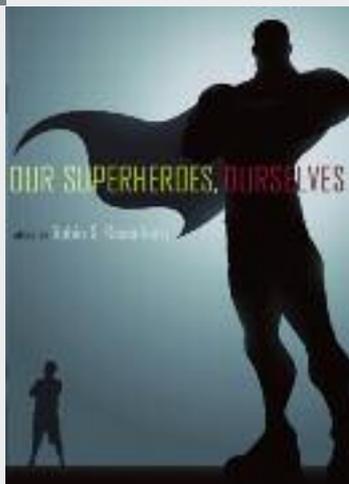


## Moral pornography?

Robin Rosenberg is 'a writer and well-known authority on the psychology of superheroes'. She's living the dream! I am fascinated by superheroes, and according to this small but mighty (think Ant-Man) book, I am far from alone. And psychologists are well equipped to help us understand a phenomenal popularity that 'suggests that there is more going on than simply entertainment'.



Our Superheroes, Ourselves  
Robin S. Rosenberg (Ed.)

*Our Superheroes, Ourselves* comprises 10 essays from an assembled collective of superhero psychologists, including Roy Baumeister, Ellen Winner and Robert Sternberg. The title has two meanings. The first, our relationship with superheroes, encompasses topics such as why we are fascinated with superheroes and supervillains, whether superhero stories are good for us, and how superheroes' bodies can influence our view of our own bodies. The second theme is the comparison between superheroes and ourselves. Rosenberg argues that superheroes serve as funhouse mirrors through which we catch our own images – sometimes exaggerated and distorted,

sometimes not. When superhero stories lead us to ask ourselves 'how would I handle that situation?' or 'what would it be like to have a power?', we're trying to figure out how similar to and

different from superheroes we are, and whether superhero stories can teach us something about ourselves.

Rosenberg, in a kind of Charles Xavier/Nick Fury role, opens proceedings herself. She outlines several reasons superhero stories resonate with a wide audience. They are a callback to youth, allowing us to 'recapture periods of our childhood when our imaginations were cranked up to the maximum – when we really *believed* we could fly or knock down the bad guy'. They are familiar and comforting; they are a special kind of escape; they allow us to 'root for the home team' unabashedly and without reserve. Interestingly, Rosenberg points out how superhero stories and films have become darker and more existential over the years, and how they may provide us with a fantasied rescuer at a time when we, as a society, really want one.

From this base camp, Rosenberg sends out her caped crusaders to spread the word, to excellent effect. David Pizarro and Roy Baumeister grab the attention with 'Superhero comics as moral pornography', arguing that the genre represents 'moral tales on steroids'. Much like the appeal of the exaggerated, caricatured sexuality found in pornography, superhero comics offer the appeal of an exaggerated and caricatured morality that satisfies the natural human inclination towards moralisation. But in this moral universe, why is 'bad' often more popular than 'good'? Pizarro and Baumeister point out that superheroes, by themselves, are boring. In a good example of the book's strength, they can go the extra mile in this argument and link to psychological research on 'the power of bad' – bad actions, events, emotions and experiences routinely have greater psychological impact than good ones. Comic books, therefore, depict a world where desired outcomes occur reliably (good triumphs over evil) and the difficulties and ambiguities of moral prediction are absent.

So far, superhero stories sound like a kind of mental playing field, but are they actually any use to us? Yes, says Larry Rubin, who draws on clinical case studies to claim that the superhero mythos carries with it the seeds for self-understanding, problem resolution, identity formation, resilience and growth. I wish someone would tell my wife, who often appears inexplicably irritated by my tendency to reduce every situation to a comic-book



### To bed, to bed...

Goodnight Britain  
BBC One

Sadly, few psychologists seem to be interested in sleep or sleep disorders, despite over half the sleep problems brought to GPs being of a psychological nature, and often relatively easily treated by psychological techniques. *Goodnight Britain* homed in on five adults claimed to be amongst Britain's worst sleepers and, one way or another, the programme's two episodes were full of material covering various aspects of human behaviour of psychological interest, especially that of the two enthusiastic consultants; namely, clinical psychologist Dr Jason Ellis and neurologist Dr Kirstie Anderson, who were on hand to diagnose and treat.

The acid test of insufficient sleep is excessive daytime sleepiness, which is usually quite evident in waking behaviour as well as from just looking at people's faces, especially the eyes. Bright eyes, smiling and an engaging dialogue are usually not indicative of severe sleep loss. So, maybe it was the excitement, cameras, retiring to a splendid country house, being the centre of attention and possibly some make-up which indicated that none of the five volunteers had a particularly serious sleep problem.



Nevertheless, despite their being 'wired up' with various electrodes and other devices for sleep monitoring ('polysomnography'), albeit to an excessive extent in some cases (but looked good on camera), and the person with insomnia sleeping in a bedroom next that of the sonorous heavy snorer, together with the sufferer from night terrors clearly exhilarated

by the luxurious settings of her bedroom (and no such terrors that night), the success of their treatments was also a testament to the placebo effect.

Another volunteer who slept little, usually preferring to keep busy at night baking cakes, woke up on the recording night and retired to the kitchen to make a splendid Victoria sponge, for which the ingredients just happened to be on hand. She was eventually deemed to be a naturally short sleeper.

Good points in the programme were the general avoidance of that dreadful term 'sleep hygiene' and its do's and 'don'ts, also reminiscent of

reference. What she has failed to appreciate is that 'if clients can learn to reframe their lives as unfolding personal mythologies, rather than as finite and finished stories, then they have the opportunity to reemerge from the adversities of their lives as heroes in their own minds rather than failures'.

The authors clearly know their superheroes. Even insights that are fairly obvious in hindsight are equipped with an impressive arsenal of examples – such as Peter Jordan's account of how it took Marvel Comics to capitalise on Schachter and Singer's two-factor theory of emotion to move beyond the physiological arousal of DC Comics to something more driven by cognitive processes and a range of emotions. So there's plenty in the book to keep the fanboy/fangirl interested.

Talking of fangirls, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Hillary Pennell offer up an interesting counter to the celebration of superheroes, cautioning that exposure to stereotypical images of women in superhero stories can have negative real-world effects on perceptions of the self and on gender-stereotyping. I've become somewhat obsessed with the Bechdel Test of gender bias when watching films, and most in the superhero genre fail spectacularly. Even those relatively rare female superheroes tend to be hypersexualised and often subordinated to male characters. Take Dr Jean Grey in *X-Men*: on the face of it she has more powerful abilities than her male counterparts, but she can't control them, bless her, so she ends up killing her mentor. Google 'women in refrigerators' (it'll be fine, trust me) for more examples.

Moving to the second interpretation of the book's title, the contributors really start to get under the costume. What do you find if you ask thousands of students to rate themselves, superheroes and supervillains on the Big Five personality traits? Travis Langley has done just that, finding that fans' ratings of supervillains differ greatly from empirical findings on the relationship between extraversion and criminal behaviour in the real world. Then Rosenberg and Ellen Winner compare 'gifted' superheroes with people who are gifted in our own world, identifying similarities such as 'the rage to master' present in both gifted children and superheroes such as Batman. Interestingly, they speculate that we 'create and consume stories about

superheroes both as an outlet for our admiration of the skills and achievements of gifted adults, and as a way to grapple with our envy of gifted children'.

Not all of the attempts to drag superheroes into our own world, and our own psychology, are as successful. Gary Burns and Megan Morris's take on 'The very real work lives of superheroes: Illustrations of work psychology' didn't fulfill its early promise, for this reader at least. And Robert Rosenberg's 'How super are superheroes?' has some nice examples – particularly the inclusion of the 'antihero' film *Hancock* as an example of 'the vacuity of a superpowered individual who falls short of the ethical and behavioural standards expected even for the common man' – but on the whole I didn't find that particular argument muscular enough.

The most ambitious piece is perhaps Mikhail Lyubansky's 'Seven roads to justice for superheroes and humans', which 'uses his knowledge of group relations, identity, and restorative justice to classify the different types of justice systems within which superheroes operate and proposes a new type of justice dispensed by a new type of superhero'. 'Let's call her Empathy', Lyubansky suggests.

Perhaps that's at the heart of the appeal of superhero stories, and of this book. Both are occasionally flamboyant, sometimes wayward, always hard to ignore. That's because, despite their fantastical content, it's always easy to empathise with the protagonists. Sure, part of the appeal of superhero films and the like is simply that they are everywhere, with huge budgets and blanket marketing. Rosenberg acknowledges this 'mere exposure effect', but she also does a great job of persuading a wide audience – not just geeks like me – that there's more to it than that. 'Super' provides 'something for most everyone, and always a different world into which we can, at minimum, escape for a while'.

Oxford University Press: 2013; Hb £15.99

Reviewed by Jon Sutton who is Managing Editor of *The Psychologist*

For your chance to win a copy of *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, tweet @psychmag with the superpower you would like to have.



## Should be celebrated

Using Psychology in the Classroom  
Stephen James Minton

clean sheets and an unappealing bedroom, and then there was the shift-worker with his inevitably irregular sleep, who was sorted out with commonsense advice.

Whilst it was clear that many sleep problems are the result of deeper underlying psychological factors, whereby improving sleep alone will not make the patient happier, what did cross my mind was that if these were indeed Britain's worst sleepers then maybe we can sleep easier in our beds.

I Reviewed Jim Horne who is Professor of Psychology at the Sleep Research Centre, Loughborough University

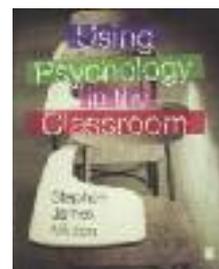
As a lecturer in the psychology of education, Minton sets out to reach a wider audience as to what knowledge of psychology can bring to the classroom. The book starts helpfully with a succinct and informative introduction covering what psychology is and a brief history that beautifully sets the scene. Minton writes with a clear, authoritative and engaging style making this text accessible to both trainee teachers and those more experienced within the classroom.

Throughout, Minton engages the reader and, importantly, challenges them to think rather than to simply read passively, posing questions about their own experiences and current practice and even setting exercises for the reader to complete, such as discussions with colleagues and written tasks. The key here is to promote awareness in the educational professional of things like expectancy effects and emotional intelligence. In addition, Minton helpfully suggests further reading for each topic, from relevant websites to reference texts.

This book should be celebrated for promoting understanding and appreciation of important psychological issues in educational professionals, and for being based on scientific psychology rather than pop psychology. However, for me what the book is missing is practical advice and guidance for professionals as to how to deal with the issues covered; for example, whilst the importance of self-esteem in education is discussed, advice on how to promote self-esteem in the classroom is lacking. Nonetheless this is a well-written and informative text which I would certainly recommend, particularly to trainee teachers.

Sage; 2012; Pb: £20.99

Reviewed by Kelly Bristow who is Director of Studies and A-level psychology teacher at d'Overbroeck's College, Oxfordshire

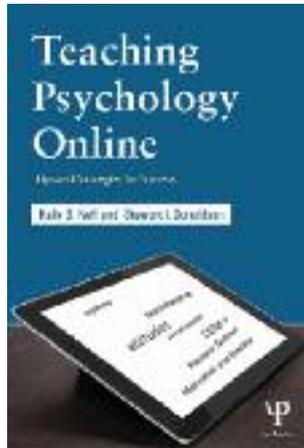




### Much to learn

Teaching Psychology Online: Tips and Strategies for Success  
Kelly S. Neff & Stewart I. Donaldson

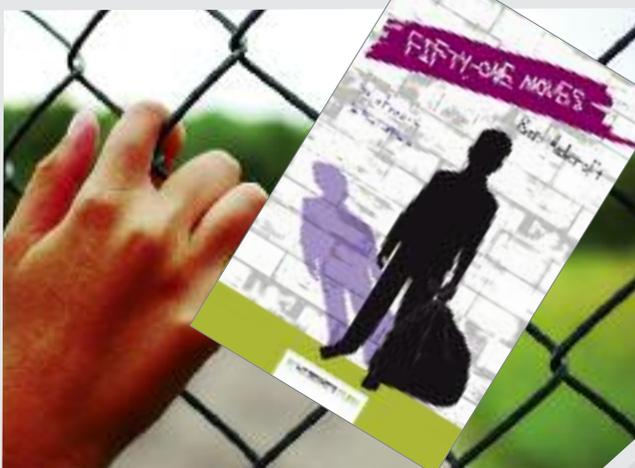
Educators in psychology are increasingly seeing the benefits of delivering courses online. This useful 'how-to' book is packed with advice on the practicalities of running an online psychology course and tackling the issues that can arise in the process. Constructive suggestions about implementation are based on the authors' extensive experience of online psychology teaching, with relevant examples showing readers how these might be translated into course designs. The accompanying website offers extra



resources and ensures the advice is kept up to date. Where the book is less successful is in the consistency of its messages. Neff and Donaldson rightly state that there is limited research to date focused on teaching psychology online, and caution that evidence from other disciplines might not generalise. Yet there are variations both between and within chapters in the extent to which the authors have drawn from the relevant broader research. Outlining strategies that personal experience has shown to be successful is certainly useful, but inconsistencies in the use of evidence to support points can make

'best practice' discussions seem misleading. The division of material in each chapter into 'purpose', 'implementation' and 'troubleshooting' also appears arbitrary at times. These observations on the communication of the message should not detract from the value of the message itself. For anyone tasked with designing an online psychology course – in particular those with little experience of this method of delivery – there is much to learn here. Readers simply need to retain an awareness that the evidence basis for these recommendations is limited.

| *Psychology Press; 2013; Pb £25.99*  
**Reviewed by Dr Nikki Luke** who is Research Officer in the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford



### Inspirational memoir

Fifty-one Moves  
Ben Ashcroft

How did an ordinary little boy from a Yorkshire mill town with a passion for fishing and football end up in a young offenders institution? Anyone who wants to understand the well-trodden path from care to prison should read this book.

It starts when Ben accidentally pushes his friend, Roy, into the River Calder. Roy broke his wrist but for Ben it was just 'a joke that went wrong'. Ten is still the shockingly early age of criminal responsibility in England, so the result was a visit to the local police station. His mother splits up with her third husband and moves the family to a nearby town where there is no river to fish in and Ben is a stranger and a target

for bullies. His elder brother, Robert, comes to join them, introducing Ben to smoking and minor delinquency. It is all too much for his mother, who goes off to Blackpool, leaving the three children on their own. Two days later, when they have eaten all the biscuits, Ben rings 999, and his life in care begins. It was a new world – 'all I'd known until then was fishing, rugby, football, the dam and the woods'. In the children's home he cries himself to sleep.

After an endless series of placement changes, Ben's life descends into one of sleeping rough, hanging out with other uncared for young people, drinking, taking heroin and criminality. But, paradoxically, it was a custodial sentence with regular meals and structured activities that gave him space to think about the future.

There is one reference to a psychological assessment, but whatever it came up with it does not seem to have been communicated to Ben. At no stage was he offered therapy or even someone with whom he

could share his feelings of distress and abandonment. Moving was the social work answer to every problem.

As local authorities increasingly try to save money by cutting youth services and after-school and holiday activities, young people from poor families and poor areas are at ever greater risk of being drawn into the criminal justice system.

Ben tells the story of how, unlike his brother and most of his friends, he eventually managed to stay out of trouble. He now spends his time working with children in care and young offenders to convince them that they can choose a better way of life. Perhaps this inspirational memoir will encourage psychologists and social workers to spend more time listening to children and finding ways to build on their strengths and interests.

| *Waterside Press; 2013; Pb £10.00*  
**Reviewed by Professor Sonia Jackson** who is at the Institute of Education, University of London

**Thoughtful and positive**



The Copper Tree  
Hilary Robinson  
& Mandy Stanley

The Copper Tree Class is a series of children's books tackling subjects such as bereavement, ageing and adoption. *The Copper Tree* is the standout offering, sensitively conveying the message that it's natural to be sad and angry when someone dies but that there can be creative ways of using memory as a means of healing.

The authorial voice is appropriately child-like, with a sense of breathlessness and the odd tangent that should make it easy for children to identify with the stories. Recommended for professionals working with these issues, and for anyone who thinks children should be encouraged to reflect in a thoughtful and positive way.

I *Strauss House Productions; Pb £6.99*  
**Reviewed by Jon Sutton** who is Managing Editor of *The Psychologist*

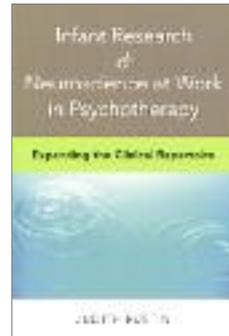


**Informative starting point**

Infant Research and Neuroscience at Work in Psychotherapy:  
Expanding the Clinical Repertoire  
Judith Rustin

This book provides a clear introduction to the relationship between infant research, neuroscience and psychoanalytic concepts. The text addresses areas such as self and mutual regulation in the therapeutic relationship, memory, the mind-body connection, the fear system and mirror neurons as well as providing a final integrative summary.

Rustin writes with clarity on each of these areas. The book uses case studies to illustrate the concepts discussed and show her thinking about how they relate in practice. This allowed her ideas to come alive in the text, as well as bring an empathic and humane quality to what



can sometimes appear to be depersonalising neuroscientific ideas.

The text has some very good, although brief, summaries of the research literature. There are some ideas in the book which, driven by the integration of research and clinical practice knowledge, can add significantly to a clinician's tool box. For example, in the mind-body chapter Rustin talks about how a client 'talks' mainly through their body, rather than with words, and her discussion of the therapeutic work here is genuinely enlightening.

Overall, for anyone interested in the burgeoning link between neuroscience and psychoanalytic concepts this book makes a very good and informative starting point.

I *Norton; 2013; Hb £22.99*  
**Reviewed by Dr Mark Wylie** who is a clinical psychologist with Cambian Healthcare



**Enthusiastic and engaging**

Inside Science  
BBC Radio 4

Earlier this year, controversy surrounded Radio 4's science schedule, as *Material World* was axed after a 15-year run. Replacing it was never going to be an easy task, and *Inside Science* hasn't had an easy time from some of Radio 4's more pedantic listeners, with a number still bemoaning the demise of its predecessor. Which is a huge shame, because *Inside Science* is absolutely brilliant.



**I say, I say, I say... how would you combat menu fatigue in space?**

Each episode provides a mix of current affairs in science, reports on new research discoveries, and interviews with scientists about how they ply their trade. It's a healthy mix of debate, critique and news (with the occasional pun or two – a recent segment on combating menu fatigue in manned missions to other planets opened with the particularly pleasing 'Is there loaf on Mars?')

delivered by an enthusiastic and engaging presenting team, consisting of Dr Adam Rutherford, Professor Alice Roberts and Dr Lucie Green.

When it comes to keeping up with what's going on in science, it's sometimes easy to get stuck in your own specific area of interest. The nice thing about *Inside Science* is that it tries to cater for all areas, so there's always something in there that you'll find interesting. Psychology has been particularly well represented on the show in recent weeks, with pieces ranging from biases in publication in the behavioural sciences, to how video games are being used in research to gather and analyse data on a massive scale.

So yes, while it is very sad that *Material World* was cancelled, nothing lasts for ever, and I think we've been given something truly excellent in its place. Here's looking forward to the next 15 years for *Inside Science*.

I **Reviewed by Peter Etchells** who is at Bath Spa University

contribute

Sample titles just in:

- Life after Brain Injury: Survivors' Stories** Barbara A. Wilson, Jill Winegardner & Fiona Ashworth
- Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments** Gina Perry
- The Psychology of Diversity** James M. Jones, John F. Dovidio & Deborah Vietze
- Genius Unmasked** Roberta B. Ness
- Teaching Clients to Use Mindfulness Skills: A Practical Guide** Christine Dunkley & Maggie Stanton
- A Norwegian Tragedy: Anders Behring Breivik and the Road to Utoya** Aage Borchgrevink
- Bullying in the Workplace** John Lipinski & Laura M. Crothers (Eds.)

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## Leading across a cultural divide

The Oxford Handbook of Leadership  
Michael G. Rumsey (Ed.)

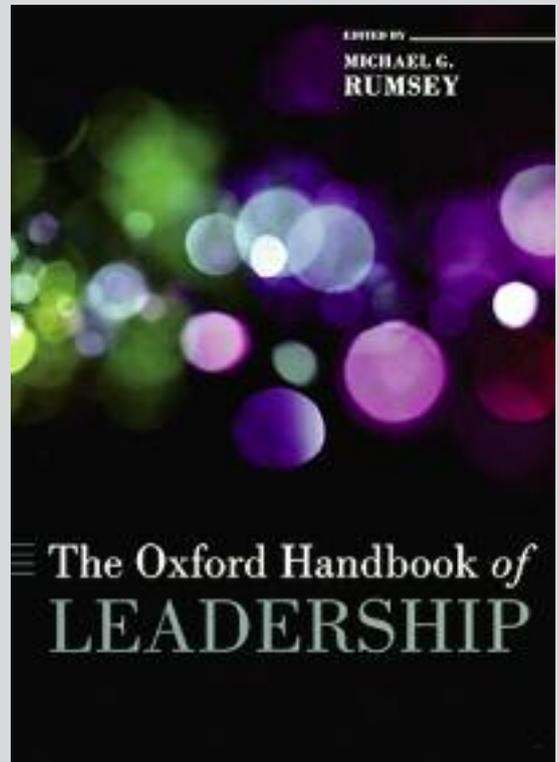
This is an excellent compendium of contemporary research into some of the core areas of leadership theory and practice. The first section deals with the attributes of a leader and how they develop. There are some outstanding contributions on personality and leadership development by experts in the field. The second section takes a contextual view of leadership including the perspectives of followers, teams and even the evolutionary origins of leadership behaviour. This is followed by an in-depth look at some specific leadership contexts including the military, education and somewhat incongruously for the non-American reader, presidential leadership.

The following section integrates both leader attributes and context into a review of the dynamics of leadership. It's here that the US-centric focus of the book is most keenly felt. Charismatic leadership is discussed in detail but not the more egalitarian and distributed models like engaging leadership that have emerged from European research to challenge the primacy of the focus on leader characteristics. There is also the curious omission of a chapter specifically on leadership coaching given this is one of the key contemporary delivery mechanisms for leadership development. The final section focuses on leadership effectiveness, reviewing levels of outcomes in leadership as well as the derailers that can inhibit the developing leader from reaching their potential.

Overall this is an excellent reference for researchers looking for comprehensive updates in specific areas of leadership research. The research-orientated practitioner will find much to engage with but may look elsewhere for recent innovations in the delivery of leadership development.

| Oxford University Press; Hb £85.00

Reviewed by **Doug MacKie** who is a Business Psychologist with CSA Consulting, Brisbane



## Alive to the accidental

Last Bus to Serendip  
BBC Radio 4

About a year ago, psychologist and journalist Dr Aleks Krotoski set out on a mission to create an engine, a machine, that predicts serendipity: that delightful encounter that changes the course of your life. Ending up with a suitcase full of dials, gadgets, levers, potentiometers – 'it basically looks like a bomb' – Krotoski took it out on the road in search of the Holy Grail of happy accidents.

Building on her excellent BBC Radio 4 series *Untangling the Web*, Krotoski's fascination with the impact of technology on mind and behaviour was again to the fore. Will the internet destroy serendipity altogether, or give it a new lease of life?

Krotoski's 'engine' (see <http://theserendipityengine.tumblr.com/>) offers a recipe... some words, plus a place to consider them in, what you should be doing there and who you should be with. Rather more than serendipitously, after hoiking it into a taxi and having a brief chat with the affable driver, the engine seemed to bump our intrepid investigator up against a load of people who knew lots about serendipity. So

she 'ran into scholar of Persian poetry Narguess Farzadh' (the word 'serendipity' stems from 18th-century man of letters Horace Walpole, who drew on a popular Persian fable of the time, Three Princes of Serendip); in a library she meets the poet Richard Price, who draws on serendipity for influence and inspiration; and after hopping on a random train to Exeter she comes across Phil Smith at a bus stop, and he just happens to be a mythogeographer who can show her how you need to sensitise yourself to connections if you're to encounter serendipity.

OK, I doubt anyone was supposed to believe these were truly serendipitous encounters. Maybe true serendipity is rather dull, and certainly not conducive to making an informative radio documentary. But the approach did rather make me yearn for a follow-up where Krotoski surrendered to the machine, rather in the tradition of Dave Gorman's *Are You Dave Gorman?*, or Danny Wallace's *Yes Man*.

Perhaps Krotoski was well aware of the

limits of her machine from the start, describing it as 'mindless mental noodling... I can bump you up against stuff, but I can't make it serendipitous for you.' Instead, serendipity is a mental way of being, with psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman telling Krotoski he sees it as little more than when chance works out for you, and when you choose to make the most of an opportunity. We can capitalise on serendipity, science historian and broadcaster James Burke seemed to suggest, by being aware of the 'unknown unknowns' – chance favours the prepared mind.

Even in this era of tailored algorithms directing your online life and 'big data' torpedoing explanations based on karma, divinity, chance or luck, Krotoski concluded that we can still be alive to the accidental. But all a machine can do is give you some inspiration: the rest is in your hands, your heads.

| Reviewed by **Jon Sutton** who is Managing Editor of *The Psychologist*



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