

‘Smarter Faster Better’ review: Charles Duhigg’s self-help tome not so helpful

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(Credit: Newsday / Thomas A. Ferrara)

Can self-help books do any good? Of course they can. Snobbery on this front is largely misplaced; at some level, all books are self-help books. Even if only by immersing us in foreign worlds, dazzling us with beauty, or making us weep in pity, we read books because they “help” us in some way to realize our richest selves.

The best self-help authors are usually philosophers. Aristotle and Plato can both be read as self-help gurus, and the great Arnold Bennett, best known today for his novel “The

Old Wives’ Tale,” wrote an unusually thoughtful time management book called “How to Live on 24 Hours a Day.” Benjamin Spock and Alex Comfort helped millions with their respective books on child-rearing and sex, and Dale Carnegie was an insightful amateur psychologist. For the past half century, probably, self-help books as a distinct genre have been an important conduit for psychological research to make its way to the general public, however dubious or ephemeral some of that research may be.

Charles Duhigg’s new book “Smarter Faster Better” is part of a great, slippery cataract of self-help descending on readers from the headwaters of Malcolm Gladwell. His runaway success with “The Tipping Point” set off countless imitators bent on emulating the mix of compelling human stories, social sciences research and journalistic epiphany so welcome in our jittery zeitgeist. Self-help authors have always offered exemplary tales; Samuel Smiles did so in “Self-Help,” the mother of the genre, back in 1859. Since Gladwell, though, the tale too often comes to us wagging the dog entirely.

Duhigg’s book is full of such stories; in fact, the ratio of storytelling to advice is way out of whack, and often it’s hard to know why we are reading about the wonderful things Google has discovered about teams, or by what magic Lorne Michaels conjured “Saturday Night Live,” or the arrogant military officer whose overconfidence on the eve of the Yom Kippur war nearly led to Israel’s destruction. Duhigg is a capable journalist, and some of these tales are interesting enough. But as is so often the case in such books, the useful observations and advice contained in this one could be boiled down to a few pages.

It’s important to focus, for example, but not to develop tunnel vision. Set goals, break them into manageable sub-goals and list concrete steps you can take for achieving them. You can tease

these “secrets” out of the narratives, but all in all the stories feel like padding, slapped together with glue and bogus wonder in order to fill pages.

The author helpfully rounds up his news-you-can-use in a convenient appendix, and there are a few good points here. “When we encounter new information, we should force ourselves to *do something* with it” in order to really absorb it, such as testing it out or explaining it to a friend. To stay focused and achieve a desired outcome, “envision multiple futures.” Those scenarios can help you decide whether to proceed, and enable you to make the most desirable scenario happen when you go forward.

A larger issue is embodied in the book’s very premise. What does it mean to be smarter, faster and better? And to what end? Come to think, what is the nature of a “productive” life? Is it possible that virtue and happiness lie in some other direction? People who pick up “Smarter Faster Better” presumably have already decided what they want, but some self-help authors, such as Stephen Covey (“The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”), don’t shy away from the ethical dimensions of their work, which are present whether acknowledged or not.

Duhigg, who scored a commercial success with his earlier “The Power of Habit,” tells us that “a prerequisite to motivation is believing we have authority over our actions and surroundings,” and that people who believe they’re in control tend to work harder, overcome setbacks faster, and live longer. But if this is true, does it mean that the obsessive focus on victimization in some quarters is actually doing more harm than good? Let’s not even broach the question of free will.

As most of us at some level understand, there really are secrets — or perhaps it would be more accurate to say mysteries — to “being productive in life and business.” And they probably have more to do with values than to-do lists. One wishes the author had paid more attention to the former, or at the very least had done a better job with the latter.

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