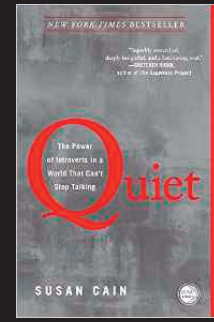


Quiet

The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking



Review by Scott Jackson

Book by Susan Cain | Published by Crown | © 2012



Why are some people the life of the party while others can't wait to get home and into their pajamas? This book provides answers relevant to both introverts and extroverts alike whether we're at work or play.

Quiet is a highly thought-provoking read. As the title suggests, it's based on the premise that introverts are unfairly stigmatized in current culture. After all, as the book's author is quick to point out, some of mankind's most celebrated accomplishments—from the theory of relativity, to Harry Potter, to the electronic device you may be reading this on—would not have happened without the contribution of introverts.

Writer/psychologist Susan Cain found the most challenging part of her training while at Harvard Law School was conquering her fear of public speaking. This led her to appreciate the distinct differences between introverts and extroverts, and the dramatic impact these differences made on people's abilities to succeed or fail at everyday tasks.

Cain wrote *Quiet* over the course of seven years and realized introversion was something she'd been grappling with her whole life. This book is her contribution to making sense of our increasingly complicated world. *Quiet* offers insightful advice on:

- ✓ comprehending how Western culture came to be dominated by extroverts
- ✓ determining what makes Western and Eastern cultures so different
- ✓ understanding whether or not character traits are genetic or learned
- ✓ becoming an effective public speaker
- ✓ what to do when you're an introvert and your partner is an extrovert
- ✓ raising the introverted child

Initial Insights

Well-researched yet touching a raw nerve, the first part of *Quiet* analyzes the evolution of what the author calls the “Culture of Personality” prevalent in North American society. There’s also a fascinating discussion on the differences (and potential causes of friction) between Asian and American cultural norms. Cain doesn’t neglect to delve into whether nature or nurture determines introversion and extroversion characteristics. She then has some practical advice on coping mechanisms for introverts—tips about public speaking, what to do if you’re an introvert but your partner’s an extrovert, and recommendations on parenting and educating introverts.

Extroverts Rule the West

Cain contends that the rise of Dale Carnegie-style self-improvement promoters closely parallels the cultural evolution of America during the early 20th century, resulting in the “personality-driven consumerism” we know today. North American and European societies developed an aversion to the meek and subdued intellectual, preferring gusto and bravado instead. This is exemplified by, for instance, Americans’ obsession with movie stars as role models of personal magnetism. The damaging term “inferiority complex” eventually came to refer to those with debilitating shyness.

There’s a highly-entertaining anecdote about Cain attending a frenzied workshop by American motivational speaker Tony Robbins. The whole experience strikes her as the antithesis of introversion, and to a quiet person like Cain, he appears to be the King of Hucksterism in what she calls the “Culture of Personality.” In a similar vein, the renowned Harvard Business School is shown to display an obvious preference for extroverts in its student body. Both support the fallacy that assertive people are smarter than introverts, and hold themselves up as models for vocal leadership. Cain contrasts these examples to black civil rights leader Rosa Parks, an unassuming figure, but one with integrity and moral fortitude.

Cain also singles out the autobiography of Apple co-founder and passionate introvert Stephen Wozniak, who touts the benefits of introversion in relation to creativity; he states emphatically that “artists work best alone.” Why then do most modern institutions organize schools and workspace into team environments? Cain calls this contemporary phenomenon the “New Groupthink,” and claims it perpetuates the myth of creative brainstorming. Unassuming introverts don’t perform well in team brainstorming sessions but are pressured into participating because that’s the American standard.

Clash of Western and Eastern Sensibilities

Quiet points out that, in stark contrast to these entrenched North American archetypes, Asian Americans value quiet intellectualism, study and filial obedience, and often have trouble adjusting to the American ideals of vocal aggression. In the West, it’s all about group domination and glorifying enthusiastic extrovert behavior whereas Eastern society more closely resembles a communal-hive mentality, where people revere the ancient proverb that “silence is golden.” On a related note, the legacy of gentle Mahatma Gandhi takes the Eastern approach one step further with “passive resistance.” Cain concludes that aggressive power beats you up; soft power wins you over.

Character Traits: Genetic or Learned?

Are introversion and extroversion physiologically based? Or do we all juggle an intricate interaction between the two? Case studies referred to in *Quiet* suggest it's a little bit of both.

Cain refers to renowned psychologist Jerome Kagan, who conducted a long-term study doing periodic check-ins with children as they grew older. He found that children who reacted more to stimuli and processed information more deeply, were probably introverts; whereas children who reacted the least to stimuli were probably extroverts—and that these characteristics stayed with them into adulthood. One of Kagan's students, Dr. Carl Schwartz, conducted brain-mapping work using a functional magnetic resonance imaging—or fMRI—machine that seems to support Kagan's theories about personality characteristics staying constant into adulthood.

On the other hand, psychologists in the 1960s theorized that people juggle amounts of stimulation to find a manageable combination, a “just right” level. Combining the two approaches suggests we're born with character traits that we retain into adulthood, but we attempt to compensate for these by varying the amount of stimulation we absorb.

“Are introversion and extroversion physiologically based? Or do we all juggle an intricate interaction between the two?”

Tips on Public Speaking

Drawing on her own experience, Cain suggests that the best way for introverts to get up in front of people and be an effective public speaker is to offset over-stimulation with advance preparation and rehearsal.

She tells the story of accomplished public speaker and introvert, Harvard University Professor Brian Little, who believes in a “Free Trait Theory”—that we all have fixed personality traits but can act like our opposite character on occasion for the sake of projects we're extremely passionate about. (Note, though, introverts will need “restorative niche” time afterwards to revert to their true selves.)

How do you know what you're really passionate about? Cain's formula entails first reflecting back on your childhood interests to resurrect what really grabbed you when you were young. Next, think about the type of work you enjoy doing today. The final factor is to notice what it is you covet. With the answers to these questions, you'll find the confidence to speak about the things you truly care about.

When You're an Introvert and Your Partner is an Extrovert...

The story of Eleanor and Franklin Delano Roosevelt is held up as a classic pairing of introvert and extrovert personalities. While the firebrand FDR became known one of the most beloved Presidents of the United States, Eleanor became, for him, the quiet and unassuming voice of the dispossessed in America.

Opposite personality types often attract each other, but the key to consistently getting along, and ultimately staying together, is conscientious empathy to meet each other's needs. Cain warns of mislabeling introvert/extrovert conflicts under the guise of other popular labels—such as the *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* characterization. And note that in confrontational exchanges, blowing off steam doesn't help; it appears to make things worse.

Raising the Introverted Child

Cain concludes with recommendations for teachers and parents to unearth the untapped potential in introverted children. These include easing them into new situations, steering clear of calling them shy, and avoiding overstimulation. Cain posits that many schools are designed with the extroverted child in mind and suggests you look at this in a new light. It may not be a simple case of your child not playing well with others; it may be that they're happier in a natural state of autonomy. Lastly, on the home front, be aware of poor "parent-child" pairings—parents whose personality types are opposite their children's and who try to correct their behavior.

Parting Thoughts

There's a subtle undercurrent of cynicism throughout *Quiet* which can be endearing in its own way, almost as if you're being shown flashes of the intimate side of author Susan Cain. Her little digs recounting her own experience with self-help guru Tony Robbins are a revealing example, as the introvert in her resists being forced out of her comfort zone. All told, Susan Cain is a huge champion of the introvert, and she's bared a great deal of her soul in this book; you have to admire her courage in doing so. It's quite the achievement for a shy and sensitive soul! Once in a while, a book comes along that offers convincing new insights. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* is one such book.

About the Author



SUSAN CAIN is an American writer whose work on introversion and shyness has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Time*, the *Guardian*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, and on PsychologyToday.com, among others. She practiced corporate law for seven years and has taught negotiation skills at corporations, law firms, and universities. Additionally, her record-smashing 2012 TED Talk has been viewed more than 15 million times. She is an honors graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School, and lives in the Hudson River Valley.

Also by Susan Cain

- *Quiet Power: The Secret Strengths of Introverts*, with Gregory Mone and Erica Moroz, Penguin Random House, © 2016, ISBN 978-0803740600.