

Ask HN: What is the most mind blowing book you've ever read?

122 points by Danilka 820 days ago | hide | past | web | 145 comments | favorite

I want to find the absolutely crazy-to-grasp book of all times.

Most articles related to this topic suggest something like the Fight Club. Even though, there are some good twists to the story, I feel like my mind could be blown away way more than that.

Needless to say that we are talking about a book for the HN audience.

sriku 820 days ago [-]

Gödel, Escher, Bach - An Eternal Golden Braid, by Douglas Hofstadter. Both a work of literary and technical genius.

Le ton beau de Marot, also by Douglas Hofstadter. Was blown by his description of how making the typographical choice of starting the first word of each chapter with letters decreasing in height to the normal page font size, caused him to rethink a whole chapter (he couldn't use descenders, which limits the first word, which limits his first sentence, which constrains his first paragraph and so on).

Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality, by Eliezer Yudkowsky. Every single chapter is potentially mind blowing. The whole approach of trying to instruct rationality through such fiction is itself brilliant I think.

raquo 820 days ago [-]

Re: Eliezer Yudkowsky, also "Three Worlds Collide":
<http://robinhanson.typepad.com/files/three-worlds-collide.pdf>...

BigCanOfTuna 820 days ago [-]

The Selfish Gene - Richard Dawkins. (http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Selfish_Gene)

The idea that organisms evolved to be survival vehicles for our genes totally inverted and simplified my view of life. It gave me a plausible explanation for how we came to be, and put the final nail in religion's coffin (for me).

hga 820 days ago [-]

Ditto for me, although not with quite the same effects. It ties into so many things in the real world; for us, e.g. "Worse is Better" (<https://www.dreamsongs.com/WorseIsBetter.html>) because it has survival value.

ThePhysicist 820 days ago [-]

"Human Evolution" by Robin Dunbar (<http://www.amazon.com/A-Pelican-Introduction-Human-Evolution...>)

The book is a mind-boggling journey through our own evolutionary history and delivers surprising and sometimes funny insights on many aspects of our behavior as modern humans (e.g. it attempts to explain the origins of religion, dancing and music). The beauty of the book lies in the fact that it makes you understand in detail which processes have transformed us from primates to modern humans. Truly fascinating, beautiful stuff.

Most people probably know Dunbar from "Dunbar's number", which relates the relative brain size of animals to the number of individuals with which they live together (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar%27s_number). This often (mis-)cited number is but one example of Dunbar's ingenious, math-driven approach to many problems in biology and evolution.

To maximize mind-blowing capacity, combine Dunbar with Jared Diamond's "The World Until Yesterday" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_World_Until_Yesterday), which explains how our ancestors and many traditional tribes lived (and sometimes still live), and "The Selfish Gene" by Richard Dawkins (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Selfish_Gene), which explains many aspects of life and social organization using mathematics and evolution theory.

For me, this stuff is more mysterious, thrilling and captivating than any fiction book I've ever read.

karuneshkaushal 820 days ago [-]

I read 'Guns, Germs and Steel' by Jared Diamond in College and it is single handedly the most insightful book I have ever read.

One of these days I will buy all of Jared Diamond's and Robert Greene's books and read them multiple times.

mrpsbrk 820 days ago [-]

'Guns, Germs and Steel' is pure geographical determinism, dressed up as something else.

cpach 820 days ago [-]

What is it more specifically that you disagree with in Diamond's theories?

wolf550e 820 days ago [-]

I suggest reading this:

https://www.reddit.com/r/badhistory/comments/2vf565/myths_of... and other posts in the AskHistorians SubReddit.

neilk 820 days ago [-]

Chomsky's oeuvre on politics, in general. There isn't one single book that states a thesis, it's about a perspective. So perhaps start with *The Chomsky Reader*. An easier-to-digest intro is the documentary *Manufacturing Consent*. The twist is that a lot of the things you think of as "bugs" in the political and economic systems of the Western democracies are "features" from the perspective of powerful elites. But the meta-lesson is that big questions can be answered. If you get past the mythology in your culture, and read primary sources, you can really figure this stuff out. Chomsky can go off the deep end at times (and his fanclub does so a lot), but his documentation is meticulous. Well worth reading.

For very different perspectives on programming, check out *Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programming* (read it a decade ago and I use techniques from there every day.)

The Gift by Lewis Hyde. Although directed at artists, it is highly relevant to creative programmers and the phenomenon of open source. He is able to articulate things which are very hard to talk about, like the intersection of economics and artistry, and how the gifting ethos is necessary for any culture to thrive. If you think ESR had the last word on how open source works, you need to read this.

Another book of interest by Hyde is *Trickster Makes This World*, wherein you learn the hacker archetype - the giver of technology; the player of tricks - has been around since prehistory. It's not a coincidence that those two aspects are always seen together.

devgutt 820 days ago [-]

Atlas Shrugged - Ayn Rand

also, not a book but very good "The last question" Isaac Asimov [1]

[1] http://www.multivax.com/last_question.html

vijayr 820 days ago [-]

Could you explain why you find Atlas Shrugged mind blowing? I read "we the living" and "The fountainhead" and found them quite annoying. Haven't read Atlas Shrugged, just curious if I am missing something.

abawany 819 days ago [-]

Not the GP but here is my answer.

NOTE1: spoiler alert.

NOTE2: please don't think of me as some heartless Objectivist - I have adjusted my views since I read it about 10 years ago but at the time, the following points were earth-shaking revelations to me:

- * It revealed to me how influence peddlers in society use a combination of coercion and guilt to suppress an individual's individuality
- * It revealed that these "thugs" are interested in suppressing your thoughts and controlling your money. I read this book during the Bush years and the

suppression of speech in the name of "patriotism" rang true, while prior regimes' punitive taxation policies also rang true as meeting Rand's definition of thugs.

* She basically posits that an individual's greatest purpose of existence is to create and to do the best for themselves that they can.

Within the above kernels, which with moderation I feel are very powerful insights, are interspersed a lot of distractions. Her writing style is retch-inducing and her hatred of native people in continents that were abused by colonialism is bafflingly naive. My edition of the book had about 1100 pages, 100 or so of which were Galt's long speech - it was an endeavor to finish this book but I am happy to have learnt the above insights.

semateos 815 days ago [-]

I appreciate the thoughtfulness of this response. I spent my high school junior year of english reading most of Rand and writing a 30 page paper on her. She has some very useful and powerful insights - but beyond my initial enthusiasm I grew to find her morally repulsive. There is some really weird shit in there like her constant need to be submissive to powerful men. Still, 20ish years later I'm a designer, engineer and entrepreneur and I find myself often referring to moments and characters in her books. However, I find it slightly upsetting that Atlas Shrugged is so often on people's #1 list.

sixaxe 820 days ago [-]

I read The Fountainhead when I was 18 and I found it absolutely mind blowing. Needless to say, I was quite impressionable at the time, and a young atheist. The book served as positive reinforcement to me, emphasizing on belief in oneself, rather than belief in God. It was also the perfect fodder for my teen angst, wrapped in delicious ideological and intellectual mysticism. This led me to be an unapologetic jerk to everyone around me for a year or so. I laugh thinking about it now.

semateos 815 days ago [-]

Hahahahaha - that's awesome. Just think - that happens to some people and lasts their whole life.

dylanjermiah 815 days ago [-]

>This led me to be an unapologetic jerk to everyone around me for a year or so.

How would that behaviour be rationalised from Fountainhead?

zodiac 815 days ago [-]

For me the main thing that Atlas Shrugged made me extend my conception of civil disobedience to economic laws. I believed that civil disobedience against for eg racial segregation laws is morally correct. Atlas Shrugged made me agree that in some cases, economic law can be unjust as well, and it would be moral to disobey it.

It did so by presenting a fictional instance of unjust economic laws. At least I read it as pure fiction - whether such unjust laws actually exist anywhere in the world is, I think, best treated as a completely separate question.

sergioschuler 815 days ago [-]

Atlas Shrugged is indeed mind blowing. The reason is because you can actually see this sort of thing happening (depending on where you are, in my case, Brazil).

It gave me a new respect for entrepreneurs.

sanketsaurav 820 days ago [-]

Contact, by Carl Sagan. One of my absolute favorites. It's such an intense book emotionally. I read it when I was 14. It changed how I looked at life in general.

SCHiM 820 days ago [-]

Gödel, Escher, Bach[1] has shaped the way I think in many ways and really warped my perspective on a lot of things.

There's also the Imperial Radch series which is a very, very good sci fi series which is unlike any other sf I've ever read[0].

[0]: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17333324-ancillary-justi...>

>Winner of the Hugo, Nebula, British Science Fiction, Locus and Arthur C. Clarke Awards.

[1]: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%B6del,_Escher,_Bach

junkblocker 820 days ago [-]

Ann Leckie was being touted as Iain M Bank's successor with her Imperial Radch series. But due to that expectation being set up I was underwhelmed. It was enjoyable on its own but doesn't compare in quality to Banks's works, e.g. Excession, in my opinion.

kbob 820 days ago [-]

Numerous people have already recommended Hofstadter, so I'll skip to:

The Moral Animal, Robert Wright. It looks at how natural selection applies to human cultures.

Debt: The First 5,000 Years, David Graeber. History of economic systems. Everything we know about money is one of many alternatives tried somewhere at some time.

Where Mathematics Comes From, George Lakoff. Presents the radical notion that math is not a truth we've discovered, but a byproduct of the organization of our brains. It looks at the evolution of the concept of infinity as an example, and so it resembles David Foster Wallace's Infinity and More.

I think these books all have the theme that what we think of as reality is just the current point on the random path of our culture's consensus. If that's not mind blowing, I can't help you. (-:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Moral_Animal

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debt:_The_First_5000_Years

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where_Mathematics_Comes_From

tokenadult 820 days ago [-]

The Nature of Paleolithic Art by R. Dale Guthrie.[1] I accidentally chanced upon this book in a library catalog search while looking for something else. The author is a biologist based at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who specializes in late Pleistocene megafauna (including *Homo sapiens*) and who is a very skilled visual artist himself. He analyzes most of the surviving rock art from the earliest period of human art around the world and along the way discusses hunting, ancient art technique, sex, and the nature of human nature. The book is full of interesting illustrations and lots of food for thought.

[1] <http://www.amazon.com/The-Nature-Paleolithic-Dale-Guthrie/dp...>

nish1500 820 days ago [-]

I am biased towards fiction.

To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee. The timeless beauty and innocence of the book remains unparalleled.

Light in August, by William Faulkner. It is the opposite of the above, dealing with complex emotions. Faulkner's prose and characters are unmatched in their depth.

jepper 820 days ago [-]

The Selfish Gene - Dawkins, The Red Queen - Ridley

I've read these books midway through high school, already interested in biology and medicine. The depth and complexity of how life forms handle evolutionary pressure is mind blowing. Why you favor relatives over strangers, the competition between mother and child, progress through collaboration of genes etc. You see the world completely differently (after reading many more books on geology, genetics, anthropology, anatomy, cellular biology etc) afterwards.

For a novel: Cryptonomicon by Neal Stephenson,

Truely changed how I look at computers and encryption as a not mathematically inclined reader. Building a computer out of church pipe organ components etc.

minikomi 820 days ago [-]

Solaris by Stanisław Lem. Well, maybe the loneliest might be a more accurate description.

lake99 820 days ago [-]

The Selfish Gene -- Richard Dawkins. Not crazy to grasp, but figuring out how nature works is mind blowing. Of all the books I have gifted to people, this one tops the list.

Symmetry 820 days ago [-]

I'm just going to answer with the books that rearranged my understanding of the world the most. In no particular order.

"Thinking Fast and Slow" by Daniel Kahneman.

"Quantum Computing since Democritus" by Scott Aaronson.

"The Strategy of Conflict" by Thomas Schelling.

"Guns, Germs, and Steel" and "The World until Yesterday" by Jared Diamond.

"The Retreat To Commitment" by W. W. Bartley.

"The Myth of the Rational Voter" by Bryan Caplan. Despite the name it made me appreciate democracy a lot more.

"Wars, Guns, and Votes" by Paul Collier.

eveningcoffee 819 days ago [-]

> "The Strategy of Conflict" by Thomas Schelling.

"Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace" by Edward N. Luttwak

yodsanklai 820 days ago [-]

1984 made a very strong impression on me.

sergioschuler 815 days ago [-]

Great book!

fsloth 820 days ago [-]

Neal Stephenson's Anathem is fairly mind blowing if read in the correct mindset.

jen729w 820 days ago [-]

Dan Simmonds' Hyperion/The Fall of Hyperion. Astonishingly good SF.

dmux 820 days ago [-]

His last name is Simmons. And the Hyperion Cantos is an excellent series. His other books are worth reading too: Summer of Night, The Terror.

nirai 820 days ago [-]

The Feynman lectures - <http://www.feynmanlectures.caltech.edu/>

For me it consistently produces one OMG or more per chapter.

dikaiosune 820 days ago [-]

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov. The core story is one of stalinist Faust but the whole arc is much better.

eveningcoffee 819 days ago [-]

This is "a little" off topic but I wanted to share experience. I have been lucky to have been seen Simon McBurney's interpretation of The Master and Margarita in the theatre. The tram scene with Pontius Pilate just blew me away.

jonathansizz 820 days ago [-]

Mind-blowing for those who've read 'The Selfish Gene' and thought it explained everything about evolution:

'The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme', SJ Gould and RC Lewontin

'The Origins of Genome Architecture', M Lynch

'Mutation-Driven Evolution', M Nei

folli 820 days ago [-]

Regarding 'the selfish gene', I still think that the concept that the gene is the unit of evolution and the resulting organism is just its proxy, is one of the greatest insights since Darwin.

mrpsbrk 820 days ago [-]

Be that as it might, that is not Dawkins' idea (i believe the foremost thinker in that regard is W. D. Hamilton), what Dawkins did was just giving it the catchy name.

cpach 820 days ago [-]

'folli never claimed it was Dawkins' idea ;-)

"what Dawkins did was just giving it the catchy name"

Well, he also wrote an accessible book on the subject. And that book is littered with references to other literature on the subject.

mrpsbrk 820 days ago [-]

Also Lynn Margulis. <http://discovermagazine.com/2011/apr/16-interview-lynn-margu...>

s_baby 820 days ago [-]

I've never read that particular Gould book but I have to agree his ideas on biology are pretty mind blowing and more relevant than ever.

fbrusch 820 days ago [-]

"The Beginning of Infinity", from David Deutsch, in which evolution, Popper epistemology and theory of computation blend into a world view fruitful of thrilling perspectives for humanity. To me, as mind blowing as anything can ever be.

wensheng 820 days ago [-]

The Mind's I, by Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett

Blowed my mind when I read the Chinese translation of this book 25 years ago in College.

qubex 820 days ago [-]

The Computational Beauty of Nature by Gary William Flake (1997)

https://books.google.it/books/about/The_Computational_Beauty...

A totally astounding introduction to how computing fits into the broader scale of understanding other phenomena in our everyday scientific lives — and, unlike most "oh wide-eyed wonder!" popsci books it contains code, equations, and deeply significant diagrams.

aida_mirbadi 820 days ago [-]

"The Four Agreements" by Don Miguel Ruiz.

This book advocates personal freedom from beliefs and agreements that we have made with ourselves and others that are creating limitation and unhappiness in our lives.

tpfacek 820 days ago [-]

It sounds like you're asking for Gravity's Rainbow, which is the predecessor of both Neal Stephenson and the Illuminatus trilogy, and 10x more annoying to decode.

davidy123 820 days ago [-]

(Trouble on) Triton, by Samuel Delaney. I read a lot of sf in my early teens (in the late 70s), all the classic space-ship stuff, this was one of the first that in a very real way brushed all that aside and exposed more about individual values, by following a protagonist who really wasn't admirable. If you aren't just looking to excite yourself about the amazing possibilities of science and advantage, it's highly recommended.

ludicast 819 days ago [-]

Cool seeing his name. I grew up about 3 blocks from him and his daughter Iva (he was gay and had Iva with a lesbian poet (actually think they were married, not sure if it was just an arrangement though)). Iva was my best friend when I was pre-school age, fwiw :).

Have a lot of great memories of him and his daughter. Now that I have young kids of my own, every so often something reminds me of those days.

kweinber 820 days ago [-]

The Denial of Death by Becker. (The discussions of homosexuality are outdated but the rest is amazing).

The Wisdom of Insecurity by Watts helped center my adolescence.

ymse 820 days ago [-]

War with the Newts (1936) by Karel Čapek (of R.U.R. fame). Classical sci-fi novel and political satire in which a new intelligent breed of Newts are taking over the world and no-one realizes before it's too late. Still relevant today.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_with_the_Newts

ThePhysicist 820 days ago [-]

Seconded. Great political science-fiction!

golemotron 820 days ago [-]

'The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature' by Steven Pinker.

semateos 815 days ago [-]

Yes! Would highly recommend that one or 'How the Mind Works' by Pinker. I'm constantly blown away by how few people are aware of modern cognitive science and just how much we DO understand about the operation of the mind. It's also super useful if you do any kind design, UX, marketing or interact with other humans.

boothead 819 days ago [-]

The most awesome book I'm currently reading is "Custard, Cakes and Category Theory" by Eugenia Cheng [1]. It's already bringing some much needed back ground, some "why", to my much neglected maths education.

On a more spiritual note, I'd also recommend Mindsight by Dan Siegel [2]. An excellent book for getting some intuition into how people's past experiences shape them. The Trauma of Everyday life by Mark Epstein [3] blends teachings of Buddhism and mindfulness with the life long lessons of a Psychotherapist.

[1] <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Cakes-Custard-Category-Theory-unders...>

[2] <http://www.drdansiegel.com/books/mindsight/2/>

[3] <http://markepsteinmd.com/>

tonyedgecombe 820 days ago [-]

Walden by Thoreau

Not mind blowing in that there was any startling revelations in it, rather that reading and absorbing it changed my outlook on many things.

hugocaracoll 818 days ago [-]

Funny you say that. I'm going to buy Walden today :)

manlio 820 days ago [-]

Lots of good essays already, so I'll chime in with some literature/fiction suggestions off the top of my head:

- Borges, Ficciones (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficciones>); that's the quintessence of mind-blowing literature: an unparalleled mix of genius, culture and crazy imagination.

- Celine, Journey to the End of the Night; a harsh, hopeless journey to the bottom of humanity. It's not an easy read even though the style is so simple. Think Houellebecq, but much better :)

- Dostoyevsky; I was obsessed with him when I was younger. "Notes from the underground" is one of the best introductions to existential nihilism I can think of. "The Idiot" one of the few books that made me cry.

- The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony; if you're into Greek literature, this book will become your Bible; it requires a lot of attention and dedication though, it's incredibly dense.

glaberficken 820 days ago [-]

2 great sf books

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flatland> Set as a satire of Victorian society "The story describes a two-dimensional world occupied by geometric figures, whereof women are simple line-segments, while men are polygons with various numbers of sides. The narrator is a square named A Square, a member of the caste of gentlemen and professionals, who guides the readers through some of the implications of life in two dimensions."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Black_Cloud I won't spoil this one for you, it's just a really interesting and suspenseful sf story. Richard Dawkins (writing in the 2010 Penguin Classics reissue) claimed the novel was "one of the greatest science fiction novels ever written."

walterbell 820 days ago [-]

Any of the novels by sci-fi and fantasy author R.A. Lafferty, http://en.m.wikiquote.org/wiki/R._A._Lafferty, because they contain allusions to centuries worth of mind-blowing books, in addition to being unlike any other author.

werber 820 days ago [-]

Letters from an American farmer, it radically shifted my understanding of early American identity and the rationalization of exploitation that still exist.

http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letters_from_an_American_Farm...

jestinjoy1 820 days ago [-]

The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives

This changed how I look at my life

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Drunkards-Walk-Randomness-Rules/dp...>

century19 819 days ago [-]

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess. There is an invented slang used in the book, which make the first pages difficult, as you have to work out what is being said. But the book is much richer for it.

brown-dragon 820 days ago [-]

"The Gods Themselves" is a easy to read but truly mind blowing book. Asimov's characters are a bit wooden but the ideas in the book really got me to look at the world differently.

The line "I have an idea, a simple idea, based on the quite obvious fact that the number two is ridiculous and can't exist." has stayed with me for over a decade now as has the surprising lovemaking of the aliens.

For a hard read that you may enjoy I'd suggest "The Book of the New Sun". I'm re-reading it for the fourth time and it just gets better.

tzs 820 days ago [-]

There's an interesting song based on the moral conflict faced by the three aliens in "The Gods Themselves", by Bob Kanefsky, and sung by Julia Ecklar: [1].

Kanefsky may be familiar to many HN readers for his song "Eternal Flame", about the superiority of Lisp to other languages, also sung by Julia Ecklar [2].

[1] [http://www.last.fm/music/Julia+Ecklar/_/Meltdown+\(Julia+Eckl...](http://www.last.fm/music/Julia+Ecklar/_/Meltdown+(Julia+Eckl...)

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-OjTPj7K54>

brown-dragon 817 days ago [-]

Ha! That was excellent! :-D :-D

ThomPete 820 days ago [-]

The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind

<http://www.amazon.com/Origin-Consciousness-Breakdown-Bicamer...>

I found it on this list:

<http://spacecollective.org/wilfriedhouiebek/4076/Summery-Boo...>

Where also the following books some of which I read to (Vehicles is really good) can be found:

The White Goddess - Robert Graves

Graves' grammar of poetic myth works at so many levels at the same time that I can't keep track of them all. This is not a book, this is a neurosis you can borrow. Druidic power to the nerds.

The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind - Julian Jaynes

Never mind the bulky title. The theory of Jaynes seems preposterous at first: before man was conscious he would not stop and think when making a decision, instead he would literally hear a voice telling him what to do. When life became too complicated this faculty broke down, but not in an instant. Religion is a by-product of this neuro-catastrophe. Jaynes however knows to make use of historic material in such a way that in the course of his argument he becomes plausible! If you don't trust me on this, trust Daniel Dennett.

The Ghost of Chance - William S. Burroughs

Burroughs was a great admirer of Jaynes and here he uses the bicameral image of two dividing brain spheres as a metaphor for the divide between peaceful lemur on Madagascar and the war-mongering chimpanzee on the African mainland as a reminder that human evolution could have taken a better turn.

Ancient Evenings - Norman Mailer

This book, the only lengthy novel in this list, I first looked up because Burroughs referenced it as his inspiration for 'The Western Lands'. When I noticed it starts with my favourite Yeats quote I knew I needed to read this. Even though Burroughs could never have written it like this, at times it is more Burroughs than Burroughs himself. It is the autobiography of a Ka, the lowliest soul of the seven souls of the ancient Egyptians, which makes for unusual reading. Especially because Mailer uses an uncensored version of Egyptian mythology which, to put it mildly, differs from the version you get of it from the National Geographic. The Egyptians practised sex magic with the stamina of a bonobo. Mailer makes Aleister Crowley look like a prudish schoolboy. This is the boldest attempt to recreate a radically different mind from ours that I know of, and does so successfully. The novel as the creation of an artificial consciousness. At the same time it doubles as an All American Novel (yuk).

The Mind in the Cave - David Lewis-Williams

Palaeolithic Psychedelia anyone? Close your eyes, place a finger on both of your eyelids and press gently. What you see is the origin of all art, you only need to look at rock-art with a guide like Lewis-Williams to see it.

The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry - Ernest Fenollosa

Edited by Ezra Pound, the most spectacular misunderstanding of language ever to be reprinted. It reads excellent and it gives us a language (Chinoiserie-Chinese) that does not exist in this world but should exist in a better world.

Vehicles - Valentino Braitenberg

I have read so much stuff relating to Cybernetics, AI, emergent systems and self-organization that I am totally saturated with it. The material itself is exciting but the professional obligation of science to be dull gets on my nerves. But this is an exception, wonderfully written and illustrated with funky little drawings. Vehicles is a tiny book but its size is deceptive. This introduction to synthetic psychology describes a number of simple responsive vehicles that with each new feature became aware of the world around them a good deal more. Each new vehicle is a new mind.

The Coleridge Notebooks.

Charles Lamb said he loved to lend his books to 'Poet, Metaphysician, Bard' Coleridge because he would return them with annotations more interesting than the book itself. Samuel Taylor Coleridge had a mind that was free, discursive, unruly and truly original. His notebooks record the flow of his thoughts as if you are sitting next to him. Every now and then I dip into this and always come out with some gem I never saw before. Get the Seamus Perry edition of this. Get a copy of the Road to Xanadu by Livingstone-Lowes for extra enjoyment.

profexile 815 days ago [-]

I'll second Jaynes. I re-read it from time to time, and afterwards, feel like I understand what is actually going on in the world, briefly. Maybe if I read it back to back with "The City and The City"..? Or, maybe that's ill advised.

jrs235 820 days ago [-]

"I want to find the absolutely crazy-to-grasp book of all times."

Gödel, Escher, Bach - An Eternal Golden Braid, by Douglas Hofstadter. Anytime I start reading a story which contains recursiveness my mind will feel warped and stuck in a loop at times.

<http://amzn.to/1KjebX> (affiliate link)

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0465026567> (non affiliate link)

nathell 820 days ago [-]

Daniel Keyes, Flowers for Algernon. Both the short story and the book (I read the book first, so I'm more attached to it). It is still deeply moving after all these rereads, decades on.

radicalbyte 820 days ago [-]

These all had a profound effect on me; especially Dune..

Flowers for Algernon, Daniel Keyes Dune Series, Frank Herbert Foundation Series, Isaac Asimov Calculus Made Easy Paperback, Silvanus P. Thompson

tammer 819 days ago [-]

Mimesis & Alterity - Michael Taussig[1]

Building on philosophical ideas from the Frankfurt school Taussig strings together ethnographic examples & historical vignettes to outline the human faculty for mimicry, and how it permeates everyday life.

[1]: https://books.google.com/books/about/Mimesis_and_Alterity.ht...

gt565k 815 days ago [-]

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience <http://www.amazon.com/Flow-Psychology-Experience-Perennial-C...>

It really has opened my eyes about how to deal with having a negative attitude and understanding the driving forces behind being in the "flow"

timtas 815 days ago [-]

"The Road to Serfdom" by Friedrich Hayek [1]

"Novum Organum" by Francis Bacon [2]

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Road_to_Serfdom

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novum_Organum

bichiliad 820 days ago [-]

I really liked Kafka on the Shore by Haruki Murakami, although most of Murakami's stuff is pretty amazing. He does short stories for the New Yorker every now and then, too:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/kino>

apricot 820 days ago [-]

Maybe not mind-blowing but life-altering: The Turing Omnibus, by A.K. Dewdney. I read it while in high school and it made me decide to learn computer science. It has 50 short chapters on things like RSA cryptography, the halting problem, logic circuits, perceptrons.

For fiction, Ted Chiang is my go-to author when I want my mind blown.

mknits 820 days ago [-]

Fooled By Randomness - Nassim Nicholas Taleb

vlow 820 days ago [-]

"Your Brain at Work" by David Rock is full of insights about the human brain in daily situations. What makes it different from many other neuro-biology books is that it does not only present

scientific knowledge but enables you to put that knowledge to use immediately. It really changed my way of thinking.

puranjay 820 days ago [-]

Immortality by Milan Kundera

It made me think about mortality, love and sexuality in ways I'd never thought of before

mkamdar 815 days ago [-]

Reasons and Persons by Derek Parfit

<http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2010/03/boo...>

dietrichepp 820 days ago [-]

If you want "crazy-to-grasp", you want Ulysses, To the Lighthouse, Gravity's Rainbow, Infinite Jest, Moby Dick, House of Leaves, etc.

Not that "crazy-to-grasp" approximates "good" in any way.

knowuh 815 days ago [-]

"Vehicles: Experiments in Synthetic Psychology" by Valentino Braitenberg is a quick read, and fun thought experiment. It's inspirational for engineering tinkering types.

franciscop 820 days ago [-]

Battle Royale. The movie is, from western/hollywood point of view, really bad. But the book is the most shocking book I've ever read. Don't read if you are sensitive though ;

fakturk 820 days ago [-]

The Third Wave - Alvin Toffler

Listen Little Man - Wilhelm Reich

Praise to Hell - Gunduz Vassaf (actually I read this book in turkish and I don't know if it translated to english but I still want to recommend this one)

moubarak 819 days ago [-]

It's a religious scripture. Unfortunately you need to learn Arabic first. Translations don't do it justice to say the least. The book is called The Quran. It talks about parallel universes, "aliens", super heroes, travelling through space and time, how ants communicate, and even modern superpower alliances. It's a hard read even if you know Arabic. For instance, reading a phrase from the first chapter will not make sense unless you reach later chapters. It even has encrypted letter combinations that have not been unlocked yet. i've read it twice from cover to cover, and about to start my third.

Sven7 819 days ago [-]

It's nonsense written 1500 years ago which is why it's hard to read. There are interesting themes. Great poetry but nothing too "mind blowing" when compared with similar texts of the period from other religions and cultures.

moubarak 819 days ago [-]

Your opinion of the book is interesting. is it safe to say that you haven't read it? i'm assuming that because there is no poetry in there. Just assuming. Otherwise your opinion is interesting because there is a large group of people who share the same. i personally found it mind blowing.

Edit: Typo

bencoder 820 days ago [-]

Permutation City, by Greg Egan. It's one of my favourites.

ValleyOfTheMtns 820 days ago [-]

Yes, the first few chapters were mind-bogglingly good. Loses its punch towards the end, but the first two thirds floored me.

ConceptJunkie 820 days ago [-]

Greg Bear's "The City At The End of Time" It has its flaws, but there are more cool SF ideas in this book than practically anything I've ever read.

Loks002 820 days ago [-]

When rabbit howls. I don't remember the author, but it will definitely make you look at things differently. I also really liked lullaby by Chuck Palahniuk.

Cyph0n 820 days ago [-]

Check out the excellent, and recently translated, Chinese scifi novel "The Three Body Problem".

Grimwood's "Replay" is a great time travel novel if you're into that.

pacnw 820 days ago [-]

Anything by Phillip K. Dick. Start with the Valis Trilogy.

jacobroufa 818 days ago [-]

I'd have to recommend the Manifold trilogy by Stephen Baxter. I know it's not a book, but as a whole entity, it deserves to be looked at.

bosky101 820 days ago [-]

Banker to the poor - the story of Muhammad Yusuf 's grameen & micro-finance, over-coming odds, and a good read if you are curious about lending.

teenie 815 days ago [-]

TIE!!! "The Crying of Lot 49" by Pynchon // "The Demolished Man" by Bester // "Ubik" by Dick !!!

dmux 820 days ago [-]

If on a Winter's Night, a Traveler -- Italo Calvino

shervinafshar 820 days ago [-]

The most "meta" book I've ever read. Fantastic approach to the methods of narrative in novel and kind of an homage to Borges and Bulgakov among other masters.

atirip 820 days ago [-]

Hobbit. I was young then. No book after that came close.

mikefantast 820 days ago [-]

Hofstadter - GEB - for sure

The Malazan Book of the Fallen (10 volumes) - Stephen Erikson - redefines impenetrable

Use of Weapons by Iain M Banks - master of the interwoven narrative

iliaznk 820 days ago [-]

Fiction: 'Anna Karenina' & 'War and Peace' by L. Tolstoy. Non-fiction: 'Quantum Psychology' by R.A. Wilson.

jessup 820 days ago [-]

"Elements of Set Theory" by Herbert B. Enderton....

$R \approx P(N)$

jgrzynski 815 days ago [-]

Infinite Jest - David Foster Wallace
The Making of the Atomic Bomb - Richard Rhodes
Foucault's Pendulum - Umberto Eco

afshinmeh 820 days ago [-]

The alchemist - Paulo Coelho

I've read it several times and each time I found something interesting that I didn't notice.

shervinafshar 820 days ago [-]

It's a nice, romantic take on a narrative called "The Tale of Two Dreamers" which influenced many others writers (such as Borges) and can be traced back to "The Thousand and One Nights":

<https://books.google.com/books?id=Y0i8aZ94CJUC&lpg=PA514&ots...>

hugodahl 820 days ago [-]

"JOB: A Comedy of Justice" by Robert Heinlein

"Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" by Robert M. Pirsing

onnoonno 817 days ago [-]

> "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" by Robert M. Pirsing

Seconded. I think this one does a good job at resetting one's worldview to the state of 'what do we actually know?'

mjclin 820 days ago [-]

Finite and Infinite Games by James Carse

JasonBlantonUX 819 days ago [-]

Tractatus Logico Philosophicus by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Considered to be the philosopher's philosopher!

tmej 820 days ago [-]

Brave New World - Aldous Huxley

Opened my mind and put into writing some of the things I'd been contemplating.

Jach 820 days ago [-]

Military Nanotechnology: Potential Applications and Preventive Arms Control - Jürgen Altmann

dade_ 820 days ago [-]

Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West by John Ralston Saul

swatkat 820 days ago [-]

"Freedom from the Known" by J. Krishnamurti.

"I Am That" by Nisargadatta Maharaj.

curiousfab 820 days ago [-]

"Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees" by Roger Fouts.

hariis 815 days ago [-]

Learn to Meditate. It will "blow away your Mind". No kidding.

vermooten 820 days ago [-]

Raintree County by Ross Lockridge Jr. Man the ending destroyed me...

fenomas 820 days ago [-]

Foucault's Pendulum.

slilo 820 days ago [-]

The Reader (Der Vorleser)

shervinafshar 820 days ago [-]

I watched the movie and find the narrative fascinating and have the book in my to-read list. Was the movie faithful to the book (in case you watched it as well)?

kseistrup 820 days ago [-]

"Mind Magic: Doorways Into Higher Consciousness" by Bill Harvey

umbs 820 days ago [-]

Autobiography of a Yogi by Sri Paramahansa Yogananda

skilesare 820 days ago [-]

The Nature of Order - Chris Alexander. Full Stop.

chadzawistowski 819 days ago [-]

I'd like to second this, but the books can be quite expensive! The library at my university had a copy of the series; make sure to check your own local libraries.

Simulacra 820 days ago [-]

Really a tie between Blink, and Atlas Shrugged.

cthrex 815 days ago [-]

"The Blank Slate" by Steven Pinker

hackrobat 819 days ago [-]

The Tao of Programming, by Geoffrey James.

justintocci 820 days ago [-]

human life values i started this book as a child thinking I was an adult. i finished it and i really was.

utefan001 820 days ago [-]

Sgt. Rock. Last warrior standing.

costea 820 days ago [-]

Ernst Gombrich - The story of art

nkoren 820 days ago [-]

Star Maker, by Olav Stapledon.

dschiptsov 820 days ago [-]

Upanishads.

sciencesama 819 days ago [-]

what !! how can i read that can you refer to a particular author ?

atsaloli 815 days ago [-]

The authorship of most Upanishads is uncertain and unknown. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upanishads>

t0rb3n 820 days ago [-]

Doug Hoyte - Let Over Lambda

megalodon 820 days ago [-]

Freedom by Jonathan Franzen

dbcooper 820 days ago [-]

Crash by J.G. Ballard.

benihana 820 days ago [-]

Catch-22.

We're all playing a game and most of us aren't even aware that we can choose not to play. Yossarian is one of the bravest characters in all of literature. He stays true to himself even in the face of overwhelming evidence that all of the world disagrees with him.

hoers 820 days ago [-]

Crazy to Grasp:

- Hermann Hesse - The Glass Bead Game
- Hofstadter - Gödel, Escher, Bach
- Bulgakov - Master and Margherita
- Melville - Moby Dick
- Joyce - Ulysses
- Everything by Baudrillard (esp. 'Agony of Power')
- Everything by William Burroughs (The ticket that exploded, Place of dead roads, Discipline of DE)

Not that crazy to grasp, but still amazing:

- Everything by Egon Friedell (mostly Historical, unbelievably dense and awesome)
- Chatwin - Songlines
- Ludwig Marcuse - Philosophy of Happiness / Philosophy of Unhappiness

tptacek 820 days ago [-]

Love that Bulgakov book (apparently the translation you pick matters a lot, but I wouldn't know, since my sister gave it to me as a gift).

I like the Hesse book a lot, although the metaphor is more powerful to me than the book, which is probably not the first Hesse book I'd suggest.

hoers 818 days ago [-]

Yeah sadly a lot of books from the former soviet union are still circulating with horrible translations (if any). I can't really give a recommendation either because I read it in german.

And truth to what you say about the glass bead game, the first 200 pages are a torture, but I still cherish it even for the metaphor alone. Do you know of any book that does a better job bringing that across? That'd be very interesting.

+ Edit to my post: Meant to put Finnegans wake to Joyce, not Ulysses! (even thought that's a pretty decent mindbender in itself)

+ Some I forgot:

- C G Jung - The Red Book (get the readers edition)
 - Nobody mentioned McKenna! 'True Hallucinations' for example. Skip everything to do with I Ching and Timewave.
 - Illuminatus! trilogy was only mentioned once for some reason (but then horrible to read)
 - Toffler - Third Wave
 - Gibson - Neuromancer
 - Hesse - Demian
 - P K Dick - Electric Sheep
 - J A West - Serpent in the sky
 - R A Wilson - Prometheus Rising
- and some awesomely trippy, mindbending 'children's books':
- Preußler - Krabat
 - Lindgreen - Brothers Lionheart
 - Ende - Momo

indoindo 820 days ago [-]

Reflection on freewill by Sam Harris

jackr9 820 days ago [-]

The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari

9/5/2017

Ask HN: What is the most mind blowing book you've ever read? | Hacker News

sciencesama 819 days ago [-]

good collection :)

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