

The Bookery

Gleick, J. (2011) *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*. New York, Pantheon Books.

A review by Heather von Stackelberg

James Gleick is an experienced science writer, and it shows in how he makes a potentially dry subject not just readable, but interesting and at times entertaining. In this book he traces the history of information theory from the codes necessary to turn language into drum patterns in Africa over a hundred years ago to modern all-encompassing networks and high data compression. He is obviously writing to the “geeky” audience but does a good job of not getting too tangled in mathematics or technical explanations, nor of getting too starry-eyed with the technological wonders of our age.

I found this book fascinating because I am currently teaching mathematics and introduction to computers, but my academic background is in communication studies and media studies. Gleick ably draws connections between these topics. He writes about how greater knowledge of the mathematics of codes has allowed advancements in the technology of data compression, which has allowed advances in communications technologies such as streaming video and tiny mp3 players containing hundreds or thousands of songs. As part of tracing the history of information theory, he also dips into the psychology of social change, and how advances in genetics and the development of the Internet were as much dependent on changes to how people thought about things as to the development of material innovations.

As this book was written for a consumer audience rather than as a textbook, some of his ideas and points are somewhat rambling and circuitous, but all in all this book is an amazing synergy of math, psychology and communication studies.

Cameron, J. (2008) *The Writing Diet*. New York, Penguin Group.

A review by Annet Chu

In Julia Cameron’s self-help book, she introduces a weight-loss program through writing. Cameron’s method is free from medication and starvation; her method primarily involves pens and notebooks. The tools that are used in the program act like an imaginary mirror that requires the readers to reflect on themselves. The author presents seven essential writing tools and several mini writing exercises for the journey of the writing diet. Some of these activities require the readers to become writers. Other activities require the writers to take some form of physical action prior to writing. This book review will summarize Cameron’s perspective on the benefits of writing and three of her seven writing exercises for weight loss.

Cameron introduces writing as a way to enhance people’s personal lives and eating habits. The writers who use Cameron’s writing tools will create a journal of diet change and enhance their health through weight control. Cameron also suggests that people should spice up their lives with adventures. The writing diet is an adventure. Instead of thinking about the good looks of a thin person, the writers will discover that every moment of writing increases self-worth. Each writing exercise will allow the writers to be in tune with their wonderful

selves.

The first proposed tool is the Morning Pages, which is the backbone of the writing diet. With this tool, the writers simply write down anything that comes to their mind. Cameron posits that writing allows the writers to embrace awareness and creativity, which will promote weight loss. Furthermore, self-cognizance in different aspects of life allows people to understand the causes of the excessive activities in which they partake (e.g., overeating). A drawback of this tool is the need for consistency. The writers have to be willing to write regularly in order to see any effects. This tool is a life-long commitment as Cameron puts it. The process is what Cameron emphasizes, and writers will be disappointed if they want to see immediate results after one entry of the Morning Pages.

Another one of Cameron's tools is the use of reflective questions. Specifically, she stresses the importance of four questions: Am I hungry? Is this what I feel like eating? Is this what I feel like eating now? Is there something else that I could eat instead? The purpose of the four questions is to remind the writers about their food consumption habits. The questions deter them from eating certain types of foods, because they may realize they do not need to eat at certain times and may not benefit from certain types of food. The advantage of the question method is that as the writers record their answers to the questions, they also create a list of foods that should not be eaten because of their lack of nutritional value. The exercise is reflective and allows writers to create a repertoire of taboo eating times and taboo foods. Essentially, the taboo foods should no longer be available in the writers' homes, but that is dependent on the ability to connect the taboo food items to grocery shopping habits.

Cameron suggests that individuals should be aware of the self and body figure. One of her exercises requires the readers to examine people with perfect body figure. Individuals often admire other people's perfect body figures, but they fail to remember that all individuals have abundant qualities like beautiful eyes and hair colour. In this writing activity, the writers observe other people's appearances and their own. Then, they record and give praise to their own good body parts. This writing activity allows the writers to live in reality and accept the fact that there are people in the world who have perfect body figures. However, this is not to downplay the self. Finally, the writing activity allows the writers to appreciate what they have and find beauty in the self.

In addition to the above three writing tools and writing exercises, Cameron uses four other writing tools and several writing activities to motivate the readers to understand themselves. The goal of self-awareness is for the writers to understand why they are eating at specific times of the day. Perhaps such consumption has resulted from a desire to escape certain life events. People can only control their eating habits when they understand the underlying reasons for eating. Cameron promotes writing as a tool to develop positive behaviours and this tool can be transferred to changing other behaviours (e.g., excessive smoking and drug abuse). Although she promises her readers that they will lose pounds, the readers must be diligent and follow all the steps in the writing diet in order to succeed in the weight loss program.

Rankin, Ian. *Doors Open*. United Kingdom: Orion Books, 2011. Kindle E-book.

A review by Jessica L. Reid (née Scott)

Art professor Robert Gissing, banker Allan Cruikshank, and "self-made software mogul" Mike

Mackenzie, were not your typical gang of thieves. Though referred to as “The Three Musketeers” by associates, they were better known for their mutual interest in art auctions and the drinks and conversations that followed in a wine bar nearby. So when Professor Gissing, over a glass of whiskey, revealed his scheme to “free” a certain number of master paintings imprisoned in the dark and isolated vaults of the storage warehouse for the National Museum of Scotland, his buddies laughed off the hypothetical plan and continued with their cocktails.

Coincidentally, that very same night, the men happened to run into Mike’s old high-school bully turned real-life-gangster, Chib Calloway. From that day forward, with Gissing’s pressing persuasiveness and the chance addition of Calloway’s professional support, the imaginary proposal became more and more real. They planned to enter the warehouse on Edinburgh’s “Doors Open Day”, when businesses and institutions normally closed to the public open their doors to allow visitors. After the guards and visitors were subdued the Musketeers sought out their chosen paintings and swapped them with forgeries made by one of Gissing’s art students. They then left their stolen van containing the copies nearby, creating the illusion that they had been spooked, left the paintings, and fled. With the appearance that nothing had been stolen, the crew believed concern for the crime would soon subside.

What author Ian Rankin does with his novel is unique. The lead up to the crime and the climactic heist itself takes place only halfway through the book. The reader is then taken down the deepening spiral of paranoia, sideways dealing, greed, lies, and the eventual violent unraveling of the entire scheme. The significance of Rankin’s story is not found in the detailing of the heist itself, but in the unique motives that led each character to want to commit it. This aspect of the story offers readers insight into the variety of characters who commit art robbery. It suggests that not every thief is a dark character looking at the price tag of art and seeing an opportunity to get rich, but that there are other reasons people commit this type of crime.

The puppeteer of the heist, Robert Gissing, is motivated by his desire to emancipate art, “out of love”, from the boardrooms of corporations, the bank vaults of insurance companies, the walls of millionaires, and the storage facilities of galleries with too little room to display them. He considers such works to be of “genuine genius! Sold into servitude and wrenched from the gaze of the deserving!” He sees great art as “part of our collective consciousness, our nation’s narrative . . . our history.”

Gissing’s first mate in the heist, Mike Mackenzie, is bored and rich, looking for a thrill, for purpose. He adores a particular portrait of an artist’s wife, which happens to look like Mackenzie’s love interest. He longs to have it, but longs more for the risk involved in taking it. Cruikshank, a disgruntled banker, simply loves art and desires to own something none of his employers could afford. Finally, gangster Chib Calloway introduces readers to the shadier, perhaps more stereotypical thief who doesn’t care for art, knows nothing about it, but sees the big business potential behind art robbery. Calloway becomes interested in the use of art as collateral, like the big time gangsters: “I’m talking about something the mafia does all the time.”

Not unlike the popular art crime film, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, Rankin’s novel also features a heist fueled by romanticized motives. Although both crimes are somewhat unrealistic, fictitious accounts, such stories do contribute to our understanding of the relationship of art and crime by allowing readers into a world beyond the news and beyond available facts. By writing in the third person and often switching the protagonist every chapter, Rankin invites us into the deep thoughts, desires, and fears of his different characters. In *Doors Open*, we

learn just how passionate some can feel toward art, particularly the buying, selling, and possession of it, and just how far some may go to “right the wrongs” of the art world. *Doors Open*, though unrealistic, is worthwhile as a character study that encourages exploration into the less stereotyped individuals who may commit art theft.