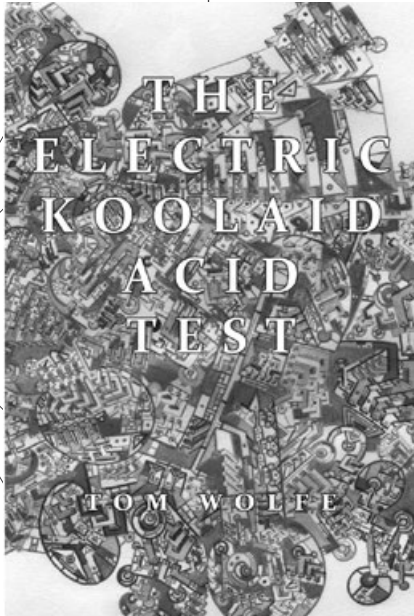




EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT ACID

BOOK REVIEW
BY FARES BOU NASSIF



I wrote about unicorns once, but I was talking about green and brown unicorns with little to no real magic to them. This time, I’m paying attention to the colourful unicorns that pepper the literary marvel that is *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe. You almost want to think it’s a fictional novel, because there’s no chance in hell a world like the one he describes could ever come back. It’s not fiction, it’s that gonzo journalism that Hunter S. Thompson made popular around his time, done Tom Wolfe style. It’s a book that made me wonder how much more creatively enthused Amsterdam might have been if I’d moved here two decades ago instead of now.

There’s something about the third quarter of the twentieth century that made American literature so fascinating, that let artists conceive of things as absurd and fantastic as “twenty four inch” instead of “two foot”, as wildly enthused as *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, or as massively captivating as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The sheer mass and quality of creative production in the US of A from 1950 to 1975 is the only Golden Age of the post-Industrial era, and that is truly remarkable. One could say we’re on the verge of a global Renaissance, but that would be largely argumentative, if not slightly disillusioned (don’t mis-comprehend: I’m one to think a Renaissance is the only rational after effect of our current socio-econo-cultural Great Depression).

Enough rambles though. I’m still finishing the book, and it’s rare for me to not skip through pages of boredom while reading books longer than 200 pages these days, as some of you know. This is one text that makes me want to reread certain passages not because they’re too complex to understand (although, sometimes, they are), but because they’re so f***ing beautiful I cannot not relive the experience of enjoying the grin and joy of his words, his playfulness, his most unusual punctuation, his randomness and the openness of perception. His experience. His comic book super heroes as the mythical creatures of America; his retelling of the origins of LSD; the brief note about Aldous Huxley and mescaline in *The Doors of Perception*; everything.

But now I’ll stop for a moment, I’ll finish the book, and I’ll write the second half of Wolfe’s brilliant creation, back when ‘Hippie’ meant

more than colourful clothing and massive forest parties (even though these were not exactly excluded either).

-

Ok. So here’s where things stand, since I don’t think you can actually review a book like this in today’s sterile pseudo-kinked vinyl doll plasticity:

I want to find our generation’s Owsley.

The Merry Pranksters are the bomb.

Acid gas sounds fun.

La Honda versus The Factory; I wonder who had it better.

The Original Magical Mystery Tour.

I could go on.

But what this book really makes you feel is this: you’re standing on the busiest street corner in your city, but the city was just evacuated because of some chemical threat. You’re in this one place, and the sun is so bright everything looks like it just got nuked, and you know you’re alone, but you don’t want to believe it. You grab a long metal pole, and now you’re suddenly running down the streets, smashing the pole into the ground, waking everybody up. But the city is really, mostly, empty, or in hiding, and so very few people hear you. Of those who do, some peek out of the corners of their windows, scared and disinterested; some throw themselves off their balconies and surge out of their front doors and start running with you; others want to, but their significant others don’t let them. Suddenly, you’re not alone anymore, and you’re still running through this city of white light, making noise and gathering momentum, then you’re too much, then you’re more, then you move to the beach, then you find a hill, then you go to a canyon, then there’s an old warehouse, then your grandmother’s house, then your ex-boss’s house, then the subway, then a park, then another subway, and now you’re in a forest.

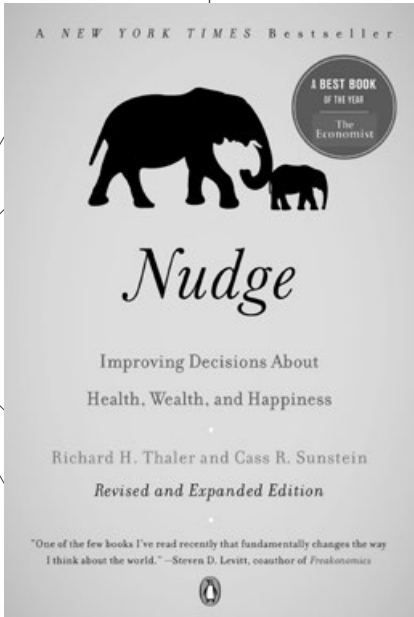
You lay down, head back, exhausted but ecstatic. You open your eyes and the white light of the sun doesn’t bother you. You see the bits and pieces around the white light, and you’re happy. You laugh. Out loud. It’s a beautiful thing, the colours of your sky.

This is what Tom Wolfe gives you. This is why you should read this book.



NUDGE: IMPROVING DECISIONS ABOUT HEALTH, WEALTH AND HAPPINESS RICHARD H. THALER AND CASS R. SUNSTEIN

BOOK REVIEW
BY FARES BOU NASSIF



This book was recommended to me a few months ago, at a job interview for an advertising agency. His idea was that the combination of choice architecture and behavioural economics constitute the basis of a well written pitch and copy for a successfully persuasive campaign. The book was recommended reading for the entire office staff, and when I did get around to it, I found it easy to see why.

How-to and self-help books have a special place reserved in hell, in my opinion, and their authors deserve even worse than I can write in a Dubai-based magazine. *Nudge*, however, is not a self-help book. It is a lightweight academic dissertation written by two very qualified and very relaxed professors. Thaler’s speciality is Behavioural Science and Economics, while Sunstein is a professor of Jurisprudence, and their writing is a reflection of their backgrounds, with anecdotes from their daily lives and off the record examples (as in, non-academic citations) from other academics. As a whole, the book is a series of examples and explanations of the various scenarios where choice architecture is unavoidable and how the many elements of behavioural science can help us improve our lives and the lives of those whose ecosystems we are required to manage.

What makes this book particularly interesting is how cleverly and gradually, like layers of an onion, it points us, ‘nudges us’, towards the disturbingly simple ways in which our actions are effectively and effortlessly anticipated. It also kind of makes you cry,

figuratively, thinking of how easily and unavoidably manipulated we are. The example that most vividly comes to mind, but is not as representative as the opening problem of the school cafeteria, is at Thaler’s dinner party. Thaler invites friends (scholarly types of the behavioural sciences) over, and opts to remove the bowl of cashew nuts that everyone had been munching on by 7PM instead of 7:30PM, to avoid their overeating and become too full for dinner later. As soon as it is removed, they are all thankful and a debate ensues on how if he hadn’t removed it they would have still been munching. It’s not the best. Just my favourite (I like cashew nuts).

It’s this, along with countless other examples, that makes a heavily theoretical book a joyful read. And, self-help or not, it does teach you a few practical tools for everyday self-management, while also tipping you off on some very handy persuasion techniques that are as simple as wearing a blue tie and fiddling with it often to make your audience select the colour blue out of a list of choices.

Their idea is simple and hardly sinister: choices need to be made, and somebody will have to affect those choices by creating the context in which they are made; if you’re aware of the various decisions being made for you (or the decisions you can make for others), you’re better equipped to deal with a social system that consistently works towards mediating choice in an increasingly global market.