

Five Books in 1,600 words

by Chris Loyd -- *fourth in the "Honest Reviews" series*

Authors spotlighted: Sheri Fink, Andy Wier, Robin Waterfield, Charles Murray, and the trio of Sullivan/Wicks/Koelling

Reviewer [CHRIS LOYD](#) is a Mission Science Integrator for the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. He will accept free nonfiction books of recent issuance. Publishers, authors and media reps can ask CNLoyd@gmail.com.

This series began in 2013 with "[Seven Reviews in 1,400 Words](#)."

Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital -- by Sheri Fink

This is an audio book, read by Kirsten Porter; the hard-copy edition was published in 2013. And it's quite lengthy -- 14 audiodiscs.

The centerpiece is a sprawling account of Memorial Hospital in New Orleans. Five days, during and immediately after Hurricane Katrina, claim half the content. The other half of the book covers the legal and cultural aftermath.

Essentially, New Orleans is presented as a city of intertwined social networks. Though often next to one another, they rarely mix. The result is that New Orleans lacks what other Americans may call "civil" society.

As with many contemporary history texts, the reader is confronted with a blizzard of names. Fortunately, there is enough history preceding the storm so that one can glean an overview. During the critical five days, we are shown the mindset and circumstances that lead to possible euthanasia.

COHERENCE: B+. Sheri Fink has done a great job assembling a narrative on a legally and ethically complicated event. However, it isn't clear if this book is largely about Anna Pou -- she's the nurse who allegedly injected patients with two drugs -- or about the conflict among sets of people, including patients, doctors, cops, refugees, business executives, and politicians. The reader can try to make the best of both worlds. I ended up taking Anna Pou as a personification of the city.

The sections on her life in Galveston are noteworthy. For example, Galveston comes across in this book as relatively impersonal and efficient compared to "Anna Pou of New Orleans." Although, for this Texan, Galveston has never seemed impersonal and efficient, at least not when compared with other Texas cities.

READABILITY (the audiobook equivalent is LISTENABILITY): The narrator is calm and professional -- very appropriate for what is mostly a hospital and legal drama. However, there appear to have been many stops and starts during what had to be multiple days of recording (recall the number of CDs). As a result, the narrator's emotive tone and loudness can jump erratically from one sentence to the next.

IN A WORD (which in this case requires the question mark): Euthanasia?

IN A PHRASE: New Orleans is a world unto itself.

WHO NEEDS IT: Ethicists, philosophers, and cultural geographers may find the book useful. Because medical professionals are likely to have strong opinions when it comes to disaster-preparedness as well as euthanasia, this book will either confirm those opinions -- or cause some heartburn.

The Martian -- by Andy Wier

An astronaut is trapped on Mars, after his crew assumes that he perished. They had been on the surface together, when a dust storm struck. The astronaut, knocked over by flying debris, became impossible to find in that dust storm.

By launching off with their return vehicle, the rest of the crew manages to escape. The stranded astronaut wakes up to find that he cannot communicate with them. The necessary equipment has been destroyed.

That sets the stage for one man's attempt to survive a world with very low atmospheric pressure, and with very real dust storms. He has to remember everything he ever learned about botany and mechanical engineering. Prepare for swearing. As for substance, Wier's research and respect for detail are impressive. The only thing lacking is in-line references for all the scientific information.

COHERENCE: B+. The story is very clear on Mars, where there is only one character. Meanwhile, back on Earth, the story involves several characters, though none as interesting as the man trapped on Mars. There the tension is palatable, though that feeling is not well translated to the action on Earth.

READABILITY: Okay. The story mixes diary entries with conventional dialog and narrative. (Again, be ready for swearing.) This story is also heavy on, though not weighed down by, scientific details and mechanical descriptions.

IN A WORD: Survival.

IN A PHRASE: Back-up systems are good.

WHO NEEDS IT: Anyone who has given at least a passing thought to living on Mars, or (and this readership will be a lot bigger) who expects to spend months or years in one of Earth's hostile environments.

Dividing the Spoils: The War for Alexander the Great's Empire -- by Robin Waterfield

Alexander the Great conquered a "narrow swath of Asia," but left behind no administrative structure and no succession plan. What followed were decades of war among the Successors: Ptolemy, Perdiccas, Eumenes and Seleuces, among others. The reader can expect an onslaught of names and places.

In between all the fighting and scheming, one encounters relatively brief mentions of Hellenistic culture. The author emphasizes in a few sections that this era in Greek history featured many advancements in technology and art.

But, by the end of the book, I recalled only that the "War of Successors" period was the first to use elephants in battle.

COHERENCE: D-. The narrative is a mess. It is hard to track who and which so-and-so are doing what to whom and where. A single paragraph can contain as many as five names and just as many places. Since royal families used the same names repeatedly (Alexander the Great was also Alexander III), reading the book requires frequent checking with the "Cast of Characters" section. Imagine constantly referring to the same eight pages of names and brief descriptions. The publisher would have done well to make that info into some kind of a pull-out, perhaps resembling a laminated map with two or three durable folds.

READABILITY: Maps are in the front of book; family trees are in the back. The book could have been better organized (and more coherent in its narrative) if relevant maps and family trees also appeared in individual chapters -- perhaps as summaries of what had just been explained. Absent a structure of that sort, the book is page after page of text.

IN A WORD: Boring.

IN A PHRASE: After Alexander the Great, lots of fighting.

WHO NEEDS IT (or not): People who are researching the post-Alexander, pre-Roman period -- in other words, they've shown up "oriented" as well as with a purpose in mind. Conversely, this is not a book for people just starting to learn about that time. The reviewer did not know what he was getting into.

***The Curmudgeon's Guide to Getting Ahead:
Dos and Don'ts of Right Behavior, Tough Thinking,
Clear Writing, and Living a Good Life*** -- by Charles Murray

This short book offers about 35 lessons, sometimes in the form of admonishments, on the right behavior stressed in the title.

Murray provides advice on presenting oneself in the workplace (aesthetically and behaviorally), thinking and writing well, and the pursuit of happiness. His counsel ranges from typical professional advice (don't say "like" at random moments) to obscure recommendations (watch the movie *Groundhog Day*).

If you are over 30 years old, you've probably learned most of this stuff one way or another. What is insightful is that the author warns the reader that their bosses and their bosses' bosses may have a "well-meaning hypocrisy." They may not want to offend their workers, but judge them nonetheless.

COHERENCE: A. Most of the advice, taken as individual lessons, is expressed well. Each reader's life experience will have its own twists and turns; accordingly, Murray seems aware that a good part of what he recommends will not fit this or that individual.

READABILITY: The author writes in a conversational manner, which is probably best for a book of this type. Some of his recommendations, particularly on word usage, could work as a separate series of lessons.

IN A WORD: Behave.

IN A PHRASE: Your boss does notice you.

WHO NEEDS IT: Ostensibly, 18- to 22-year-olds. As one ages, some of these lessons become irrelevant, such as considering getting married in your twenties.

Also, if a young adult takes the advice seriously, they may already have internalized some of the lessons from earlier in their life.

NOTE: This is the second Murray book that has been reviewed in what is now a four-part series. If he writes further books, those will not be reviewed until the number of other authors reviewed has been greatly increased.

Engineering Economy, 15th Edition -- by
William G. Sullivan, Elin M. Wicks, and C. Patrick Koelling

This is a textbook. It focuses on determining the cost-effectiveness of projects, and comparing alternatives. It also introduces methods of evaluating post-tax earnings as part of analyses. Cash-flow diagrams are used extensively.

[Engineering Economy, 15th Edition](#) is good -- in fact, it's the first useful economics book this reviewer has ever read. Why? Because the authors focus on methods over theory. One can apply some of the knowledge to personal finances, such as calculating the Present Worth of something. Long-term thinking is emphasized.

COHERENCE: A. Don't forget that this is a textbook, so it focuses on mathematical principles, followed by examples. If a textbook can't earn a high grade for coherence, it isn't an experience to be imposed on students.

READABILITY: No grammar or spelling mistakes stand out. The flow and language of the text are similar to what ones finds in other college textbooks. Political slant? I detected none. When the discussion is on topics such as energy and the environment, the focus is on the economics, and the financial returns of alternative projects.

WHO NEEDS IT (or not): Aside from upper-level or graduate students in Engineering, anyone who is curious about how large projects are evaluated. People interested in economics, but in search of something broader, or more qualitative, should look elsewhere.

© 2015, [Chris Loyd](#) and ExactingEditor.com

In case you missed the previous installment --
www.ExactingEditor.com/Loyd-August-2014.pdf