

2008 Review of Books

January 3, 2009

[Original link](#)

Previously: [2007 Review of Books](#), [Books I recommend Without Reservation: 2006](#)

I read exactly 100 books this year. I mistakenly told someone over the summer that I read a hundred books a year (I only read 70 last year, although 120 the year before that) and as the new year approached I felt duty-bound to make that true. (This led to spending a lot of New Year's Eve in a corner reading, as this list may suggest.)

Here are the books (in chronological order), with occasional short comments. Books I'm happy to have read are linked. Books I recommend are in bold.

1. [Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction](#). Seemed decent for the format.
2. Gecan, [Going Public](#)
3. [The Activist's Handbook](#). Could be better written, but probably the best of its type. I've definitely thought back to this one a lot this year.
4. Poundstone, [How Would You Move Mount Fuji?](#)
5. Poundstone, [Labyrinths of Reason](#)
6. Lodge, **[Changing Places](#)**.
Typical campus novel fun, but with some great People's Park stories.
7. Elster, [Political Psychology](#). Short Elster essay collection. Probably for Elster fans only.
8. [Lords of Poverty](#) (skipped parts)
9. *On Being Nonprofit*. Completely unmemorable.
10. *How to Do Things with Words*. Important in its time, but mostly overtaken by Searle's later work.
11. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*
12. *Campaign Finance Reform and the Future of the Democratic Party*
13. **[The Visible Hand](#)**.
Tough sledding, but important points. [Read my summary](#).

14. Thaler, *The Winner's Curse*
15. Poundstone, *Fortune's Formula*
Fantastic fun. Math, mafiosi, movies.
16. Freeman, *Rawls* (parts)
17. MacKenzie, *An Engine Not a Camera*.
I recommend [starting with his LRB stuff](#).
18. Fitch, *Solidarity for Sale*. For leftists who really love unions. You need to know the flaws to make them better.
19. Maisel, *From Obscurity to Oblivion: Running in the Congressional Primary*. Not a lot of books on the inside of campaigns, but this is one of the few.
20. Segaran, *Programming Collective Intelligence*. Terrible title, but a good book on how to do data mining.
21. Willis, *Learning to Labor*. Not as great as the excerpts I'd read had led me to think.
22. *The Brain: A Very Short Introduction*
23. Peck, *Hatchet Jobs*. Fun stuff.
24. Sloan, *My Years with General Motors* (skipped second half). I read this to understand how modern management was invented. It did not help.
25. Hoopes, *False Prophets*
A wonderful series of profiles of the most prominent management theorists going back to slavery and Taylor. The book's editorial line is a bit marred by the inability of the author (a B-School prof and manager) to reconcile his belief that management power is unjust and that it is necessary. But solid history and good takedowns of some important figures.
26. Dani Rodrik, *Has Globalization Gone Too Far?* (lent by Henry Farrell).
A good book, but not for general readers.
27. *A Random Walk Down Wall Street*. Mixed feelings.
28. Wilson, *To The Finland Station*.
Really, really good. Edmund Wilson was the incredible writer you'd expect and this is his masterpiece.
29. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man*
[Luc Sante's intro](#) alone is worth the price of the book, but the rest of the book is fantastic as well. Everyone should know about con men. (The BBC's *Hustle* is obviously a television adaptation of the book.)

30. *A Choice Not an Echo: The Inside Story of How American Presidents Are Chosen*. Still crazy after all these years, although the whole anti-backroom thing is interesting. I read it to see what you could airdrop on college kids.
31. Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior*
Really, truly great.
32. *Is That a Politician in Your Pocket?* (skimmed)
33. *Debunking Economics*. Quite good, although not perfect.
34. *Men and Women of the Corporation*.
35. Carlson, *Executive Behavior*. Worthless
36. Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior*
Magical, magisterial masterpiece. ([my review](#); [more on Elster](#))
37. Piven, *Challenging Authority*. Kind of thin; I glazed over portions.
38. Rosen, *The World Split Open*
39. Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*. Terrible.
40. *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend*
41. *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*
42. Brook, *The Trap*
43. Gessen, *All the Sad Young Literary Men*
44. Khurana, *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*
45. Glymour, *The Mind's Arrows*
46. Pearl, *Causality*. I wish everyone understood this.
47. Elster, *Strong Feelings*
48. Gelman et. al., *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* (sent by Andrew Gelman). Lots of great empirical work, but little theory or story to back it up.
49. Lodge, *Nice Work*
Typical campus novel fun, but with deeper thoughts about business and finance.
50. Armstrong and Moulitsas, *Crashing the Gate*
51. Menand, *American Studies*

52. Galbraith, *The Predator State*
My summary.
53. *Watchmen*
Brilliant. Wanted to see it before the movie came out.
54. Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*
55. Mann, *Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1*
Tough reading, but really fascinating stuff.
56. Frank, *The Wrecking Crew*. Lots of good dirt, but not exactly the most rigorous theoretical argument.
57. Perry, *Spectrum*. Perry is great — the autoinvestigatorial last chapter alone is worth it.
58. Bearman et. al., *Doormen*. I read this because I now have a doorman and am uncomfortable about it. This helped.
59. Teles, *Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*. Good stuff, although narrow.
60. DFW, *McCain's Promise*. Brilliant, naturally. I'd read *Up, Simba!* before, of course, but I read this out loud to a friend and it was just a joy to do.
61. Ken Silverstein, *Turkmeniscam*.
Great fun. Not just a great story of investigative journalism, but lots of interesting and important background as well. I'm a huge Silverstein fan.
62. DFW, *Everything and More*.
This book is an interesting, but, I think, ultimately unsuccessful experiment. DFW tries to teach math by channelling his favorite math teacher — writing in the style of an excitable lecturer, completely with verbal tics and backtracking (which, in printed form, becomes kind of a running gag).
It's certainly not a bad book by any means, but I don't think it's really a successful model for how books can teach math.
63. Wodehouse, *Psmith in the City*. Hilarious. Psmith is a delight. I want to hear him acted but the recent BBC version is dreadful.
64. Clark, *Organizing Our Marvellous Neighbours* (skimmed parts)
65. *How Wikipedia Works* (skimmed parts)
66. Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*. Delightful. I apologize humbly and abjectly for ever criticizing the strong programme of science. Sokal and Bricmont led me badly astray on that one.

67. DFW, *Consider the Lobster*

DFW's suicide hit me very hard. I ended up coping [by reading every piece of nonfiction he'd ever published](#). He was a brilliant, tortured man and I see so much of myself in him. His nonfiction was fantastic and I will consider my life a success if I can do half of what he did.

If you want to get started, I recommend (best work first):

1. [Federer as Religious Experience](#) [B/W PDF]
2. "David Lynch Keeps His Head", in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (there's a *severely* abbreviated version printed in *Premiere*; read the real thing instead)
3. "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again", in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (the [Harper's version](#) [PDF] preserves most of the good stuff but is shorter)

68. Krugman, *Peddling Prosperity*

Probably Krugman's best book, it provides a thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening *intellectual* overview of the economics of the 1980s and 1990s. The delicious takedown of supplysiders is worth the book alone, but the rest is great too.

69. Tough, *Whatever It Takes*. A great read; a bit overly credulous — doesn't address Keynesian critics of intervention or betray much skepticism about tests. ([my review](#))

70. Wolfe, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. Great fun.

71. *The Homework Myth*. Sometimes it seems like Kohn just gets narrower and narrower (via email, he disputes this).

72. *Savage Mules*. A good antidote for faith in the Democratic Party. ([dsquared's review](#))

73. Beam, *Great Idea at the Time*. A fun historical take down of the Great Books. Probably more fun if you know what the Great Books are.

74. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Borderline unreadable. Why did everyone rave about this book?

75. *Love at Goon Park*.

The first section is a (confessed!) retread of *Becoming Attached*, one of my very favorite books ([a 2006 highlight](#)). But after that it gets much better and the interplay of animal and human stories is a lot of fun. I've been reading it to the five-year-old, who loves animal stories of all sorts, and she just laps it up. (I skip the incredibly dark parts, of course.)

76. Newsweek, *Secrets of the 2008 Campaign* (full text online). For campaign junkies only.

77. Perlstein, *Tested*.
Very good. ([my review](#))
78. Keynes, *Economic Consequences of the Peace* ([full text online](#)).
Wow, Keynes knows how to write. The first section is a must-read for any diplomat. Chapters 4 and 5 (which unfortunately are the bulk of the book) are only worth skipping or skimming for modern readers.
79. Kaufman, *Synecdoche, New York* (scripts). What a movie! There were a lot of script reviews that said things along the lines of “I don’t know if movies can capture a script this complex.” Reading the script now, you see the exact opposite is the case. The script is a pale imitation of the film, missing most of what made the film magical. Which just underscores what a great movie it was.
80. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.
Not the easiest read, but brilliant. One of the very very few books I want to read again (in this case, because I am sure I didn’t get it all the first time). The definitive Marxist take on education.
81. *Smile When You’re Lying*
Tons of fun. I hate traveling and have never cracked a travel book, but this angry and profane insider’s evisceration of the industry was still a complete joy. [Read Ezra’s review](#) — with [a comment from the author!](#).
82. DFW, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*.
Brilliant. Just brilliant.
83. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*.
84. Douthat, *Privilege* (lent by Rick Perlstein).
What is wrong with Ross Douthat? This book is eminently mockable, but I have to say I could see writing most of it myself. Which is weird, since Douthat is a staunch conservative and I’m a crazy-far-leftist. Is Douthat a double-agent? Or is he really this confused about what conservatism is about? I wrote this summary for Rick:
- Prologue: Harvard is actually an education in the ruling class. [Ross didn’t like Harvard so much.]
 - 1: Diversity policies ensure all sorts of ethnicities get accepted but they all come from the upper class. [Big black homeless guy starts living in Ross’s dorm.]
 - 2: The real ruling class gets tapped for private clubs where they get connected to wealthy alumni and rape attractive coeds. [Ross gets invited to apply at various clubs and rejected.]

- 3: Students are aggressive social climbers, calibrating who they talk to and what activities they join to maximize their resume. [Ross's friend's friend gets arrested for embezzling.]
- 4: Persuaded that the market is God and academia is a sideshow, professors give students easy grades to help them get good jobs and be rich (thus proving the professors' worth). Courses are poorly taught and maddeningly specific — its very difficult to get a solid general education. [Ross doesn't like his classes and gets mediocre grades.]
- 5: Random drunken hookups are so common that the only way to get any kind of commitment is to fall into a college marriage (of which, I must say, there is a beautiful description pp. 145-147). [Ross falls head-over-heels for a totally agonizing tease, only to have her give it up months later to a preppy sailing kid who gets her drunk.]
- 6: Most harvard students arrive virgins and have a hards time getting any while they're there, out of awkwardness and fear of threatening their spot in the overclass. [Ross can't even get laid at an all-girls school.]
- 7: The student body is primarily New Democrat, with a smattering of vocal leftist protestors. [Ross supports the living wage movement. *[ed. note: wtf?]*]
- 8: Harvard students spend summers at elite internships acclimating to their future careers. [Ross goes sailing with William F. Buckley!]
- 9: 9/11 sucked. [Ross laps up the patriotic spirit and the Summers presidency.]
- ...and then a tearfelt ending.

Sorry, did I end up mocking it a little?

85. Gore, *Sammy's Hill*. Yes, I have a weakness for chick lit.
86. *What Motivates Bureaucrats?* A genuine investigation (as opposed to the typical social science arms-length thinking) into how Reagan affected the civil service. In short, our civil service is the opposite of what you see on *Yes, Minister* — they were practically falling over themselves to kneecap their own agency in response to the President. Kind of sad, but hopefully this means that Obama will also have wide latitude.
87. DFW and Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers*.
A great book, although surprisingly the best parts are written by Costello. A dense intermixed weave of music, history, race, law, fantasia, and brilliant writing.
88. *The Telephone Gambit*. Decently researched, mixed in with self-indulgent (and just plain bad) autobiography about writing the book. I wrote up a summary of the story which I'll be publishing soon and you should

probably just read that instead. But everybody should agree that Bell stole the telephone from Gray after this book.

89. Krugman, *The Age of Diminished Expectations* (1st ed). Bleh. Krugman's first book, back before he knew how to write.
90. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*. I'm also going to publish a summary of this.
91. Beam, *Gracefully Insane*. Like all good residents of Cambridge, being institutionalized in McLean has long been a dream. After enjoying Beam's other book (*Great Idea at the Time*) this seemed right up my alley, but it was nowhere near as good.
92. Gore, *Sammy's House*. The Gore books were bothering me because I could never figure out who Wye and RG were supposed to be — all the other characters mapped pretty obviously onto current politicians, but the candidates were a mystery. I'd somehow forgotten my first instinct: RG is AG, which means that you have to think back two decades or so. Once you realize that, everything falls into place.
93. Wodehouse, *Mike: A Public School Story*. The first Psmith story. Cricket, cricket, cricket, cricket. Sigh.
94. *Ice Cream Man*. Good fun for Tosci's fans.
95. Kuttner, *Obama's Challenge*
96. *V for Vendetta*. Moore's whole story about how the movie softened the fascism and anarchism seems completely bogus. That said, the movie did change some fantastic parts, including V's televised speech and the brilliantly convoluted *Hamlet*-esque ending. Also, the movie's whole virus attack subplot was stupid. On the other hand, the movie added some great stuff too. So see both, I guess.
97. Krugman, *Pop Internationalism*. The essays Krugman wrote before *Peddling Prosperity*, meaning it discusses the same stuff but much more disjointed and poorly edited. I was hoping it'd explain the mystery of his animus towards Laura D'A, but no such luck.
98. *First-Time Manager*. A much better book than I expected, but enough tin-ear corporate silliness that I can't thoroughly recommend it.
99. Searle, *The Campus War* (full text online).

Actually, a really good book on the campus uprisings of the 1960s. First, there's some terrific first-hand reporting from Searle's experience at Berkeley (in which he participated in all three sides: the uprising, the faculty response, and the administration counterattack!). Second, there's some good secondhand summarizing about the experience at other campuses. Third, there's some good analysis about why campus uprisings happen

and what they mean. Fourth, there are some interesting proposals for reforming the university. (I, too, want to get rid of the trustee system.) Makes me wish Searle did more non-philosophy books!

100. Haggis-on-Whey, *Animals of the Ocean (In Particular, the Giant Squid)*. Not as good as [the original](#) (now in its third edition!).

Happy new year!