

Self-Help: formation, function, and future

By Madilyn Moeller

First, a History

Egypt's *Sebayt* ("teaching")

Circa 2800 B.C. → The Maxims of Ptahotep

- Moral behavior, self control

Lau Tzu's *Tau Te Ching*, 600s B.C.

Middle Ages *Mirror-of-Princes*

France's *Savoir Vivre*, 1600s

Samuel Smiles' *Self Help*, 1859

- promoting the self-made man
- Industrialization, liberalism, modernization

New Thought movement, 1920s

- positive mantras, mind over body

Post-W/WII **New Age** spirituality

- *Pray Your Weight Away*

Human Potential Movement

- Harmony Books, Deepak Chopra

Me Decade

Chicken Soup for the Soul

Oprah Winfrey Show

Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus

Marie Kondo's *KonMari Method*

Marcus Aurelius, Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Malcolm Gladwell, Timothy Ferriss

The background of the slide is a photograph of tall, thin grasses or reeds against a clear blue sky. The grasses are in focus, with some blades in the foreground and others receding into the background. A large, stylized, light blue quote icon is centered in the upper half of the image.

“

It thrives in a particular vacuum—the one left behind by the disappearance of certain public values that once fulfilled our lives. Strains of self-help culture—entrepreneurship, pragmatism, fierce self-reliance, gauzy spirituality—have been embedded in the national DNA since *Poor Richard's Almanack*.

Operating Presuppositions & Assumptions



It is assumed that someone who has found success will have guidelines to share

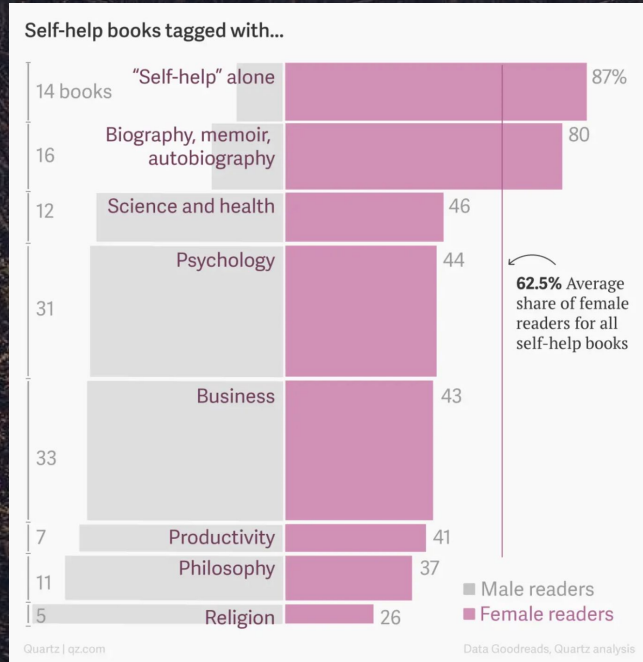


If one follows the guidance of a self-help book, they will see improvement in that aspect of their life



What worked for the author will work for the reader

Qualities of a self-help book



Nonfiction bestsellers
Based on personal
experience
Steps/ List format
Growth-centric

What's the appeal?

They set out to meet the cultural demand for the best nonessentials afforded while **crafting their most socially-acceptable selves**.

Consumer culture and the trend of **constant improvement** in technological updates enforce an urgency to **stay with the times**: the newest fashion, fad diets, and phones.

Given the **expense of mental health treatment**, some readers seek self-help books to meet this need.

Others turn to books to **avoid the stigma** of seeking professional help and maintain their **independence**, turning instead to bibliotherapy.



Bibliotherapy

Redding et al. (2008) reviewed 50+ self-help books and report:

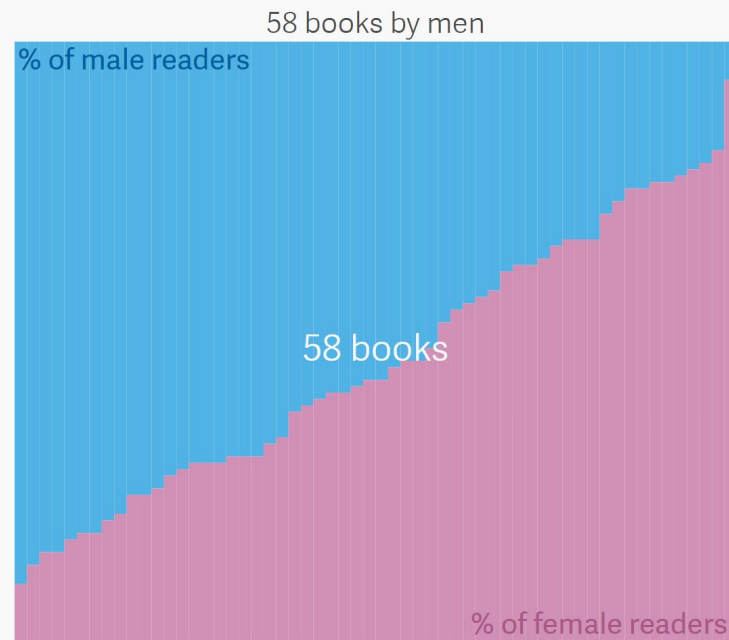
- ❖ Those using cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- ❖ Those written by mental health professionals
- ❖ Those whose authors have a doctoral degree
- ❖ Those focusing on specific problems

Are most highly rated and most likely to be effective

David Burns' *Feeling Good* has been effective in helping people cope with depression.

Who's reading?

80% of self-help book customers are repeat buyers, which could indicate that they are not helping.



Data: Goodreads, Quartz analysis

Stigma

Some of the stigma around self-help characterizes its readers as:

- ✗ Weak or vulnerable
- ✗ Dependent
- ✗ Gullible

The books themselves are questioned based on

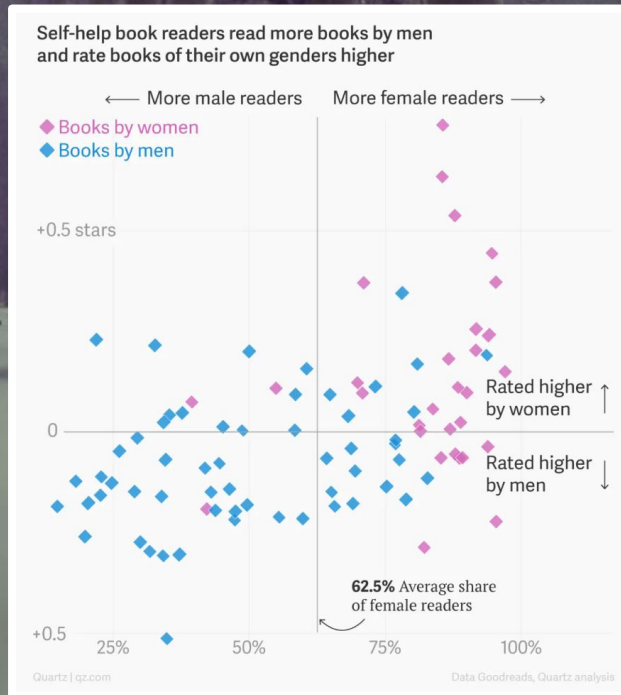
- ✗ The author's expertise (or lack thereof)
- ✗ Credible results vs. anecdotal platitudes

Public Reception

"...a book that truly changed the course of my life...
Anyone can read this and take something away
from it."

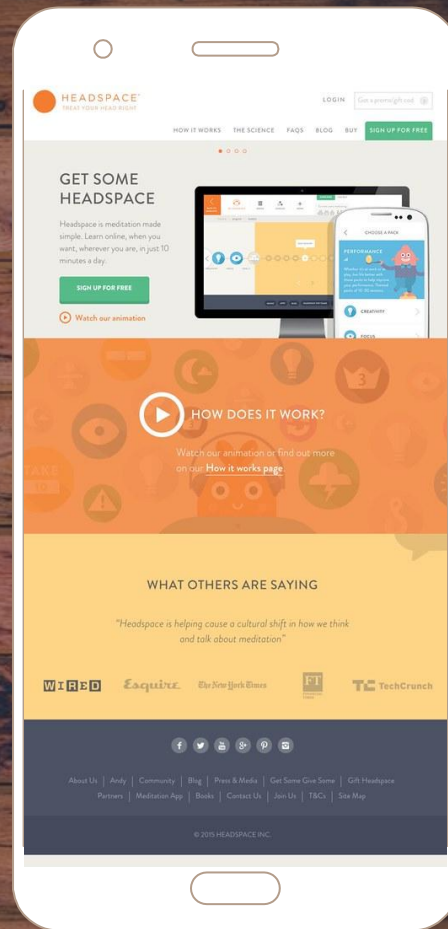
"It's like every motivational and self help speaker
you ever listened to got quoted (but not
necessarily credited) here."

"...the book is rather empty. There's nothing new,
it's just a rehash of other books on the subject.
There is no new perspective, no new insights"



medium

From books to blogs, TV
shows, productivity apps,
and podcasts, self-help has
gone mobile.



Print

Advice columns such as “Dear Abby”

- Authors are granted ethos and credibility through their publication.
- In response to questions sent in by readers seeking guidance.
- Personal aspect: idiosyncratic stories
- Offer a step forward to address the situation
- Wide viewership

Video

TED Talks

- TED conferences give speakers authority, legitimacy
- Experts use anecdotes and research data
- New research is presented in a dramatized fashion
- Varied subject matter, all with a message
- Wide viewership

Sister Genres

Public Figures

Fame often compels celebrities to write memoirs sharing their life stories, serving as inspiration while humanizing the celebrity to general society. The public attention gives celebrities an increased readership from fans, hopefuls, and the curious.

Celebrities use their public images and "guru" status to elevate the sales and acclaim.

Social Media Marketing

Broadly

Social media is a critical factor in publicity for authors of this genre, both as a promotional tool and site for fans to engage.

Case Study

Rachel Hollis, author of *Girl, Wash Your Face*, ran a lifestyle blog before she wrote her best-selling book. Now a motivational speaker, Hollis runs a couples-therapy podcast, posts daily on Facebook Live, and has more than 2.5 million followers on social media.

A green bicycle is leaning against a rustic wooden wall. To the left is a blue-painted wooden door. The wall is made of vertical wooden planks, some of which are weathered and peeling. A dashed white line forms a circle around the text and a dashed line connects the text to the bicycle.

\$9.9 billion

Value of the self-improvement
industry



thanks!

ANY QUESTIONS?

references

Goodreads data show that women reading self-help books are getting advice from men.<https://qz.com/1106341/most-women-reading-self-help-books-are-getting-advice-from-men/>
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