

The 2011 Review of Books

April 19, 2012

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Previously: [2010](#), [2009](#), [2008](#), [2007](#), [2006](#)

2011 was a stressful year, in many ways, and so for large parts of it I did not really read. [Instead, I tracked](#) how many books I started and how many pages I got through each, for a total of 112 books started, 70 finished, and over 20,000 pages read. Not up to my usual standards. Nonetheless...

Key: Books in bold are those that were so great my heart leaps at the chance to tell you about them even now. If you only have time to read some of this, read those.

1. [The Net Delusion](#) by Evgeny Morozov
Surprisingly well-written and well-researched.

2. *Managing Oneself* by Peter Drucker

3. [The Halo Effect](#) by **Phil Rosenzweig**

Last year, I recommended *Good to Great*, calling it “actual science”. [Dave Bridgeland quickly corrected me](#) and recommended this book, which is vastly better. Not only does it systematically debunk the pretensions to science in *Good to Great* and the other management bestsellers in an absolutely delightful manner, it provides a short but very thought-provoking discussion of strategy in its own right.

You can mock the banality of its recommendations, but there’s no question: this book is well worth it just for the way it encourages habits of genuine scientific thought. I knew I never should have fallen so low as to trust a business book!

4. [The Farnsworth Invention](#) by Aaron Sorkin

Clearly not Sorkin’s best, but short and fun. Also interesting to see how Sorkin plays with the fourth wall in a play format.

5. [The Trial](#) by **Franz Kafka** (translated by **Breon Mitchell**)

A deep and magnificent work. I’d not really read much Kafka before and had grown up led to believe that it was a paranoid and hyperbolic work, dystopian fiction in the style of George Orwell. Yet I read it and found it was precisely accurate — every single detail perfectly mirrored my own experience. This isn’t fiction, but documentary.

Spoilers follow.

The bulk of the book is about K trying to find someone to fight his case for him, and failing miserably. As an individual in a world of bureaucracies, he concludes [there's no substitute](#) but to do the work himself.

This is set against the backdrop of his “day job” at the bank — about as characteristic a bureaucracy as you can imagine. The bank, by contrast, has no difficulty finding people to do its work for it. Even when K slacks off or gets distracted, the bank continues chugging along just fine — as seen in the vice president who leaps to take K’s work from him. (Compare: The independent lawyer is under no such pressure to actually get K’s work done.)

A vivid illustration that bureaucracies, once they get started, continue doing whatever mindless thing they’ve been set up to do, regardless of whether the people in them particularly want to do it or whether it’s even a good idea. At the same time, individual people have an incredibly hard time executing long-term or large-scale tasks on their own, even when they’re quite motivated.

But what of the priest? The priest tells K a story about how as an individual in a bureaucracy, it’s a losing game to try to ask permission. You have to persuade your boss, your boss’s boss, and your boss’s boss’s boss (so terribly powerful that your boss can’t even bear to look at him). If you wait for your request to be approved by the chain of command, it won’t happen at all.

K argues with the priest about how horribly unfair this is: isn’t your boss (the individual) doing the wrong thing somehow? The priest maintains there are many different theories about this question of individual responsibility. But K is missing the larger point: this is just how bureaucracy works.

K takes the lesson to heart and decides to stop fighting the system and just live his life without asking for permission. It goes well...for a while. But it still seems a better option than the alternatives.

6. *The Great Stagnation* by Tyler Cowen

A dreadful little book, which boils down to nothing more than a vast tract of economic illiteracy. Take just the insanity that is chapter

2. Cowen takes as his dictum:

The larger the role of government in the economy, the more the published figures for GDP growth are overstating improvements in our living standard.

For example, as government-insured health care takes up a larger proportion of our country’s spending, we can’t accurately measure how our living

standards are improving since it's paid for at set rates by government instead of through a competitive market process to set accurate prices.

But, as any economist should realize, our standard of living is *never* appropriately measured through prices, because of consumer surplus. The *whole point* of a competitive economy is to create this disconnect. Let's say a chair greatly improves my standard of living and I would pay \$10,000 for one. In a competitive market, different chair providers compete for my money by offering a lower price, eventually driving the price of the chair down to the cost of production.

Has my 'living standard' [*sic*] thereby decreased? Of course not! In fact, it has increased since I can buy several chairs (while still getting thousands of dollars in consumer surplus!). It's insane to blame this on government.

Cowen's other arguments are similarly ignorant. For example, he tries to claim that the reason we're in a recession, "not filling government coffers or supporting many families", is because "our major innovations are springing up in sectors where a lot of work is done by machines, not by human beings. ... That is one reason why we have been seeing a 'jobless recovery.'" (L503)

Nonsense on stilts. [The Federal Reserve decides](#) how many people will have jobs, iPads have nothing to do with it.

This book's popularity is a sad sign of how ignorance triumphs when it benefits the powerful.

7. [Lifted](#) by Evan Ratliff (iOS)

A fast, fun real-life heist story.

8. [Getting Things Done](#) by David Allen [reread]

Still good, though not worth starting a cult over. Its insights are more psychological than anything else.

9. [Private Firms Working in the Public Interest](#) by Abigail Bugbee Brown

Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Olympus — why is there so much accounting fraud? Why isn't this stuff caught? In this serious but briskly-written work, Abigail Brown explains the incredible story of how accounting firms actually work. Paid by the people they're supposed to be auditing, accounting firms have developed an elaborate culture of corruption, letting them aid and abet the most egregious forms of dishonesty.

(Disclosure: Ms. Brown and I were lab fellows together at the Harvard Center for Ethics.)

10. [QED](#) by Peter Parnell

Not bad, by any stretch, but on the page, for anyone who's familiar with Feynman's actual writings, this can't help but feel thin.

11. *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* with David Foster Wallace

After a great artist dies, there comes a point where the barrel of work that can be published posthumously seems like it's running dry (Elliot Smith's *New Moon*, Kafka's *Office Papers*). Publishing the transcript of a rambling conversation with DFW as a book would seem to be similarly stretching.

But, like the others, it turns out to be appreciated all the same. DFW is delightful and witty and it's fascinating to see how much of his linguistic creativity and charm wasn't the result of any special effort but simply his natural form to speech. He must have been such a delight to spend time with.

The problem is that the editor of this volume, David Lipsky, is apparently a dreadful writer who is deluded into thinking he's a great one. Taking DFW's polite words of support as deep praise, he is not shy about sharing his 'gifts' via overwrought introductions and interpolations. The result is an infuriating combination of glorious rants from DFW cut with ignorant and ill-written speculation by someone desperate to show off. (Though I don't recall Lipsky's recent piece about DFW being so bad, so maybe he merely needed an editor...or was told to pad the book out with random asides.)

12. *Inside WikiLeaks* by Daniel Domscheit-Berg

13. *Brainiac* by Ken Jennings

Who knew Ken Jennings was so funny? A witty and delightful book, though obviously not one that's anything more than trivial.

14. *From Dictatorship to Democracy* by Gene Sharp

A short but impressive guide to how to run a democratic revolution. Reportedly rather influential and certainly provides an interesting structure for thought.

15. *Kingpin: How One Hacker Took Over the Billion-Dollar Cybercrime Underground* by Kevin Poulsen

A fun and intriguing book. Poulsen writes in a restrained style, but the pace is fast and the images are vivid and the technology seems pretty right-on.

(Disclosure: Kevin Poulsen and I worked together at Wired.)

16. *Diary of a Very Bad Year: Confessions of an Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager* by Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager and Keith Gessen (with n+1)

An annotated transcript of a series of interviews between the brilliant literary writer Keith Gessen and a sympathetic and polymathic hedge

fund manager. The hedge fund manager tries to provide some insight into what his world is like, in real time as it's collapsing, but Gessen's questioning typically isn't detailed enough to get a very vivid picture. HFM's stories were thrilling as things happened but with distance they seem somewhat blurred; it's harder to fit them in now that we think we understand what happened. They're both delightful characters, though, enough to still make the book a decent read.

17. *The Watchman: The Twisted Life and Crimes of Serial Hacker Kevin Poulsen* by Jonathan Littman

Whatever else you want to say about Kevin Poulsen, he was certainly funny. Littman provides a vivid retelling of his strange story. I'm told Poulsen denies most of what's in this book, so it may not have much value as documentary, but as entertainment it's pretty good.

18. *Tourist Season* by Carl Hiassen

19. *Strip Tease* by Carl Hiassen

20. *Skinny Dip* by Carl Hiassen

Carl Hiassen writes murder mysteries with a political bent. They're fun airport reading but it's hard to justify them as much more than that.

21. *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh

This book, the source of the name *The Daily Beast*, is a vicious satire of journalism. It has some quite witty and biting moments, including some I've found myself referring back to, but I'm not sure it holds together as literature.

22. *The Age of WikiLeaks* by Greg Mitchell

An good, well-written summary of the story so far, but nothing more than that.

23. *JSTOR: A History* by Roger C. Schonfeld

24. *Team Rodent* by Carl Hiassen

A very short book packed full of muck about the Disney Corporation. Fun stuff, but it comes off as very light — basically just a list of stories Hiassen seems to have picked up in his years of living nearby.

25. *Shots* by David Fenton

26. *At a Slight Angle to the Universe* by William Bowen

27. *The Honor Code* by K. Anthony Appiah

A collection of interesting stories about how social revolutions have happened. Appiah tries to tie them together with a story about honor, but I think that's ultimately less interesting and persuasive than just reading the stories themselves.

28. *The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: Nine New Stories* by Peter Suber
29. *The Story of Colors* by Subcomandante Marcos
Absurdly, a children's book by Subcomandante Marcos. As weird as you'd expect, but not as good as you'd hope.
30. *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival* by Kevin Guthrie
A compellingly-written and fascinatingly-told story of how the New-York Historical Society, a grand old museum housing countless invaluable treasures, was so consistently financially mismanaged that despite its greatness it found itself constantly on the verge of financial ruin. Clearly written as a cautionary tale for those who would run a non-profit.
31. *The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace
In his notes, David Foster Wallace described this unfinished book about boredom as one where "something big threatens to happen but doesn't actually happen". As a result, it's probably less unfinished than it feels. It has the usual DFW virtuosity with language (including some truly poetic sections) and a tax-related premise that somehow captures the entirety of this political moment the same way *Infinite Jest* captured the cultural one, but there's certainly nothing in the way of a plot the way there was in *Infinite Jest*.
32. *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
This book is like a literary cupcake: a small bombshell of sugar without very much in the way of substance. I believe I read the whole thing while sitting in an airport terminal and while I enjoyed it and laughed, it's hard to claim I took anything away from the experience.
33. *Poor Economics* by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo
God, what a book! *Poor Economics* is a series of tales of foreigners trying to save the far-flung poor, while failing to realize not only that their developed-country ideas are terrible disasters in practice, but also that everything they've learned to think of as solid — even something as simple as measuring distance — is far more fraught, and complex, and political than they ever could have imagined. It's a stunning feeling to have the basic building blocks of your world questioned and crumbled before you — and a powerful lesson in the value of self-skepticism for everyone who's trying to do something.
34. *The Filter Bubble* by Eli Pariser
35. *The Psychopath Test* by Jon Ronson
Another fun puff pastry of a book.

36. *Empire State* by Jason Shiga
Reads a bit like Shiga trying to do his own version of *Shortcomings*. Not a bad book, by any means, but it has none of the Jason Shiga magic.
37. *Bookhunter* by Jason Shiga
Words won't do it justice: an action-movie-thriller of a book, a hilarious adrenaline-fueled ride that's impossible to put down. I've never had this much fun with a piece of entertainment. Just sheer delight.
38. *Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga
Not his best, but still entrancing and strange and very, very good.
39. *He's Just Not That Into You: The No-Excuses Truth to Understanding Guys* by Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo
40. *Mac OS X 10.7 Lion: the Ars Technica review* by John Siracusa
41. *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* by Eliezer Yudkowsky
This is a book whose title still makes me laugh and yet it may just turn out to be one of the greatest books ever written. The writing is shockingly good, the plotting is some of the best in all of literature, and the stories are simply pure genius. I fear this book may never get the accolades it deserves, because it's too hard to look past the silly name and publishing model, but I hope you, dear reader, are wiser than that! A must-read.
As it says at the beginning, you really need to give it a couple chapters to get started before passing judgment — the first bunch are quite silly and it doesn't seem worth sticking with until you've gotten past them.
42. *In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives* by Steven Levy
Levy again does what he does so well: make an alien culture visible and comprehensible. A great guide to Google.
(Disclosure: Levy once included me in an essay collection he edited.)
43. *How to Count* by Steven Frank
The first volume into what will surely be a wonderful introduction to programming. Certainly the best book on counting that I've read.
44. *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey
This book touched me deeply and made me rethink the entire way I approached life; it's about vastly more than just tennis. I can't really describe it, but I can recommend [this video with Alan Kay and the author](#) that will blow your mind.

45. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge

This book does not live up to its title — it has very little practical advice on how to create a learning organization — but still, it’s an important topic and I don’t know of anything better. It’s full of fascinating stories and provocations that will change how you think about business.

46. *House of Holes* by Nicholson Baker

I’m not normally one for filthy books, but Baker’s writing is so good that he somehow manages to make this one just utterly compelling despite the smut. I started reading and I couldn’t stop, he just draws you into his world of pure insanity.

47. *Rick Perry and his Eggheads* by Sasha Issenberg

Sasha Issenberg is a miracle-worker. This book (really an excerpt from his forthcoming book) is so very, very good that it just blows me away. Issenberg tells the tale of everything I’ve been trying to say to everyone in politics, but he does it in a real-life three-act morality play that’s so good it could be a model on how to tell a story.

48. *Haiti: After the Quake* by Paul Farmer

Farmer’s gripping personal story of returning to Haiti after the earthquake and seeing the devastation it had left, both physically and politically. It’s a personal narrative, not a work of investigative journalism, but it still provides powerful insight into what happened.

49. *Confessions of a “Rape Cop” Juror* by Patrick Kirkland

When I first heard that the “rape cop” had been acquitted, I took it as yet another instance of a “rape culture” in which crimes against women go unpunished. This book persuaded me that we were all wrong. It’s a fascinating real-life story of what it’s like inside a jury room and what it really means to have proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

50. *The End of Loser Liberalism* by Dean Baker

Dean Baker knocks it out of the park again — a must-read for anyone who cares about economic policy.

51. *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries

Ries presents a translation of the Toyota Production System to startups — and it’s so clearly the right way to run a startup that it’s hard to imagine how we got along before it. Unfortunately, the book has become so trendy that I find many people claiming to swear allegiance to it who clearly missed the point entirely. Read it with an open mind and let it challenge you, so you can start to understand how transformative it really is.

52. *The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man* by Michael Chabon, illustrated by Jake Parker
A short children's book with absolutely gorgeous illustrations by Parker and a cute little story by Chabon.
53. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (Book 1)* by J. K. Rowling
54. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Book 2)* by J. K. Rowling
55. *Republic, Lost* by Lawrence Lessig
56. *Flat Earth News* by Nick Davies
I've read a lot of books of media criticism and they all tend to trod similar ground: sensationalism, political bias, etc., etc. Nick Davies has written what is, in many ways, the same book — except he write it as an insider, not an outsider. As a result, he explains *how* the media gets to be this way, *why* it is as bad as it is — and he tells lots of delicious insider stories of incredible things he discovered that got cut or buried or distorted beyond all recognition. Davies is now famous for bringing down the Murdoch empire, but if more people read this book, perhaps he will bring down the rest of corrupt journalism as well.
57. *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson
Siracusa is right: they got the wrong guy. The book is compelling and readable, there's no doubt about that, but it tells a story that's basically already been told. Isaacson is so clueless and uncurious that pretty much all of his "exclusive interviews" were wasted; there's no insight in any of this, just weird lapses into authorial judgment.
Robert Caro has said there's one more biography he wants to write after he finishes LBJ. I dearly hope that it's Steve Jobs.
58. *Anything You Want* by Derek Sivers
I constantly find myself loving Derek Sivers' blog posts, and while they feel eerily insubstantial collected together here, they're still full of enough insight and good humor to make them well worth reading.
59. *CODE: The Hidden Language of Computer Hardware and Software* by Charles Petzold
A magnificent achievement. Charles Petzold starts with the story of two kids across the street who wish to communicate with each other and, from this simple beginning, builds up an entire computer without ever making it seem like something that should be over your head. I never really felt I understood the computer until I read this book.
60. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Book 3)* by J. K. Rowling

61. *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain* by Dwight Macdonald (edited by John Summers), with an introduction by Louis Menand

Dwight Macdonald is one of those delightful cranks that you can't help but love watching. Summers has collected a magnificent listing of things to watch — plus included an introduction that's the incredible Menand at his best.

62. *The Ghost [Writer]* by Robert Harris

It's hard to shake the feeling that a big part of the appeal of this book is watching Tony Blair get arrested for war crimes, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a first-rate political thriller.

63. *What It Takes: The Way to the White House* by Richard Ben Cramer

Were this just the story of how George H. W. Bush got elected, it'd be one of the few biographies that belonged in the same league as Robert Caro. But it's so much more than that: Richard Ben Cramer gives the same treatment to dozens of candidates in the 1988 presidential election: Gary Hart, Bob Dole, Joe Biden, Dick Gephardt, and on and on. Even if you didn't care about politics, this book would be worth reading simply because the writing is so good. But if you do, there's never been a better exposition of what drives these men who wish to be our leaders and what they have to go through to get there.

64. *Joan: Forty Years of Life, Loss, and Friendship with Joan Didion* by Sara Davidson

It's hard to shake the feeling that this book is merely the author attempting to cash in on their minor friendship with Joan Didion, but I love Didion so much that I'm just grateful for the stories.

65. *How a Book is Born: The Making of The Art of Fielding* by Keith Gessen

Gessen is an incredible writer and here he has the gift of getting to observe, first-hand, a heartwarming tale. A good story and a great introduction to the modern book business.

66. *I'm Feeling Lucky: The Confessions of Google Employee Number 59* by Douglas Edwards

There were many, many times in this book that I couldn't help but wonder: How did he get away with writing this? Google apparently approved of the project and had chaperones in all his interviews, but nonetheless the book is just full of revelations and shockers that it's hard to imagine Google would ever want to see the light of day.

There are a lot of books written about Google, but this has got to be one of the best. Edwards is uniquely suited to the task: his talents as a writer

allow him to craft a compelling read, his insider's view of the very early days give him a detailed knowledge from which to tell his story, but his total lack of cultural chemistry with the rest of the Googlers allows him to find mysterious all the crazy things which they all take for granted. A fantastic read.

67. *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* by Christopher Hitchens

Mother Teresa is a byword for saintliness, but have you ever stopped to ask why? Christopher Hitchens makes a convincing case that she's something closer to a monster. Everyone I've told about this book is shocked by the concept, but it's a short book with a pretty compelling argument.

68. *The Gated City* by Ryan Avent

69. *Books I Did Not Read This Year: An Ebook* by Kieran Healy

Healy is hilarious; this collection of blog posts was a delight.

70. *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes* by David Grann

Grann is a masterful nonfiction writer; this is a collection of his pieces.