

Book reviews

7 secrets the weight loss industry will never tell you



Graham Park
AWL Pty Ltd, 2008
9780980537109
\$24.95

The *7 secrets* are myths about the weight loss industry which Park aims to debunk. Park is a self-confessed former failed dieter, who attacks traditional weight loss methods and concepts. Yet he is actually part of the industry himself, promoting his own program, *Adventures in Weight Loss*, after a career promoting health supplements.

Park intersperses passages of his own reflections with "Professional Comments" from his team of experts. The value of these is somewhat diminished by a lack of objective separation: for example, Park's weight loss program exclusively promotes the supplements produced by one expert's company.

The major appeal of the book may lie in the fact that it suggests that dieting, exercise, and diet products such as shakes, are not necessary for weight loss (and may indeed mitigate against it), that surgery is unnecessary, and that 'real food' is our friend. This, surely, is what we've all been hoping to hear. But though the book promotes the *Adventures in Weight Loss* program, it does not actually provide a plan or program for anyone to lose weight.

Although they won't help you lose weight either, the delightful Glasbergen cartoons may well justify the purchase of this book.

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They told me I had to write this



Kim Miller
Hybrid Publishers,
2009
9781876462840
\$17.95

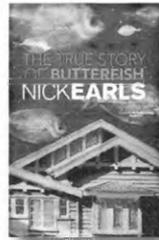
Despite its numerous motorbike references, *They told me I had to write this* is actually not a very 'blokey' book, focusing more on the emotional journey of the main character, a delinquent teenage boy named Clem. The book is written from Clem's perspective in a series of letters/diary entries addressed to his grandmother. The language style is simple and casual throughout, and I think the author does a great job of capturing the Clem's voice. My only criticism of the book would be that this voice doesn't change very much, so though Clem deals with some fairly serious issues, the tone of the book is mostly light and easy to read.

The issues in this book are fairly universal, making it easy for most readers to relate,

and the process Clem goes through to resolve his problems is fairly transparent. This allows the reader to see how the way Clem deals with his issues could apply to their own lives. The book also promotes the message that most troubled kids just have a lot of issues that need dealing with, and shows a lot of the unique problems they face.

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The true story of Butterfish



Nick Earls
Vintage Australia, 2009
9781741666335
\$32.95

Nick Earls acknowledges musical duo Savage Garden as a source of inspiration for *The True Story of Butterfish*: anyone familiar with Savage Garden's success and eventual breakup will see the resemblance readily. Even though Earls denies its Savage Garden's story, it is hard not to be overwhelmed by the similarities.

Earls presents the story from the perspective of Curtis Holland, who has returned to Brisbane after the breakup of the Butterfish. Curtis, always seen as the enigmatic one, found fame hard to take and now wants a quiet life producing music away from the spotlight. He hides out in the suburbs seeking anonymity, and meets the Winter family who coax him out of his shell and help him to find the peace he seeks.

Curtis is not particularly engaging as a narrator, not damaged enough by what has happened for his story to be compelling. The writing keeps the reader at a distance and true sympathy for Curtis is hard to find. Earls wrote this as both a play and a novel and the novel suffers for this. It is a great idea for a story and disappointing that it misses the mark so badly.

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The third man factor



John Geiger
Text Publishing, 2009
9781921520372
\$34.95

The proposed intention of the author is a record of the "third man factor" phenomenon where people in extreme conditions report experiencing a mystical presence or hearing a voice of a benevolent being. Geiger holds that this is common for people enduring extreme conditions and tells stories from survivors including explorers, soldiers and civilians in wartime, and scientists working in extreme isolation. The most famous case is Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton and his small rescue

party who experienced a mystical presence of an extra person in their dangerous escape from Antarctica. This was evoked as the "third" person by T.S. Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land*.

A small part of the book is devoted to the possible neurological, psychological, and spiritual causes of the phenomenon. The author attempts to be objective about these causes but unfortunately lacks the substance for a good discussion. The strength of this book lies in its tales of adventure and exploration allowing the reader to follow men and women struggling through the extreme to their physical salvation.

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The lost Mona Lisa



R.A. Scotti
Random House
Australia, 2007
9780593057858
\$35

The Lost Mona Lisa is "the extraordinary true story of the greatest art theft in history". In 1911 da Vinci's celebrated portrait of Lisa Gioconda – better known as Mona Lisa – vanished from the Louvre, sparking a media frenzy and an international manhunt. R.A. Scotti's novel stretches from Paris in 1911 and the sensationalist journalism of the Mona Lisa theft back to the world of Renaissance Florence and the life of da Vinci, and swings around to follow the enigmatic Mona Lisa on her journey through the last 500 years.

Although a little slow to start – the first few chapters are annoyingly short on details and over-indulged with recaps and Parisian metaphors – *The Lost Mona Lisa* is a satisfying and well rounded account. Scotti's novel successfully bridges the gap between art history and creative non-fiction, using physical descriptions of locations and key persons to bring the theft of da Vinci's masterpiece to life. Once in full swing, the novel is an intriguing and varied account of not only Mona Lisa's colourful life in the palaces and hearts of great men, but also of the political and social scene in which she was famously stolen.

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Fishing for stars



Bryce Courtenay
Viking, 2009
9708670072750
\$32.95

Blame Dr Tony Freeman for this rambling, almost unreadable saga. He is the specialist called in to deal with

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protagonist Nick Duncan's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Freeman reckons billionaire former intelligence officer Nick can be cured by writing his life story. Set in Australia, the Pacific Islands, Japan, and Indonesia, Nick's journey takes us through the second half of the twentieth century tackling big issues – the environment, politics, Japanese yakusa, the Balibo Five. The two great loves of Nick's life (in addition to butterfly collecting) take lead roles. Anna Til (a.k.a Princess Plunder) and Marg Hamilton (a.k.a. the Green Bitch) are the yin and yang of Nick's rollicking life. Anna was a comfort woman to the Japanese in WWII and has made a fortune exploiting oil, animals, and people. Marg was an intelligence officer, now a feisty Greens activist. Both are passionate and love Nick to bits, as does his beautiful godchild Saffron. Saffron inherits Anna's fortune, Marg is falsely accused of owning Gunn's Pulp Mill shares, Nick is cured, and best-selling author Courtenay has done it again. Courtenay's acknowledgements include his massage therapist, fitness instructors, and cats and dog. A truly ruthless editor is not evident.

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Plutonium: a history of the world's most dangerous element



Jeremy Bernstein
UNSW Press, 2007
9781742230887

Bernstein has crafted an accessible history of this curious element by weaving narratives of world historical events, scientific enterprise, and personal biography into an engrossing whole. The uncharitable might consider the references to his own encounters with significant historical characters as name-dropping, but it lends flavour and colour, avoiding the dry treatise this book could easily have become.

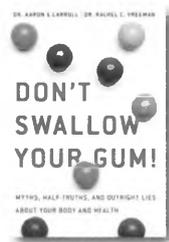
The players in this nuclear physics history are described with a clear admiration for their perseverance, insight, and genius. Yet the controversy that accompanies this heritage is not ignored – from the overlooked work of female scientists, the tremendous impact of WWII and Nazism on the rate of research, and the lives of scientists, to the drama surrounding Karen Silkwood and Bernstein's conclusion that the huge investment in Cold War stockpiles of plutonium are surpassed only by the huge investment now required to neutralise this legacy.

Bernstein has set the discovery of Plutonium into its scientific, historic, and social context, while peopling the journey with eminent scientists and thinkers, and contemplating the larger consequences of its existence. He presents no solutions to the question of how we as a society should

deal with it, but concedes that despite his admiration for the process of discovery, he somewhat regrets the level of success.

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Don't swallow your gum! Myths, half-truths and outright lies about your body and health



Aaron E Carroll and
Rachel C Vreeman
Penguin, 2009
9780141044224
\$24.95

Every day, you hear things about your body and health that are not – or not entirely – true. But how do you find out what's what? If you shave your hair, will it back thicker and faster? Should you wake a sleep-walker? This book sets out to prove or disprove the things that people often swear are true.

An article by these authors on this topic was first published as *Medical myths* in BMJ 2007; 335: 1288-1289. It generated many responses from the readers of the journal, some calling the authors irresponsible and stupid, some backing and enhancing a couple of the myths, and even suggestions of myths that were not discussed that readers thought should be included.

Most of the myths discussed turn out to be myths, but some are half-truths. So if someone tells you that cracking your knuckles will lead to arthritis, or that eating spinach will make you strong, refer them to this book.

There are references to published literature for each myth discussed, and counter-arguments to help you prove your point against decades of urban legend. An interesting read, enjoyable, but definitely not full of facts.

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88 lines about 44 women



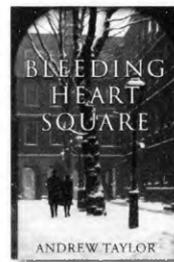
Steven Lang
Viking, 2009
9780670072835
\$32.95

Lawrence Martin is an ageing rock star, who meanders aimlessly through life, falling into one situation or another, always due to someone else's influence. At the beginning of the novel, he isolates himself in rural Scotland, hoping to rediscover himself and his creativity, and sort through the various issues he sees as holding him back. The plot winds from there, with much deep point-of-view and flashbacks, eventually revealing its genesis in a tragic event in the past.

To distract myself as I waded through the chapters of self-indulgent self-analysis told in long lists of sentence fragments – One after the other. Short bursts of text. – I tried to determine if a novel with an unsympathetic narrator can ever truly work. There are examples: John Banville's *The Sea* won the Mann Booker Prize, and *Catcher in the Rye* is considered a classic. But both these examples have other merits – Banville's self-aware writing and sharp aim for his novel meant it could be appreciated, if not strictly liked. Salinger created a character that spoke to a lost generation about their own sense of futility. Unfortunately, while Steven Lang may have striven to join the ranks of these novels, *88 lines* lacks both the clarity of purpose and the strong characterisation necessary to make that possible.

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Bleeding Heart Square



Andrew Taylor
Penguin, 2008.
9780718153731
\$32.95

When Lydia leaves her abusive husband and moves in with her father, she unwittingly begins a chain of events that affect all the tenants of Bleeding Heart Square, and uncovers the secrets behind the disappearance of a woman a few years earlier. Set in the inter-war period, during the early beginnings of fascism in England, this criminal thriller is told from three different viewpoints that intersect and weave a narrative of events that keep the reader involved until the very last page.

With good use of imagery, a rundown house in London and its surrounds translate into visual images that stay with the reader throughout the book. The characters demonstrate a range of social circumstances, and the attention given to the lesser characters make them as interesting as the central figures of the story. The author's use of different narrative voices works extremely well, and I particularly liked the beginning of the first chapter, which drew me in like an unlocked door to a secret garden.

I found this book to hard to put down, so be warned: don't take this on your holiday or else you'll never leave your hotel room!

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