

Are you pushing to obtain the very best foundation of knowledge? Of course you are! Strong leaders must be very effective at their ongoing learning strategies. And one of the key ways is the effective use of book reviews!

Let me explain—first, with some observations about books themselves.

The digital age has fostered the creating and availability of massive amounts of information, the vast majority of which is not in book form. There's so much information available on the web alone that it's virtually impossible to keep well-informed in any complex field of endeavor, let alone do the cross fertilization of knowledge needed to master leading people in a complex, modern organization.

So, the strong leader must read constantly, read a lot, and read even more. But with that huge expansion of internet information available to read at our fingertips, each of us needs real discernment about how to select our reading material wisely—even in our browsing of the internet! And, indeed, valid internet research amidst all the sketchy information available on the web is a trick unto itself.

Enter...the world of books! Ever since the era of Gutenberg, books have been exceeding helpful—indeed, foundational—for the lifelong learner. And books are all the more important in the digital era. The author of the truly worthwhile book becomes our tutor, our convincer, our companion. Certainly, writers and book-authors who I have never met dominate the list of my greatest mentors and disciplers. That's because the books that are truly worthy of reading and absorbing are books that have been carefully crafted by their authors—unfolding a great narrative, communicating real truth.

And that regard for careful integration of key truths in a well-constructed, well-contextualized narrative is often what is missing in web information. ...Books are not dead! Far from it!

But, still, the Bible tells us that “of making of many books, there is no end.” And the libraries of the world are exponentially larger than when the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote that. The truth is, the significant majority of books written are not worth your time as a discerning learner. Go to your local bookstore—you'll find rows and rows of books of little real value. Even if the vast majority of books in the world today were actually given to us, we would be wasting our precious time reading just the first few words of each one. That's not sticking our heads in the sand...that's just the unvarnished truth of it. We must prioritize!

The deeper truth is, the lifelong learner must try, number one, to discern the small fraction of books that are worthy, and number two, which books to actually read among those in the worthy category.

So...where to go from here? Well...to book reviews! What is needed are those book reviews that astutely illuminate, charitably critique, justifiably admire, and wisely advise. Repeating that: great reviews astutely illuminate, charitably critique, justifiably admire, and wisely advise. But which ones do that?

Well, first, we should agree that truly great book reviews are a very important form of art on their very own, standing alone in adding vital information that helps direct the aspiring book reader. The first and foremost task at hand, of course, is this: to buy or not to buy?

But it's deeper than that: effective book reviews comprise a special genre in and of itself. The purposes of reading a number of quality book reviews are...to increase our awareness of personally unexplored knowledge...to expand our thinking and integration of possibilities...to point to a newly-invented crack in

our armor of competence...and to marvel at the unparalleled increase in knowledge we are experiencing and accumulating, just as the Bible promised!

Lifelong learners are very jealous of their time, so they may read only a small fraction of the books they become aware of. How can they do that? For the time-constrained learner, book reviews are an indispensable way to source books to read. That's the real value of book reviews: you have delegated the "first reading" to someone else before you commit your time to it. Just like movies. Was that new movie any good? Should I invest time and treasure in it?

So, I would estimate that I read, say, one book for every 100 book reviews that I consume! But almost all the book reviews I read add important, even vital, well-roundedness to my knowledge base. And when well done, reviews are entertaining and thought-provoking, pointing to new possibilities and trails ahead.

So, you ask, what are some key sources of book reviews?

Well, read those solid book reviewers from sources that you know will identify great thinking. But also be sure to read book reviews by qualified reviewers who hold biases helpfully outside the realm of your personal opinions. A careful reading will work to either affirm or correct your opinions.

Amazon, of course, has led the way with its own unique, open-field approach that allows all comers to post book reviews...Amazon has likely fostered the creation of many more book reviews during the last ten years than all other forums combined since the very dawn of publishing.

But, of course, a basic problem regarding reading book reviews is much the same as for reading books, especially on a forum like Amazon. Beware: is the often-anonymous Amazon reviewer truly capable, truly thoughtful, truly grounded?

Yet, there are sometimes amazingly remarkable reviews on Amazon, astute reviews that have directly caused me to buy or not buy the particular book in question. So Amazon is often a good stop along the way—but it's only one stop.

Perhaps surprising to some, the versatile *Wall Street Journal* is a superb source of reviews of newly-published books, especially for the broadly-seeking learner. Typically, in every Saturday edition, the Review section publishes multiple book reviews with typically strong reviewers across an amazingly broad cross section of topics: history, art, business, government, biographies, you name it. Also, in many weekday editions, there is often a quickly-readable book review found in the back of the main section.

So, why is the *Wall Street Journal* committed of publishing constant book reviews? It's simple—because its subscribers are some of the world's most effective leaders...and they value book reviews!

On the political and cultural front, some magazines or journals of opinion that review many important books included the newly-revitalized *Modern Age*, *Touchstone*, *World*, *First Things*, and *National Review*. But take care here—the cultural and religious biases of such magazines and reviewers can overtake the books' themes themselves. But, of course, that's true of all reviewers' approach to reviewing books!

Here's the overall takeaway: strong leaders absolutely must be high-performing knowledge workers and, therefore, lifelong learners. So...strong leaders often devour book reviews by solid reviewers as a key part of their bag of tricks. Book reviews, well-selected, can and should be an extremely efficient and effective way for each of us to source, to affirm, to discover, and to learn the ever-growing knowledge we need.

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Because of digital developments over the past several decades, world-class access to vast knowledge and key wisdom is now very affordable to many. Now, think about web research, seminars, mentors, books, and so forth. What is the proper structure and mix of your lifelong learning strategy in order to remain differentiated as a top knowledge-worker and leader?
  
2. Essentially, each of us has appointed personal gatekeepers for knowledge-direction and wisdom-acquisition. So, make a list of your personal top ten influencers by name, in order of importance. That list might include family, bosses, pastors, speakers, authors, pundits, mentors, book reviewers. Now...how wise, how robust, how fruitful are each of these ten gatekeepers on your behalf? Do numbers 5, 7, and 10 (or whatever) really belong on your list?
  
3. Are you satisfied? Are you devouring the right knowledge at the proper, fruit-bearing pace?