy

THE INCREMENTALISTS novel is one of those novels I expected to pick up and immediately love. I mean, c'mon, it's set in Vegas, involves secret societies and is co-written by the amazing Steven Brust. Needless to say my hopes were extremely high when I started this book and then they quickly came crashing down.

I freely admit that my score for this novel is partly based on the expectations I had for THE INCREMENTALISTS. Reviews are entirely subjective and it shouldn't bug so much, but it does. This is a good book and I feel that if I hadn't known who the authors were or what the book was about going in I would have enjoyed it a whole lot more.

The book is told from the alternating first person viewpoints of Phil and Renee. Phil is an old hand at being an Incrementalist and has existed in one form or another for thousands of years. The Incrementalist society itself is an incredibly cool idea; they're a secret society consisting of exactly 200 people that exists to make the world a better place a little bit at a time through a process known as "meddling". They use this power to nudge the powers that be along a path that the Incrementalists have decided is the best course for mankind as

a whole. Neat, right?

But then there's those two alternating first person views. There are only a few series told in the first person that I like to begin with so dealing with a book that has two (and, really, three) first person views was an exercise in frustration. It also didn't help that I never made much of a connection with any of the characters. They're all cool in concept, but quickly lose their charm after a couple hundred pages.

Brust and White are both excellent writers and the book does move and extremely brisk pace. I couldn't help but wish that it had slowed down a bit and explored more of the world they created. Even so *THE INCREMENTALISTS* is still worth picking up if you're looking for something completely different than the other urban fantasy novels currently out there.

Sexual content: Graphic sex.

Robert says

Walking around in a constant state of confusion might be the best way to sum up my feelings on this tale. If this muddled state actually led me to some definitive suppositions on the universe, or put me in touch with all the answers to *THE INCREMENTALISTS*, or even offered me a sense of well-being, I would have been okay with my scrambled brains and possibly the head scratching as well. But that wasn't the case here. Instead, I felt a bit exhausted after finishing this tale, like I'd been running a race in the wrong direction.

The dialogue stood out for me (and there was a quite a bit of it), but not in a good way. The Old English felt a bit ham-handed, although it could just as easily have been me. But I like to think that's not the case. Even focusing on just the modern times, the dialogue proved a bit pretentious and stilted and a bit too heavy handed. Aside from the dialogue, though, there seemed a few too many clichés. As for the pace, I'd equate it to walking through molasses.

None of the characters resonated with me. While this is fantasy, and the argument could be made that I shouldn't have identified with the characters, I enjoy a story much more when I do. And I found myself racing to the end, so I could set this book aside and move to the next one on my TBR list.

I can't help but feel like there was some flaw in the execution of this tale. Maybe it was a case of trying to do too much in such a short amount of time, or maybe it was a case of not doing enough, or maybe it was a case of blending universes and realms that shouldn't be blended. But whatever it was, I found disappointment lingering on my lips.

The premise certainly intrigued me with secret societies and unbroken lineages and cheating death and making the world better and meeting in Las Vegas, but that excitement quickly dwindled away, and I was left with a tainted aftertaste.

I received this book for free through NetGalley.

Cross-posted at Robert's Reads

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

3.5 stars. My copy of this book was an ARC I received from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. Thank you Tor Books and NetGalley for making that happen! My recent positive experiences with the Vlad Taltos series by Steven Brust had made me curious about this novel, so I was looking forward to checking it out.

The concept behind *The Incrementalists* is a very interesting and original one, and it only gets wilder as you read more of the story. Phil and Celeste are part of a secret society of two hundred people with an unbroken lineage of memories reaching back to the dawn of humankind. Their ongoing mission: to make the world better a little bit at a time through a process called "meddling" or "meddlework", which they achieve through influencing others by nudging them gently towards a certain inclination.

With Celeste's recent death, Phil goes looking for a new recruit for her next reincarnation, which is how he meets up with Renee "Ren" in Las Vegas. The book is told in alternating parts by these two characters, though Celeste remains a prominent presence in their lives. Always an unstable personality in life, Celeste is no different even in death. Now not only has her meddlework jeopardized Ren's initiation, her plans also extend to affect her fellow Incrementalists, changing the rules and putting them all in danger.

The idea behind the Incrementalists' work was what initially attracted me to this story. Personally, I felt the hints of both sci-fi and fantasy in the way their meddling process operates, which makes me think this would be an excellent book for readers who love cross-genre speculative fiction. To influence people, the Incrementalists would gather a list "switches" which are essentially memory and sensory factors which would trigger a reaction from their individual target. The Incrementalists themselves experience a sort of memory and personality "immortality" for as long as their consciousness stays stable through the reincarnations. All their collective knowledge or history of the world is seeded to the memory "Garden", available for any Incrementalists to "graze" from. This concept feels almost magical to me in a way.

This would also be perfect for those looking for something more cerebral and abstract, as the book is also heavy on symbolism and metaphors and would be positively mind-bending for someone not expecting it. The story mostly focuses on the Incrementalists and their own inter-societal crisis that Celeste has wreaked, but I would have loved it even more if there had been more on their history, or if their mission goals of making the world "better" had been expanded upon.

I also enjoyed the writing style. Of the two authors, I'm not familiar with Skyler White, though after this book I may be open to checking out more of her writing. But from what I've read of Steven Brust's fantasy novels, this definitely has the distinct feel of his work. The storytelling is so fast-paced, the reader has to be quick on their feet to keep up and you can't zone out for a second lest you miss something. I like that the book isn't bogged down with superfluous details, and in fact starts off with very little information, so you have to trust to the fact that more will be explained as the story progresses.

Overall, a great read if you're looking for something a little fun, a little strange, and a little different!

More reviews at [The BiblioSanctum](#)

Jennifer says

Thoughts on *The Incrementalists*, free of summary, spoilers, or character names (cross-posted from my blog).

First off, this is a great book if you're into keeping neurotic lists as though you were going to make character trading cards. There's a strong secret history concept to it, and the way the secret society works involves 'switches', sense-memory triggers that can be used to influence people. (My switches would probably be miso soup, lilacs, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, and big friendly dogs.) This group uses their influence to do good things, which is refreshing considering all the stories out there that use bad emotional triggers for dark reasons. Triggering bad memories isn't necessarily stronger, but it is easier, and therefore seems a bit lazy.

There's a lot of love-story going on, and I often denounce the fact that it seems like all the songs and stories are about love, but here I'm not complaining. Everyone involved in the central love affair has agency (even when they've been manipulated). There's no love-interest-as-a-reward crap, and the payoff of the romance is strong and thoughtful. There's a scene with coffee in bed that is the loveliest, realest moment between lovers I've read all year. The sweet fragility of what they're feeling makes the reader yearn for a new romance, but the narrative still deals with the awkwardness and hard parts; their love is magical without being trite. Contrasting that NRE is a whole cast of well-drawn characters. One uses love as a tool instead of appreciating it, in a dark reflection of how the *Incrementalists* as a whole use emotions. Another is thwarted in love, and turns it to bitterness and then problem-solving momentum. Yet another character has this pleasant sort of French love for all his comrades.

The setting is Las Vegas (a town I thought I hated until I spent a fantastic weekend there) and there's a love-letter-to-a-city aspect that works nicely. I like when a book really makes the setting an integral feature rather than just grudgingly sketching a place and then letting it fade to the background. When the plot, setting, and characters are skillfully interwoven, the story gets so much deeper in my head.

Anyway, I'm just in love with this book, and I think a lot of other people will be too.

Thomas Edmund says

The Incrementalists is in my opinion a lazy book. Two authors have clearly come up with a brilliant concept - immortal beings who 'meddlework' with us humans, ostensibly for the better, and preserve their lengthy lives by storing their memories jointly in a celestial garden and occasionally trading their psyches into a new body.

The laziness is apparent in the book lacking anything other than a great concept. The characters have little personality (despite the constant discussions about personality modification.) Even though the majority of the characters are beings that have experienced eternity, there is a noticeable lack of epic in the story. The entire piece happens in Vegas, which may be some form of symbolism, there are several references to dramatic meddlework but little real consequence and certainly no big world changing actions within the story.

Finally it felt like there were no stakes in the story. What was I the reader supposed to be rooting for? Worrying about? The final conclusion of a diluted love story and existential development, was not saved by

the overly vivid sex scenes, which were awkward as all get out compared to the shallow flighty tone of the rest of the novel.

Ben Babcock says

These people are oddly obsessed with putting bathrobes on after showering. She used his bathrobe, so he had to settle for a towel—what, you don't towel off and *then* put on a bathrobe?

I was hesitant to borrow this from the library—the description screamed “generic pseudo-science-fiction thriller.” Nevertheless, I resolved to give it a chance. I swear I didn't notice that John Scalzi had blurb'd it until I started reading. And it makes sense that Scalzi would blurb this, because it's in his wheelhouse—but neither Steven Brust nor Skyler White writes it the way Scalzi does. *The Incrementalists* is a bizarre mix of John Scalzi and Tim Powers (I like one and not the other, but it's the worst of both, so don't take this as a recommendation).

Now, I love me some Scalzi, but I'll happily admit that there are things about his style I don't like. He writes great, snappy dialogue—a *lot* of great, snappy dialogue. Too much, sometimes, to the point where all of his characters just feel so snappy and sarcastic and witty that they fade together. Scalzi is not a hugely descriptive writer. And that's OK—not every writer needs to be descriptive or should be. And I get that thrillers, as a genre, tend to be lighter on description and heavier on dialogue and action. The fact that I only enjoy this occasionally, like I only occasionally enjoy a whipped topping dessert, is one reason I don't read them that often.

Unfortunately, *The Incrementalists* seems to reside towards the lower end of the scale. It's particularly nondescript, except when it gets *way* too descriptive. I just opened to a random page (303) and was confronted with this gem:

He was all that mattered. The taste of his mouth on mine, the solid unyieldingness of his body that my body wanted to wrap and mold and form itself around. Everything else felt irrelevant and trivial to me, and we almost shedded our clothes trying to get free of them fast enough to fill our hands and mouths with each other again. There was no fear, no pulling away or even holding back, nothing reserved or restrained or considered. His hands hurt me, and I wanted them to. His mouth took from me and I wanted nothing left behind.

This is only really a problem when it comes to the scenes in the Garden, where description is everything. I admit I'm not the best person to critique stuff like this, because I don't visualize places as they are described when I read. But everything about this book just seems like a confusing mish-mash of same-same.

Even Ren and Phil feel very similar. The first-person perspective jumps between them within chapters. Now, I recently ran across an identical narrative device in *Trouble*. It worked fine there, because Pratt managed to differentiate between the two main characters. Here, I often forget whether Ren or Phil was the narrator, reminded only if the other character was in the scene and being referred to in the third person.

The basic premise of *The Incrementalists* is great. It's like reincarnation lite—personality continuity suspended in a kind of symbiosis, with an agenda on top to “make the world better.” I liked it, and I

genuinely liked how Brust and White handled the concept. Even the plot—Celeste, a recently deceased Incrementalist, is running a Xanatos gambit (TVTropes) that could destabilize the entire operation—is fantastic. By all rights, this should be a fun thriller.

Other than the stylistic and narrative issues, though, I just feel let down by the execution of that plot. The main characters spend far too much time sitting around talking about the Garden, explaining the Garden to Ren, “grazing” in the Garden, or mumbling pseudo-scientific stuff. It’s all very Roger Zelazny (or, as I mentioned, Tim Powers), in that it’s the magical realist equivalent of science fiction. But the most tense moment has to be when Celeste and Phil are at odds over a gun—that was exciting. The rest of the book is just *work* trying to follow the meandering, sometimes thorny explanations that Brust and White serve up to shore up an increasingly fractured “magic” (for lack of a better term) system.

Look, if you have a higher tolerance for this type of novel, you might enjoy this, just as I have a much higher tolerance for the pedantic hard SF technobabble of Alastair Reynolds than a lot of other people just as, if not more, intelligent as me. To each their own, right? But just because other people might *enjoy* this novel doesn’t mean it’s well-written or even all that good, in the same way that a serviceable cup of Tetley orange pekoe tea is nowhere near as good as loose-leaf. I drink the former pretty often when I’m too lazy to steep it properly—but I don’t pretend it’s amazing.

Karen says

I got to read an advance review copy of this book some time ago, and as I am drawn to books that not only defy genre, but actively buck it, *The Incrementalists* and I quickly became fast friends. Brust and White have created a complex and fascinating world that kept me thinking about it long after I put the book down. From a plot perspective, there's plenty here to keep you reading -- secret societies, mystery, romance, and a fascinating premise -- but it's the deeper threads and questions that stay with you after you've read the last page that take it to a new level. Issues of identity, of immortality, and of free will, for starters. I can't wait to see what they do with the second book -- and what slice of this fascinating other world I'll get to experience next time.

Steven Brust says

Yeah, so, this is the first time I've rated something I've written. It goes against every bone in my Minnesota body, but I tell myself that it's Skyler's parts I'm rating.

Several years ago, Tappan King suggested to me the idea of an immortal secret society dedicated to making the world just a little better. After I read Skyler's first two novels (and *Falling, Fly; In Dreams Begin*) I very much wanted to work with her. Hanging out with her one day, Tappan's idea came to mind, and we started kicking it around, and this book is the result.

I am more geeked about it than anything I've ever done--and that's saying something, because I tend to be a geeky fanboy about my own work (I mean, that's why I do it, right?).

Writing it was a joy--we kicked it back and forth and told each other a story. Revising it was a joy, "Hey, you know what would be even COOLER?" I'm still discovering subtleties and resonances in the parts she wrote. Rereading it is still a blast.

So, yeah. I'm psyched about it. I only hope it doesn't disappoint.
