



On the Shortness of Life: Life Is Long if You Know How to Use It (Penguin Great Ideas)

By Seneca

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, statesman, philosopher, advocate and man of letters, was born at Cordoba in Spain around 4 BC. He rose to prominence in Rome, pursuing a career in the courts and political life, for which he had been trained, while also acquiring celebrity as an author of tragedies and essays. Falling foul of successive emperors (Caligula in AD 39 and Claudius in AD 41), he spent eight years in exile, allegedly for an affair with Caligula's sister. Recalled in AD 49, he was made praetor and was appointed tutor to the boy who was to become, in AD 54, the emperor Nero. On Nero's succession, Seneca acted for some eight years as an unofficial chief minister. The early part of this reign was remembered as a period of sound government, for which the main credit seems due to Seneca. His control over Nero declined as enemies turned the emperor against him with representations that his popularity made him a danger, or with accusations of immorality or excessive wealth. Retiring from public life he devoted his last three years to philosophy and writing, particularly the **Letters to Lucilius**. In AD 65 following the discovery of a plot against the emperor, in which he was thought to be implicated, he and many others were compelled by Nero to commit suicide. His fame as an essayist and dramatist lasted until two or three centuries ago, when he passed into literary oblivion, from which the twentieth century has seen a considerable recovery.

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On the Shortness of Life

Most human beings, Paulinus,* complain about the meanness of nature, because we are born for a brief span of life, and because this spell of time that has been given to us rushes by so swiftly and rapidly that with very few exceptions life ceases for the rest of us just when we are getting ready for it. Nor is it just the man in the street and the unthinking mass of people who groan over this - as they see it - universal evil: the same feeling lies behind complaints from even distinguished men. Hence the dictum of the greatest of doctors:† 'Life is short, art is long.' Hence too the grievance, most improper to a wise man, which Aristotle expressed when he was taking nature to task for indulging animals with such long existences that they can live through five or ten human lifetimes, while a far shorter limit is set for men who are born to a great and extensive destiny. It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested.

* A friend of Seneca's.

† Hippocrates

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