

A weary kind of acceptance?

This short book in the 'Art of Living' series implicitly promises much, but does no more than produce an erudite, well-documented and an unarguable case for entropy as central to all things. The style and content is relentless, and as far as one can tell is based on a wide-range of philosophical theory and evidenced fact. But then it is not very hard to prove that all things fail, and that in the end we all die. What might have been more useful is a scholarly analysis of how we construct the narrative of entropy, perhaps contrasting various cultural traditions. The focus of this book is somewhat narrow. An extract may serve to illustrate:

'We cannot ask to be born but once alive relatively few of us want to die or suffer, but we all do...Cioran, the celebratedly arch-pessimist Roman aphorist...decried human existence... "Whether one succeeds or not comes down to the same thing" (1998:63), he means that life is ultimately absurd and disappointing whatever happens within the detail' (p.35).

Feltham's style is much influenced by what he calls 'diagesis' – speaking in the author's voice – an inheritance from Plato. The resulting self-analysis is sometimes initially engaging and certainly does prevent thinking floating into the ether. By the end of the 157 pages, however, perhaps one knows unusefully much about the author's middle-aged position in the universe. Self-revelation and a personal take on mighty themes can be greatly illuminative, as we have seen in the works of some of the great subjectivists, but in this exploration the life-story appears to act as some kind of trip-wire on the way to extrapolation. The repetition of the personal position throughout the book does not in my opinion lead the narrative forward.

The upshot of traversing the chapters is that we are no further forward than at the beginning. They explore the nuances of the linguistics, take a quick scamper through failure across the lifespan, explore ideas of original failure somewhere within the scheme of things (so, one wonders, is it 'failure'). The fourth chapter investigates failure in the arts, and the fifth is on a personal position of being a failure. There is a somewhat cursory attempt to bring the threads together in a final chapter on 'Learning from failure'. The chapter *heading* is the most optimistic of all the content associated with this finale.

It seems to me that there is a basic fault in this exposition. It seems to assume that things should be different. It carries with it an air of ontological disappointment and even perhaps disapproval. Psychology does not assume that we do anything other than fill in the time between being born and dying with more or less satisfaction, fulfilment and varying measures of societal and individual self-esteem. The exception to this last statement is of course what might be called the 'American Dream' somewhat slavishly adopted by aspirant cultures that would that they had the same facilities for such a dream. That there is such a thing as societal and individual denial of death is unarguable, and this book would be some sort of

antidote for anyone persuaded to forget their existential limitations, or who are otherwise driven by hubris. On the other hand, the book could perhaps drive some people to ever more diligence in constructing an alternative reality, such is the aridness of the position Feltham industriously describes.

The point of a deep acceptance of inherent entropy could be that a flower is to be celebrated in its growth and brief splendour. The value of this little book may be in encouraging a kind of humility, a sense of the limitations of science or philosophy beyond description. Feltham's solution appears to be in a rather weary kind of acceptance, a version perhaps of stoicism mixed with a rather wistful glance back at some of the insights of theology, and a sense that we have not done badly to get through. It rather reminded me of the novelist David Lodge's later stories, an account of a worldly wise academic for whom life, sex and career had failed in their promise. Feltham says: 'Personally I find it somehow comforting to know roughly where I stand and where I end, and knowledge of my own failings brings me to self-acceptance rather than to melancholy' (p.140).

I think it was it was Erik Erikson (1975) who once said that psychologists confuse deeds with behaviour. It would seem that this is possibly true for social philosophers also. All our behaviours fail if what we are looking for is a notion of continuance, of a grand narrative of success or failure. But on the way there are many *deeds*, many moments of wonderful irony, and many strivings-after-life when life is threatened. This amounts to something, albeit the moment is transient like all things. Continuity is not the only test.

The book may well be of benefit to those addicted to a certain notion of success. It would be good for prospective writers of management theory texts to be made to read *Failure*. This activity before they set fingers to laptop when about to produce yet another airport sales *How to Change the World (and become very rich) in Ten Minutes* would be salutary and would contribute to a slightly more honest world. It is a good balancer for those of us who are practitioners or academics and who take ourselves too seriously. When we are getting to believe that the future of the world depends on our particular project Feltham's evidence of eventual entropy would provide needed perspective. It is not a book to read if you are prone to self-pity, or want a reason not to bother. It would not, I imagine be high on the biblio-therapy lists for CBT patients!

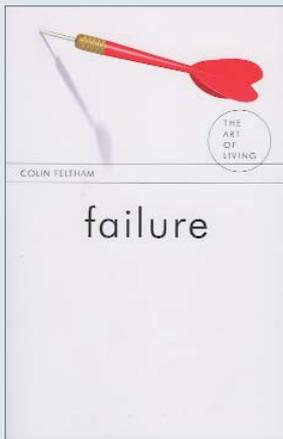
But if you want to immerse yourself in an erudite and exceedingly well-written treatise by a man who seems to be essentially compassionate about his world and the other people who have tried to understand its vagaries and its occasional cruelties, I can recommend it.

| Acumen; 2012; Pb £9.99

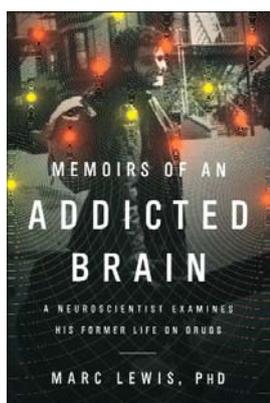
Reviewed by Peter Martin who is a counselling psychologist

Reference

Erikson, E.H. (1975). *Life history and the historical moment*. New York: Norton.



Failure
Colin Feltham



A trip into neuroscience

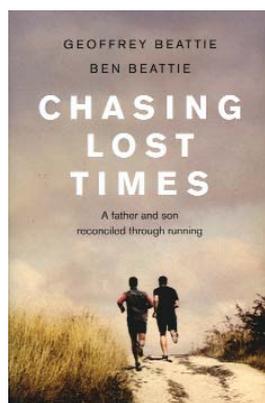
Memoirs of an Addicted Brain
Marc Lewis

Many neuroscience and psychopharmacology texts are inaccessible to the layperson, and delivered in a dry manner largely for reference purposes. Lewis uses an autobiographical approach to describe his personal experience, giving the reader the opportunity to understand how his journey into addiction started, and ended.

Living a life with a sense of abandonment having been sent to boarding school, being ostracised by his peers, and being bullied, Lewis sought an escape from reality, with alcohol being his gateway drug. Moving on to over-the-counter dissociative medicines, cannabis, LSD and heroin, to name a few. Describing in detail his experience of each drug, his overdose, and the experiences of those around him, demonstrates the highs and lows of drug misuse; and the benefits of abstinence.

Lewis uses his neuroscience background to interlace the science behind the addiction, explaining each drug's effect on the brain and providing a greater understanding of how drugs mimic and exaggerate the natural functions of the body. This contextual presentation of neuroscience allows readers to enhance their understanding of psychopharmacology and the process of addiction.

I *PublicAffairs*; 2012; Hb £17.99
Reviewed by Tim Mahy
who is a health psychology doctoral student, City University, London



A visionary book

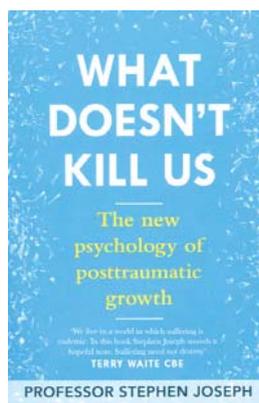
Chasing the Lost Times: A Father and Son Reconciled Through Running
Geoffrey Beattie & Ben Beattie

This book takes a look at the inner psyche of an individual man for whom running became an obsession. Written in autobiographical style by Geoffrey Beattie (a Professor of Psychology at the University of Manchester) and his son, the limits are demonstrated between trying to juggle the demands of a career, a compulsion to run, and family life. Beattie admits that running damaged his relationship with his young son, but in a bizarre turn of events, the bond between the two is strengthened by running together in adulthood.

Both perspectives are provided side-by-side in this visionary book, which will appeal to anyone who has ever felt a passion to a particular sport or hobby. It is a book about relationships, acceptance of mistakes and the power of forgiveness and is about dreams of the future rather than visions of the past. It confirms the indisputable bond between father and son, as ironically it is the father who ends up learning from the son.

Beautifully written, it is a compelling read with a feel-good factor.

I *Mainstream Publishing*;
Pb £11.99
Reviewed by Kirsten Nokling
who is a research assistant at the Spectrum Centre: specialist centre for the research of bipolar disorder



Life after trauma

What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth
Stephen Joseph

Trauma studies is dominated by a medical model discourse and the illness metaphor for psychological distress. This book challenges this received wisdom and instead provides a new way of thinking about trauma [see also the article on p.816]. Stephen Joseph presents a serious alternative to deficit psychology, suggesting that people can, and often do, grow in the face of adversity finding new and more resilient ways of being in the world.

Stories about the author growing up in Northern Ireland through the height of the Troubles are a skilful use of personal narrative coupled to accounts from other trauma survivors. The result is a book grounded in scientific evidence with a feel of connectedness to the real-life trauma people face. The book includes valuable resources by way of measures for post-traumatic growth (PTG)

and plenty of theory with the science of the discipline never far away. Most convincing was that responses to trauma should be understood as the best attempt to respond and adapt. The book presents a well-thought-out approach to positive psychology.

Without minimising or diminishing the impact and distress following trauma the message is clear, people grow through their struggle of accommodating trauma-related experiences. Interestingly, for those interested in facilitating PTG Professor Joseph suggests that 'treatments to alleviate posttraumatic stress might inadvertently be thwarting the development of posttraumatic growth'.

It isn't often a book comes along and significantly has an impact on theory and practice. This book has that potential and highly recommend it.

I *Piatkus*; 2012; Pb £13.99
Reviewed by David Murphy
who is Lecturer in Trauma Studies and Counselling, University of Nottingham

just in

Sample titles just in:
How to Improve Your Mind: Twenty Keys to Unlock the Modern World James R. Flynn
The Brain Supremacy: Notes from the Frontiers of Neuroscience Kathleen Taylor
Advances in Intergroup Contact Gordon Hodson & Miles Hewstone (Eds.)
Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning Roger Griffin

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