

Brockman, John (ed) – This Will Make You Smarter

Doubleday, 2012, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

This book belongs firmly in the surrounding knowledge category, which I suspect to most readers of InvestingByTheBooks is a category we turn to after all of the “real” book titles have been exhausted. Expanding one’s horizons is important I believe. In the words of Charlie Munger *“In my whole life, I have known no wise people who didn't read all the time - none, zero. You'd be amazed at how much Warren reads - at how much I read...”*

This Will Make You Smarter with its catchy title, is a pantheon of interesting insights and ideas that will satisfy even the most intellectually curious amongst us. The book does what it says on the tin. It is both a formidable compilation to have on the shelf and a good read. I like to pick it up from time to time to absorb some random insight from the world of biology, physics or neuroscience.

The editor (there are 151 authors) is John Brockman. Brockman is a literary agent and an impresario and he created the website called Edge.org. If you take away just one thing from this review, let it be a visit to this website. Edge.org was launched in 1996 as a modern day version of the Bloomsbury Group, or “The Reality Club,” an informal gathering of intellectuals to share ideas and theories. In the words of the novelist Ian McEwan, Edge.org is *“open-minded, free ranging, intellectually playful ... an unadorned pleasure in curiosity...”* Each year Edge publishes a book by posing a thought provoking question. The contents of these books contain the answers to the question from its erudite members. Through the years I have purchased and read most of these books. My favorite is the 2012 edition of the Edge question.

In 2012 the question was *“What Scientific Concept Would Improve Everybody's Cognitive Toolkit?”* or to paraphrase: if you, Mr(s) prominent scientist can offer your average person with one insight, one

rule of thumb from the world of theoretical science that you think they ought to know, what would it be? The answers are far and varied but most are rooted in a branch of science. The essays range from a single paragraph in length to 4 pages and cover a total of 151 topics by as many authors. The members of Edge that have written for the book read as a who’s who in science across multiple disciplines. They include Steven Pinker, Daniel Kahneman, Richard Dawkins, Matt Ridley, Daniel Dennett as well as practitioners such as Paul Kedrosky and Vinod Khosla. There are too many entries to list, but I have some favorites. Kahneman writes about the Focusing Illusion i.e. *“Nothing in life is as important as you think it is when you are thinking about it”*. Ridley, the author of the Rational Optimist writes about Collective Intelligence highlighting the fact that human achievement is entirely a networking phenomenon driven by the forces of specialization and trade. James O’Donne’s essay is entitled *“Everything is in Motion”* and quotes Heraclitus *“You can’t step in the same river twice”*.

As a collection of essays the book lacks some structure. The entries appear in no particular order. There’s no ranking by status of the author for instance nor are there specific sections or chapters. Having read it a few times now, I noticed there is a grouping in that entries that cover a specific topic or theme such as randomness, “emergence” or the limits of human cognition, tend to go together. The lack of structure is also appealing; you can randomly flick through it and read an entry without having to read what came before to understand it.

To the investor, intellectual curiosity and knowledge building are a necessity. This book if anything, highlights how little we know, and that the smartest people tend to be the ones often least convinced of their knowledge.

Henry Makansi, June 9, 2013