

Five Reviews in 1,950 words

by Chris Loyd -- *third in a series*

Authors spotlighted: Amy Chua, Dr. Norman Doidge, Tony Juniper, Yuval Levin, and Rachel Maddow

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The first installment -- "[Seven Reviews in 1,400 Words](#)" -- grew out of an off-hand e-mail question: "What book has made the biggest positive/productive impression on you during this past year?"

(1) For "mind-control", *The Brain that Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge, M.D. This book came out in 2007 and, along with two others in this collection, is being reviewed in its audio version.

Covering the topic of neuro-plasticity, Dr. Doidge walks the reader through several case studies. The case study histories are often "nested" -- that is, a given researcher might read another research's paper, at which point the author begins to focus on that second case study.

Near the beginning, the author urges that everyone consider having a cognitive assessment. Near the end, the author describes the political implications of neuro-plasticity, ranging from immigration through human sexuality.

Dr. Doidge is just short of being evangelical about the possibilities of neuro-plasticity. After a while, such enthusiasm makes the reviewer wonder whether any psychological and neurological problems would not be treatable.

Coherence: B. He focuses on terms and phrases -- neuro-plasticity, "neurons that fire together, wire together" -- in ways that let the reader learn about the big picture well enough. However, due to the extensive

case history on the subject, and the nested approach the author takes, there is a study-within-study-within-study aspect. Given that this was an audio book, it was sometimes hard to know where in the timeline the author was.

Readability: The narrator for this audio book is Jim Bond, and he maintains a calm, professional tone throughout. This works well most of the time, but becomes surreal -- due to its detachment -- when the author delves into graphic explanations of sexual behavior. From pornography to hammering nails into one's body, the narrator does not seem to waver from his conversational-lecture approach.

In a Word: Brain.

In a Phrase: Change your mind.

Who Needs It: People considering going into neurology, as opposed to certified practitioners, might find the book instrumental. (The reviewer seriously considered recommending it to everyone -- but not after the two chapters on pornography and self-abuse.)

Otherwise: Some people might have trouble not throwing the book at the wall, or ejecting the CD and flinging it out onto the highway. Conservatives may appreciate the social criticisms within the book, but not the descriptors, nor the discussion on how changeable people are. Liberals may find the author prudish or condescending, despite the author being optimistic about education and criminal recidivism.

(2) For “money and the ecosystem”, *What Has Nature Ever Done for Us? How Money Really Does Grow on Trees* by Tony Juniper.

The author focuses on the monetary value that nature brings, which is refreshing compared to the usual political fare found on the Internet.

Juniper opens each chapter with some statistics and then walks the reader through short segments, discussing the extent that the economy is dependent upon nature. He starts off with a description of the Biosphere 2 project in Arizona, and progresses to soil-management, nitrogen fixation, the diversity of species, the disappearance of bees, biological pest control, and more. In the process, he introduces the reader to photosynthesis and other basic scientific concepts.

The focus on ecosystems moves environmentalism into a broader scope than the fixation on carbon emissions. Instead of lambasting capitalism, the author focuses on key problem areas, and showcases large companies that are taking steps of which he approves.

Coherence: A-. The author emphasizes that ecology and economy are not separate. The book is full of examples showing just that. Since the subject is about ecosystems, drawing simple conclusions or directions can be difficult.

Readability: The author writes in a breezy, pleasant way. There is a lot of crossover from chapter to chapter, and the text flows well. One (non-science?) mistake in the book is a header for Seoul's (South Korea's capital city) river; the text that follows is not about Seoul's river. It's in a later section.

In a Word: Ecosystems.

In a Sentence: The earth sends price signals, too.

Who Needs It: Environmentalists will appreciate the book, even if it's the case that they already know the core message and much of the science. People who are responsible for large systems -- municipal, corporate -- might find inspiration in the book, along with some worthy examples for the design of large projects.

Otherwise: Economists are not likely to take the book seriously, because it lacks focused, in-depth analyses.

(3) For “separation of civilians and the military”, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* by Rachel Maddow. Another audiobook; the original text was published in 2012.

Maddow narrates the *Drift* of the U.S. military from civilian participation and accountability. This is a complex story of politicians, military brass, and contractors. Presidential hesitancy takes turns with hubris, from avoiding hard decisions to keeping secrets beyond given military operations.

The best parts of the book are the explanations of the 1983 Grenada Invasion,

and the Congressional debate on the 1991 Gulf War. The story becomes muddled with the Iran-Contra Affair; later the author fixates on one contractor during the Bosnian War. The sheer volume of details shows that Maddow did her research, but a step back every now and then -- to remind the reader/listener of the big picture -- would have been welcome.

Coherence: B. The author starts off with a clear prologue, and concludes with an equally clear conclusion. However, the middle parts of the book alternate between compelling narratives and burying the reader with overwhelming details. The Iran-Contra Affair is so complicated, and explained in such depth, that the reviewer spent more time trying to figure that part out rather than focusing on the larger picture.

Readability: Maddow narrates her own book. This is both good and bad. Good in that the listener knows what parts Maddow wishes to emphasize vocally, as well as with the words themselves. Bad in that this extra vocal emphasis often adds an occasionally goofy editorial spin, as opposed to enhancing context or information.

In a Word: Depressing.

In a Sentence: A wall separates the military from the civilians, and taking that down will be very, very difficult.

Who Needs It: Anyone who has never been in the military, nor a dependent of it. And especially those who have not been in the military, nor a dependent of it, since the 1990s.

Otherwise: Rachel Maddow is nothing if not partisan. Conservatives will have a very hard time reading or listening to the extensive sections devoted to her criticism of the Reagan Administration. Liberals will want that same section to be larger, if not its own book.

NOTE: The reviewer is a "military brat" himself, and was greatly disturbed at hearing what has happened to the institution of his childhood.

(4) For "flame wars of the 1790s", *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* by Yuval Levin.

Levin spends 231 pages covering the debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. Without going to the extent of a line-by-line, side-by-side take-

down of each side, he contrasts the philosophers' political views thematically. The chapter titles themselves almost say it all: Nature and History; Justice and Order; Choice and Obligation, and so on.

The problem the reviewer had with this book is that Burke and Paine mixed their essays with metaphor and sarcasm, and often spoke past each other on purpose. This is in addition to having to process words that seem to have evolved in meaning since the 1790s.

To complicate matters even more, the opinions of Burke and Paine changed over time, but they still wrote to battle each other. Reading this book is like reading a lengthy analysis of two angry Internet bloggers.

Coherence: A. Several times throughout the book, author Levin summarizes the points of Burke and Paine. Essentially, Burke was a reformer who did not want to abandon past institutions, including the monarchy; instead, he sought to learn from them, while making or allowing minor incremental changes to keep society stable. Paine was a radical who did not want to inherit past institutions, especially the monarchy, and instead sought to use reason as a way to make society freer.

The problems with each philosophy -- as well as the impossibility of these two philosophers agreeing on a political program or other social agenda -- are quickly apparent.

Readability (macro): No surprise that Levin cites Burke and Paine extensively, but the way he adds his interpretation leaves the book alternating between the author's dry prose and the difficult and contentious writing of his two subjects. The book felt like a very long first-year college-level American History class paper.

Readability (micro): This book contains just one typo.

In a Word: Dull.

In a Sentence: Before picking up this book, spend some time with the original Burke and Paine essays and pamphlets.

Who Needs It: High-school and college students, taking American history, may find the book very useful. Historians, whether amateur and professional, may also like this book.

Otherwise: Wonks and opinionaters might be interested at first, but they are hereby warned that this book quickly becomes dull and repetitious. Everyone else can skip it -- too sweeping.

(5) For “ethnocentric child-rearing”, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua. Yet another audio book; the original was published in 2011.

The author speaks about her extended family history, and how she raised her two daughters. She is struggling to prevent generational decline of the type observed in other immigrant families. And her book ends up putting into operation the findings of Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* (covered in the August 2013 set of reviews) and Doidge's *The Brain that Changes Itself*.

Much of the book describes battles with her younger child. Her husband and children all cry fowl, and point out contradictions in her methods and statements. Chua is honest enough to document when her husband, parents, in-laws, and friends are expressing disapproval.

The author comes from a successful family herself. She drives her children to only get A's in school, and practice music for several hours per day. This family has lived in nice neighborhoods, with good local schools and music resources, plus nearby New York City, at their disposal.

Children raised in this environment will likely live in nice neighborhoods as adults. The cognitive training that math and music will have on the minds of her children are very likely to have positive affects on non-math and non-musical activities. Thus does Amy Chua add a form of "lab work" to the Murray and Doidge theories.

Coherence: C. One can sense the author's emphatic convictions interacting with, and being diluted by, her academic training: Again and again, she'll strongly assert, then backpedal and refine.

The author is strident about Chinese parenting being superior to Western parenting. But, after adding so many qualifications to the words *Chinese* and *Western*, she winds up using ethnic words to describe a methodology independent of ethnicity. Despite the author's confidence that Chinese parenting is better than Western parenting, her family strikes this reviewer as surprisingly ordinary, fitting in with "high-achieving" U.S. families regardless of race, creed and ethnicity.

Readability: The author tends to take on a condescending tone, then switch to a softer tone, as she tries to add nuance to her drama. It is like listening to a rich mother -- in this case, one who is also a tenured Yale law professor -- talk about raising her rich kids in a rich Connecticut neighborhood.

In a Word: Chua.

In a Sentence: You have to listen to it to believe it.

Who Needs It: (1) Parents who need self-validation that their own methods (whatever those might be) are the correct ones; and (2) Individuals who want an insight into how other families operate.

Otherwise: People who cannot stand to be lectured to, or who don't care about family structures, should skip this book.

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