

All That Really Mattered

J. A. Barker

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It's the harder aspects of Andrew's transformation that yield a fascinating look at how a Frankenstein experiment affects a man's entire being.

All That Really Mattered, a romantic novel by J. A. Barker, portrays the journey of a neuroscientist whose brain is transplanted into a younger man's body. This careful exploration of where human essence resides is enriched by provocative questions on medical ethics, philosophy, and religion.

Andrew Hamilton, descended from Boston Brahmins, is sixty-two years old and a prominent figure in his field. Anthony Costello is an Italian truck driver in his early thirties, whose death provides the body Andrew needs to continue his life after an accident. In an unexpected feat, Andrew is granted a new life.

Faced with the loss of friends and colleagues who can't accept his eerie surgery, Andrew moves to escape scrutiny. His own wife, Margaret—who releases him from their marriage, out of a belief it would be kinder to let her now-younger spouse find a more suitable love—remains an ever-present shadow despite his attempts to find meaning without her.

The promising plot skillfully reveals the consequences of trying to preserve an identity when one's physical reality no longer matches. The tension between holding on to memories and living in the present is also made clear through Andrew's encounters with potential partners.

When the plot shifts from his struggles, the prose becomes rushed. Chapters that introduce another character whose brain is transplanted complicate the story. A late-stage conflict that arrives in the form of a manipulative woman also results in strange turns and explanations, all for the purpose of clearing a path for a crucial figure from Andrew's past.

Amid dramatic moments, a quieter character stands out. Walter, Andrew's surgeon, links the others together. An adviser, sounding board, and source of wisdom, he's sometimes discreet and sometimes forthright in his opinions. Despite being the orchestrator of some of the book's major events, he comes across as genuinely concerned for his patients rather than opportunistic. His role provides vital perspective.

All That Really Mattered presents an idealized vision of star-crossed soul mates. With an emphasis on love—how it endures, deepens with experience, and remakes itself—the work occasionally revisits familiar ground. It's the harder aspects of Andrew's transformation that yield a fascinating look at how a Frankenstein experiment affects a man's entire being.

The rift between body and mind serves as a powerful mirror for the many ways people see and fail to see each other. Here, what makes a person human is a flame that transcends time.

KAREN RIGBY (September 19, 2016)

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