

Books Worth Reading

Sam Spiro

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1 Introduction

What follows are a list of books which I think are “worth reading.” These are not necessarily my [favorite books](#), but most of them either changed my view on something or overall improved my life. I don’t expect anyone to get something out of all of these books, but I think almost all of them are worth at least checking out.

2 Productivity

2.1 *Deep Work* by Cal Newport

This is my favorite book of all time. It came to me at a time in my life where I needed to figure out how to be very productive very quickly, and this more than fit the bill.

The main takeaways of the book are (1) being able to focus deeply is a valuable skill, (2) this skill can (and should) be trained. The book gives lots of concrete evidence and advice towards this goal. One of my favorites is its advice not to do any work after 5:30. I've been using this rule for years now, and it's made me much more productive than I would be without it.

I'll also note that Newport has a podcast called *Deep Questions* which covers similar topics for those who want to learn about his ideas without committing to reading a whole book.

2.2 *Getting Things Done* by David Allen

Like *Deep Work*, this book gave me a huge boost to my productivity. However, this book is way more technical/nitty gritty, and as such isn't a good fit for everyone¹. Nevertheless, I got a lot out of the book, and I think it's worth checking out. Perhaps the easiest to implement tip from the book is that if a task will take you less than 2 minutes to do, you should just do it immediately. I'm not perfect with following this rule, but when I do my todo list nearly disappears.

2.3 *Mini Habits* by Stephan Guise

The main idea of the book is that the best way to establish a habit is to choose one that is as easy as possible to achieve. For example, I have a habit of doing at least 1 pushup after waking up. To emphasize, I can (and usually do) more than this, but having such a low bar makes it almost impossible for me to come up with an excuse to skip for a day, and as such the habit is more likely to stick. Other examples of mini habits include: writing one word of an essay, reading one word of a book, etc.

2.4 *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* by Mark Manson

The central lesson I learned from this book is that unfortunate circumstances may not always be your fault, but they're always your responsibility. Essentially, if you don't like a situation you're in, you shouldn't blame someone else for the situation (you may be correct, but it isn't useful). Instead, you should ask what you can do to make it better. A warning: one can take this mantra too far and dip into either self-blame or into trying to do everything on your own, but at least for me I found this to be a helpful tool.

¹Even I found the book hard to go through when I went back to reread it.

2.5 Any Productivity Book

This might just be me, but I immediately become more productive right after reading a productivity book. Examples of such books include *Digital Minimalism*, *Indistractable*, *5% More*.

3 Diet

I am not a medical doctor, consult your doctor before undertaking any changes that could significantly affect your health.

3.1 *Unsavory Truth* by Marion Nestle

This book show how easy it is to use “science” to argue that basically any kind of food has health benefits. In particular, one should have a lot of skepticism when reading up on any claim that a certain kind of diet or food is good for you (and this applies to all of the books on this topic that are listed in this file). Nestle’s other book *Food Politics* is similar, but personally I found *Unsavory Truth* to be better.

3.2 *In Denfense of Food* by Michael Pollan

Eat food, not too much, mostly plants. This is the first line and the entire message of the book. In particular, “eat food” refers to eating unprocessed foods, and towards this end I try to avoid buying foods at the grocery store which contain ingredients that I don’t know (which usually means I buy foods with just 1-2 ingredients).

4 Informative

Roughly speaking, these are books which either changed my perspective on something, or which gave me insight on some aspect of life or the world.

4.1 *Science Fictions* by Stuart Ritchie

This book discusses how even though science is the greatest method we have for discovering truth, there are a lot of systematic issues with how it is performed. If nothing else the book is worth reading to hear about a lot of the “well known” psychological studies which later turned out to be false. Some notable examples include power posing, priming (e.g. if you see words associated with “oldness” you tend to move slower), growth mindset. In fact, this book pointed out two books that were previously on this list as sources for over exaggerated claim (and have since been removed from this list).

4.2 *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

A really moving story highlighting the many flaws in the prison system, especially with regards to the death penalty.

4.3 *Chasing the Scream* by Johann Hari and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander

Both books really changed how I viewed the war on drugs, and in particular they made me realize how blatantly racist some of these polices were. As a warning, the author Johann Hari has had issues with lying and plagiarism in his writing (which he acknowledges himself). Thus you may be less inclined to believe what he says in that book.

4.4 *Bottle of Lies* by Katherine Eban

After reading through all the horror stories in this book, you may never be able to bring yourself to take generic drugs and dietary supplements again.

4.5 *So You've Been Publically Shamed* by Jon Ronson

The book is about how damaging it can be to be shamed on the internet. It was written well before cancel culture really blew up, and I think the lessons of the book have become even more relevant since then.

4.6 *Anything* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Taleb consistently writes really insightful and thought provoking books, the most famous being *The Black Swan*. My personal favorite is *Antifragile*, which talks about systems which grow stronger under (mild) stress, and I also really enjoyed *Skin in the Game*.

5 US Presidents

I love history books, especially those with narratives focusing on a single key figure. In particular, I have a soft spot for books on US presidents, and I think one can learn a lot from them even if you aren't a US citizen.

5.1 *Means of Ascent* and *Master of the Senate* by Robert Caro

These are my favorite biographies of all time. Lyndon B. Johnson is an absolutely fascinating character who is a master at wielding political power, and Caro does an amazing job at bringing him to life.

I'll note that these are the second and third books in a series of biographies on LBJ by Caro. While the first book *The Path to Power* is fine, you don't really get to see LBJ shine quite as much in that one, which is why I'd recommend starting in the middle.

5.2 Any Book about a President You Don't Care About

Many times over I've read through books on President's that I thought were either heartless or inept, and more often than not I found that the story is a lot more complex than that. Some personal examples in this direction include *Hoover* by Whyte, *The Bully Pulpit* for Taft, *A Man Divided* for Nixon, and *His Very Best* for Carter.

5.3 Any Book about Theodore Roosevelt

He is just an absolutely fascinating human being. My main recommendation would be the trilogy written by Edmund Morris starting with *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, but I also really liked *The River of Doubt* by Candice Millard.

5.4 *The Three Lives of James Madison* by Noah Feldman

In school I learned that the US fought a revolutionary war, wrote a constitution, and then Washington became president. I had kind of naively assumed it was a smooth transition between each of these three things, but this book made me realize how much of a fight went into getting any form of national government. This also gave me a much better understanding of all the compromises which led to a lot of the weird quirks of the US governmental system. It was also interesting to see that even the people who wrote the constitution argued about how to correctly interpret it, as well as the birth of political parties.

6 Fiction

6.1 *A Long Way Down* by Nick Hornby

In addition to being a delightful read, this book has one of the best portrayals of depression I've ever seen. I would also recommend the books *Anxious People* by Fredrik Backman, and to some extent *Turtles all the Way Down* by John Greene for similar reasons, but these were less impactful for me.

6.2 *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman

While I didn't care so much for the second half of this book, the first half resonated with me more than perhaps any other book I've read.

6.3 Any Classic

If a book is still being talked about 100 years after it came out, it's probably doing something right. These sorts of book also have the advantage that they're more likely to be something that continues to seep into modern society and popular culture compared to a book that's currently trending. Of course, the disadvantage of many of these books is that they are often not written in modern English, so they can be a bit of a mixed bag. Some classics that I personally enjoyed (in roughly decreasing order of enjoyment) include: *1984*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *I, Robot*, *Treasure Island*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Don Quixote*, *Brave New World*.

7 Somewhat Niche

Here are some books that are one specific topic and hence might not be of interest to most.

7.1 *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins

Gives an almost axiomatic approach to biology which I found to be really appealing. As a corollary he argues that genes, as opposed to organisms, are the fundamental objects that drive natural selection. This book is also where the word "meme" comes from, so I guess that counts as cultural relevance.

7.2 *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels* by Jason Schreier

This book showcases how chaotic the process of making video games is, and quite frankly, it makes me kind of shocked that most games are mostly functional.

7.3 *A Mathematician's Survival Guide* by Steven G. Krantz and *The Professor is in* by Karen Kelsky

The first book discusses how to succeed in a math grad school program. It feels a little outdated in various places, and the book can be a little "cold" at times, but overall I think it's information and lessons are valuable. The latter book focuses on the task of getting a tenure track academic job in any field but has an emphasis on the social sciences. I would *highly* recommend this book if you're thinking of applying to grad school and you're not in a STEM field since, at least as the book portrays it, the job market there is really bad.

7.4 *Open* by Andre Agassi

I'm not particularly interested in tennis, and perhaps because of this I found the book to get a bit dull halfway through. Still, even I found Andre's situation of being remarkably good at

something he never liked to be incredibly compelling. I also hadn't quite internalized how much of a role injury and psychology plays in high level sports until reading this.

8 Other Media

While I've found books to be the most influential form of media for myself, it's certainly not the only source of inspiration for me.

8.1 *Jubilee* (YouTube Channel)

This channel produces a lot of different content, most of which I don't watch. However, the two series *Middle Ground* and *Spectrum* have gone really far in informing me of issues and perspectives that I didn't know about.

8.2 *The Hubberman Lab* (Podcast)

Discusses a lot of good information regarding health and optimizing performance. I highly recommend listening to episode 28 which in particular discusses a lot of important points regarding sleep.

8.3 *Lazy* (Song) by the Living Tombstone

I've never really resonated emotionally with music, but this song hit me.

8.4 *Bojack Horseman* (TV Show)

The writing for this series is super clever, and they touch on a huge number of important but uncomfortable topics. I will note that the first season isn't super engaging (I dropped the show after watching the first 3 episodes, but I'm very glad that I went back to it).

8.5 *Breath of the Wild* (Video Game)

This didn't really change my world view or anything; it's just the most perfect video game I've ever played. It's also one of the very few video games I've played since high school that I actually enjoyed instead (a few other games that achieved this were *Hades* and the *Monster Hunter* franchise).

8.6 *Hunter X Hunter* (Anime)

Again, this didn't really change my world view, it's just my favorite piece of fiction of all time. I almost never revisit a piece of media after I've finished it, but I've seen all of Hunter X Hunter about 3 times (and it's not a short show!). I personally recommend watching the anime which came out in 2011 as opposed to the older anime or reading the manga (though neither of these are bad).

9 Maybe Worth Reading

Here are some books that either I recommend but not as much as the other books on this list, or books that are probably worth reading but which I read too long ago to remember for sure.

1. *The Oxygen Advantage* by Patrick McKeown
2. *Rising out of Hatred* by Eli Saslow.
3. *Political Tribes* by Amy Chua.
4. *Range* by David Epstein.
5. *The Grid* by Gretchen Bakke
6. *The Dip* by Seth Godin.
7. *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach.
8. *Debt* by David Graeber.
9. *How to be Miserable* by Randy Paterson.
10. *Age of Ambition* by Evan Osnos.
11. *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond.
12. *Sapiens* by Yuval Noah Harari.
13. *Morality* by Jonathan Sacks.
14. *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl.