

Very Good Introductions

February 22, 2008

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Oxford University Press has a wonderful series they call [Very Short Introductions](#). The books are small, short, colorful paperbacks with titles like “The Brain”, “Political Philosophy” or “The Tudors”. For each one, the editors find an expert in the field, have them write a brief overview of all the relevant areas of study (thus the book on “Globalization” covers economics, politics, culture, environment, ideology, and the opposition movement) and edits them to be clear and concise.

The result is a very good series of books, and I’ve enjoyed them immensely, but it’s not quite what I want. For one thing, the shortness of the books (they’re usually about a hundred half-size pages) makes them unfulfilling. It’s impossible to get a real understanding of a big topic in fifty pages, especially when many of them are taken up summarizing related concerns. (Perhaps you could provide a nice overview of economic globalization in fifty pages, but covering economic, political, cultural, environmental, and ideological globalization in that space is absurd.)

And the other is that, however great the editors at OUP, it seems impossible that they would be able to commission the best exposition of every topic for one series. Many of the greatest writers are not going to accept a particular commission, do not approve of some piece of the series’ style, or perhaps want credit or attention for themselves rather than being just another book in a huge OUP series.

So that’s why I’d like us to put together our own series — not of very short introductions, but of very good ones. These are books which a) try to explain a whole subject with b) clarity and even joy while making c) no strong assumptions of prior knowledge and d) not dumbing the subject down. It’s an extremely rare combination — there are many books on subjects that are good but unreadable by the average person, while there’s a whole industry churning out pop sci pageturners that communicate little actual knowledge of a subject. But the rare book that actually achieves all four of these goals is a true gem, and ought to be promoted more widely.

Please post your suggestions in the comments and I’ll try to assemble a list of them next week. I’ll go first:

[*Law 101: Everything You Need to Know about the American Legal System*](#) by Jay M. Feinman

This delightful book goes over the key points of constitutional law, civil procedure, torts, contracts, property, criminal law, etc. with wit, style, and lots of great examples. Sit down not knowing anything about the subject and come away with a clear enough understanding of torts, contracts, and crimes to apply the ideas in your daily life.

OK, your turn.