

Book reviews

Shrinking the world: the 4000-year old story of how email came to rule our lives



John Freeman
Text Publishing, 2009
ISBN: 9781921520945
RRP: \$34.95

John Freeman's *Shrinking the world* is in part historical account, social examination, and cautionary tale, examining what we as a society have come to accept but not always recognise — that email rules our lives.

Freeman begins his narrative detailing the vast history of human communication and the development of the internet, both of which eventuated in the creation of email. While the topic can be somewhat complex, Freeman uses clever and easy to understand comparisons to illuminate readers.

From its humble beginnings, Freeman examines how email has morphed into an everyday necessity for the western world, completely transforming our professional and personal lives. The majority of what Freeman has to say is obvious, although not immediately apparent to those of us too busy slogging away at our computer's inbox.

While Freeman touches on email's obvious benefits, his main aim is to demonstrate how instead of bringing people together, email alienates and impersonalises interactions, and often becomes ineffective and time-consuming in a professional environment.

In his final chapter, Freeman outlines his recommendations for how we as a society can regain control so that email can once again become a tool to aid, instead of an ineffective distraction. Whether or not readers take into account these suggestions, the book will no doubt make people pause to evaluate their own email dependence.

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Wolf Hall



Hilary Mantel
HarperCollins Publishers, 2008
ISBN: 9870007292417
RRP: \$32.99

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* paints a panoramic and detailed account of life in England during King Henry VIII's reign. Told from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, throughout the novel both minor and major players are given a voice enhancing the depth of the main protagonist. The narrative, while more exciting than a history text, does not have the heart racing impact of a modern thriller.

At times the text seems jarring and the overuse of simple sentences creates an obstruction to the flow of the storyline. While for some this may increase a lifelike aspect to the dialogue and text, I sometimes found that it extricated me from immersion in the story.

The provision of multiple perspectives is masterly drawn together to provide a holistic view of court and common life. The portrayal of characters throughout the novel gives them a more natural and true-to-life feel. The content and detail of the dialogue enables readers to understand different scenes and characters without having to guess implied meanings. The brutality of life and human nature depicted in the novel seems realistic and believable.

Wolf Hall will appeal to a wide range of readers especially those interested in the period.

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Parrot and Olivier in America



Peter Carey
Hamish Hamilton, 2009
ISBN: 9781926428147
RRP: \$49.95

To describe a story by Peter Carey is like seeing a photograph of a coral reef, rather than experiencing it yourself while snorkelling. The colours fade and the whole experience can't be communicated with the same sensation of the sublime.

Peter Carey's new book evokes his previous work, *The unusual life of Tristan Smith* — many of the characters focus on their physicality and lack of strength (a certain smallness and strangeness), and the whole story revolves around a journey over sea. This is inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville's experiences and ensuing Democracy in America.

Olivier de Garmont and his opposite in life experience, Parrot both have shadowy feelings around life and seek redemption. They are united by the uncertainty of their purpose in life and the threat of loneliness bestowed by their different classes.

Many of the elements and experiences have the same core elements of horror and beauty (similar to *Bliss*) and integration of strange vignettes. However, I find that when Carey interprets semi-fiction or non-fiction (such as *The Kelly Gang*), that he seems to lose some of the loveliness of his turn of phrase.

An interesting, bulky book which will especially appeal to both Alexis de Tocqueville and Peter Carey fans.

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The book of tomorrow



Cecelia Ahern
HarperCollins, 2009
ISBN: 9780007326341
RRP: \$32.99

Tamara Goodwin had everything she could possibly want, growing up in a mansion with wealthy parents, her own private beach, and a plasma TV above a jacuzzi bath. She was the typical spoilt teenager, thinking and living in the now, knowing everything and never contemplating tomorrow.

Suddenly her father dies and Tamara and her mother realise their lives are about to change forever as they relocate to the country to live with her aunt and uncle. Her mother sleeps her life away under her aunt's nurturing, while Tamara becomes increasingly bored and lonely, longing to return to Dublin.

The arrival of a travelling library gives Tamara a distraction through a leather-bound locked tome and, with sister Ignatius' help, she unlocks the book. What she discovers inside forces her to question everything she has ever believed in.

Tomorrow is a whimsical journey through the eyes of a sixteen year old with a mixture of mystery, romance, and fantasy. As a fan of chick lit and fun fiction I held high expectations for the book, so was a little disappointed to discover themes representative of a young adult novel. The author's use of humorous dialogue and descriptive writing of surroundings improved the light read.

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How not to die: surprising lessons on living longer, safer and healthier



Dr Jan Garavaglia
Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2009
ISBN: 9780462099484
RRP: \$35.95

Dr Jan Garavaglia is a forensic pathologist who presents the investigation of death as a tool for teaching us how to live longer, safer, and healthier. This book taps into our curiosity about medical investigations that has made television shows like *House* and *CSI* so popular. Her writing is straight forward but interesting, and highlights how quickly life can be taken away through ignorance, foolishness, or bad choices.

Based on sound medical evidence derived from the corpses she examines, Garavaglia advocates a proactive approach to maintaining our health and well-being. Each chapter has a catchy title that indicates the theme such as *Doctor dread* – fear of doctors, or *Highway to the morgue* – driving accidents. Using anecdotes her investigations demonstrate the impact medical factors and their causes have on health and, ultimately, life.

The book is a quick read with minimal use of medical terminology, useful check lists, an appendix of resources and websites, which include Australia, and a selected bibliography. It would be a useful addition to a general health collection in public libraries or secondary schools and TAFE.

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Pieces of me: genetically flawed – surviving the breast cancer I may never have



Veronica Neave
Big Sky Publishing, 2009
ISBN: 9780980658200
RRP: \$24.99

Breast cancer is the most common cause of cancer deaths in Australian women. For most women, the lifetime risk of developing breast cancer is around 8% but for women who have a strong family history of the disease and mutations in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, the risk is up to 80%. Veronica Neave's great-grandmother, great-aunt, grandmother, and mother all developed breast cancer before the age of fifty. Veronica and her two sisters tested positive for a mutation of the BRCA2 gene in 2006. In this book she describes, with honesty and humour, how she and her family dealt with this devastating knowledge.

Veronica Neave decided, at the age of 39, to have her two healthy breasts surgically removed, followed by breast reconstruction. She writes, "I was given a window, a looking glass, that showed me a future that I did not desire, so I changed it". But for Veronica, changing a future that may or may not happen also meant challenging her perceptions of sexuality, motherhood, and body image, the latter particularly crucial to her as an actor.

This book is engaging at the level of the author's personal journey and thought-provoking in its examination of the medical, social, psychological, and ethical issues surrounding genetic testing.

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Superfreakonomics

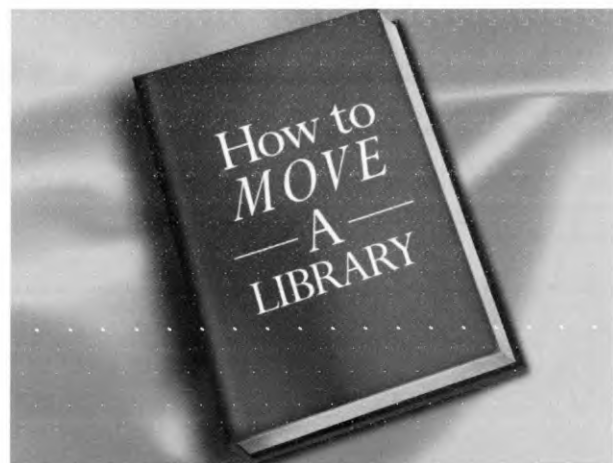


Steven D Levitt & Stephen J Dubner
Penguin Books, 2009
ISBN: 9780713999914
RRP: \$32.95

Levitt and Dubner changed the way the world viewed economics – and economists – in 2005 with their debut book *Freakonomics*. *Superfreakonomics* is their follow-up, wherein the authors use their unique investigative techniques to explore global warming, the economics of prostitution, and how to catch a suicide bomber. With their trademark wit (and so-bad-they're-kinda-good puns), they delve into some of the most pertinent topics of the day, looking at correlation, causation, and really big coincidences.

No need for a mathematics degree, or indeed any knowledge of economics at all to enjoy this book. The authors use plain language and easy-to-understand examples to lead readers through their argumentation. This might be the only criticism I have for the book, as being led in small, easy steps is very seductive, and does not necessarily create an atmosphere for critical thinking or discussion. However, I don't think this is the authors' intent, as their whole book is built around the idea of re-thinking standard procedures, of looking at the world and its problems from a different point-of-view. As such, it is an enjoyable book for those who just want to read, and a provocative one for those who wish to engage.

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