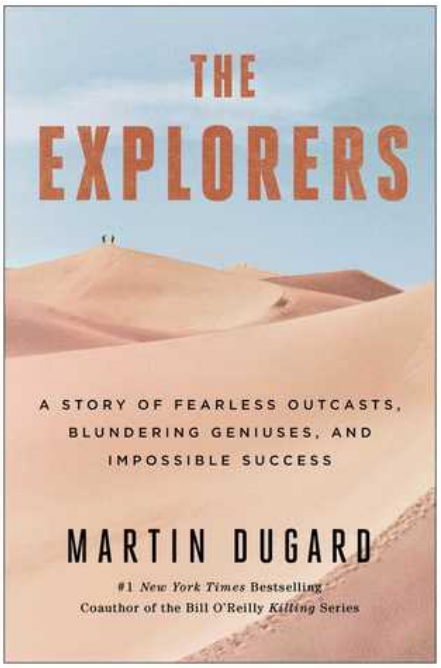

The Explorers: A Story of Fearless Outcasts, Blundering Geniuses, and Impossible Success

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The riveting account of one of history's greatest adventures and a study of the seven character traits all great explorers share.

In 1856, two intrepid adventurers, Richard Francis Burton and John Hanning Speke, set off to unravel mankind's greatest geographical mystery: finding the source of the Nile River. They traveled deep into a forbidding and uncharted African wilderness together, coming near death on several occasions. Ultimately, Burton and Speke arrived at two different conclusions about the Nile's origin. Before leaving Africa they became sworn enemies. The feud became an international sensation upon their return to England, and a public debate was scheduled to decide whose theory was correct. What followed was a massive spectacle with an outcome no one could have ever foreseen.

In *The Explorers, New York Times* bestselling author Martin Dugard shares the rich saga of the Burton and Speke expedition. To better understand their motivations and ultimate success, Dugard guides readers through the seven vital traits that Burton and Speke, as well as many of history's legendary explorers, called upon to see their impossible journeys through to the end: curiosity, hope, passion, courage, independence, self-discipline, and perserverence. In doing so, Dugard demonstrates that we are all explorers, and that these traits have a most practical application in everyday life.

The Explorers is a book about survival and courage. It is also a book about stepping into the darkness with confidence and grace, aware on some profound level's - as were Burton and Speke - that the Promised Land we are searching for is not some lost corner of the world, but a place within ourselves.

The Explorers: A Story of Fearless Outcasts, Blundering Geniuses, and Impossible Success Details

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From Reader Review The Explorers: A Story of Fearless Outcasts, Blundering Geniuses, and Impossible Success for online ebook

Adam says

This past summer, in a fit of curiosity, I began writing a book about Christopher Columbus. To be honest, I had wanted to write a history of slavery in Wisconsin, my home state, but every attempted first chapter--on Jean Nicolet, the Jesuits, John Cabot--felt flimsy and incomplete, and only when I began to study the four voyages of Columbus, none of which ever touched the continental United States, did I find the opening story that I was missing. And while this idea seems strange--Columbus died more than 100 years before Jean Nicolet made his way into Green Bay and down the Fox River, and 300 years before Wisconsin actually became a state--his story perfectly foreshadows every major theme from that later history, from hapless expeditions and complicated relationships with indigenous populations to horrid greed and the origins of widespread indoctrination and indentured servitude. To write a book about slavery in America, regardless of what century or state, is to contend with the legacy of Columbus.

In the course of researching Columbus' life and expeditions, I had the chance to read two very different kinds of texts: firsthand accounts, including Columbus' own journals, and works of historical nonfiction from the last twenty years, which also used information from those journals but with much more finesse and context. Needless to say, the firsthand accounts were more helpful, even if it meant tirelessly attempting to separate factual events from manufactured self-promotion--Columbus was a master at the latter and terrible at the former--and looking desperately for other sources to fill in the missing pieces. That is where the recent books came into play, as they could be helpful--I hoped--in revealing paths to discovering what I had missed.

Instead, what I found in those books was nothing short of sacrilege. Based on little more than a desire to tell an interesting story rather than convey unblemished history, these modern-day writers wrote of Columbus as though he were a swashbuckling pirate or foolhardy kiss-ass. (That's not to say he wasn't both of these things at times, but rendering him as such through Indiana Jones-style prose is not the same as showing it through data.) Columbus, his crew, and the native people were ascribed with thoughts and emotions that were never recorded, only inferred, and the ecosystems of various islands were described in incredible detail, even down to the particular weather on a particular day and how it affected the trees and plans, even though those islands have not existed in those pristine, almost untouched states for centuries.

A perfect example of this habit can be found in Martin Dugard's retelling of Columbus' final voyage, which was fraught with disaster from the very beginning and never improved. Writing of Columbus' imprisonment at the end of his third voyage, Dugard writes that Columbus' ankles "had long ago been rubbed raw by iron shackles," and that "even lying flat on his back, he could feel their heaviness against his flesh and anticipate the manacles' noisy clank as he threw his feet over the bed." Dugard continues, "A verdant morning breeze wafted in through the window, on its way from the green mountains of Hispanola out to the Caribbean's turquoise waters. The fragile gust was yet another reminder that the freedom of wind and open sea--the freedom that had defined his life--beckoned less than half a mile away." All of these descriptions are contained in only the first two paragraphs of Dugard's entire book, and the remaining 250 pages are no better. If any of this information--the raw ankles, his anticipation of the shackle's clank, the fragile gust reminding him of freedom--is drawn from the firsthand literature of Christopher Columbus and his crew, it's gone unpublished.

Much of this is the fault of Dugard himself, who could have easily dispelled any accusation of over-fictionalized history with a thorough and detailed bibliography--a necessity when writing about important but

controversial events and people. Many modern histories of Columbus do not contain a bibliography, and Dugard's writing is only supported by a "Notes" section and a seven-page "selected bibliography" that does not contain any specific attributions. (In many cases, Dugard lists only two or three books as the sources for his lengthy chapters, including Washington Irving's own fictionalized history of Columbus, which has been thoroughly invalidated by historians.) Had Dugard followed the examples of other, more notable historians and history writers, whose bibliographies often run over one hundred pages and cite every single quote, he might have realized the problem ahead of time.

Unfortunately, Dugard's most recent book--another history of exploration, this time focused on Richard Burton and John Speke--suffers from the same problems. At the end of *The Explorers*, where there should be a bibliography, Dugard offers us only a lengthy paragraph listing the titles of books he consulted; where there should be a detailed, fifty- or sixty-page list of pages and citations, there is an acknowledgement of all those whose writing influenced his own, as well as a justification for the extensive and distracting footnotes that litter every other page and add very little to the overall history. (In one instance, Dugard's footnote about explorer Sebastian Cabot becomes a discussion of the *Family Affair* actor of the same name; in others, he mentions the habit of South Floridians to dispose of their exotic pet snakes into the wild, offers a hypothesis on why the brain preserves some memories differently than others, explains the results of a Harvard study on daydreaming, and acknowledges all of the various places named after men like James Cook and Christopher Columbus.) Nowhere are we given direct evidence that much of the detailed, narrative-driven minutia included by Dugard actually happened or are certifiably accurate.

What's more, this is not Dugard's greatest transgression. Rather, the lack of adequate citations and his incessant need to footnote a legitimate historical topic with irrelevant bits of trivia pales next to an understanding of world history that is not only flawed but offensively blind. Much of Dugard's book is built on his inability to see beyond a Westernized version of history that values European explorers over indigenous people. Time and again, the white male Europeans in Dugard's book are "discovering" places that had already been occupied for centuries, if not millennia, while discounting those who were native to these regions. Even though these places were often the ancestral homes to millions, it took the arrival of Europeans to legitimize it, and it was those same men who were given credit. This level of Eurocentrism has dominated history books for generations, personified by Columbus' "discovery" of islands that were inhabited by people for thousands of years--an event that we celebrate every year, despite the fact that Columbus' arrival commenced the eventual exploitation and extermination of entire ethnic populations.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this mindset can be found in a tangential section on Howard Carter, who unearthed King Tut's tomb in Egypt under the supervision and funding of fellow Englishman Lord Carnovan. Keeping in mind the historical importance of this tomb to the region, not to mention its importance to the people of Egypt, Dugard's summary of this excavation is nothing short of clueless: "All because Carter and Carnarvon wouldn't quit. All those years of perseverance paid off. The results can be viewed in museums such as the exhibit within Highclere [Carnovan's estate] dedicated to the earl's collection of artifacts discovered during the years he indulged his passion for Egyptology." (Dugard 245) The terminology Dugard employs here shows a total disregard for what Carter and Carnovan did: they unearthed important artifacts, yes, but they did it to steal rather than preserve them or return them to the Egyptian people, since everything they found was part of that nation's history and culture. Instead, Dugard believes it's a testament to the tenacity of European explorers that these two men stole another culture's precious artifacts and either locked much of it away in stately manors for their own enjoyment or--presumably--sold it off for financial gain.

Dugard's book is organized to tell the story of men like Burton and Speke--men who put their own lives on the line to go places where they'd never dreamed of going before, all because those locations happened to be

there.* But by embracing only one perspective--that of the invaders, the conquerors, the victors, the white European men--Dugard is implicitly elevating their story while disregarding the hundreds of years that preceded their arrival, yet another form of colonialism, exercised now over history itself. In fact, it was often the arrival of men like Burton and Speke that brought about the end of these native populations, and in horrible fashions: through enslavement, violence, bloodshed, rape, exploitation, and death. And yet they're seen as the ones worthy of praise, adulation, and study.

The great tragedy of Dugard's book, beyond what has already been mentioned, is that one of his chapters--"Independence"--is absolutely beautiful. In discussing the traits needed to be a world-class explorer, Dugard discusses the science behind introversion and extroversion, concluding that those most likely to walks thousands of miles without a second thought or crawl through a deadly African wilderness for years at a time are a special breed of person set apart from the rest of society. They are not fulfilled by interactions with others--in fact, just the opposite--and find solace in solitude, where they can think over pressing issues and push themselves to becoming better, more educated people. Had Dugard balanced his worship of explorers with a hardy and serious acknowledgment of their terrible legacies, he would have done justice to the very spirit of exploration without disregarding the souls of those it ultimately harmed.

*Female explorers are featured only twice: Isabel Godin, who walks across the Amazon to be reunited with her husband, and Amy Johnson, who earns notoriety for flying across half the globe and then dies in a plane crash within the span of only three pages

This review was originally published at There Will Be Books Galore.

Baobab says

I wasn't that impressed with this book. I expected a catalog of interesting explorers, but the book came across as the story of John Hanning Speke and Richard Francis Burton and their quest to discover the source of the Nile, and later their quest to discredit each other's theories as to what that source is. This story is far more interesting than anything else the author has to say, but he constantly interrupts it with annoying explanations of psychological, neurological, and motivational theories about what makes a person into an explorer, and mention of other explorers. He goes off into motivational tangents that are just annoying. Fortunately the book is not long and his writing style is easy to read, so one doesn't have to put up with it for long. I gave it 3 stars solely on the basis of his telling of the story of Speke and Burton. The rest of the book is worth only one star.

Graham Podolecki says

I liked this book, even though it has some glaring problems.

The wealth of information and fun facts this book has to share about explorers and exploration is a real treat. I learned a fair bit from the eclectic often all-over-the-place nature of Dugard’s writing and feel a great desire to get out in the wilderness and well...explore.

The major problem I have with this book is structural. Dugard decided at one point to frame this book around the seven qualities an explorer must possess and at times I feel he was jamming a square peg into a circular hole. The connections and segues are sloppy at times and ultimately I felt Dugard didn't really keep his discussion tied to the trait he was trying to expand on. It felt like a long tangent trip rather than following any sort of firm story about Speke, Burton and the source of the Nile.

Also, Dugard is quite opinionated and those new to the subject will emerge from this book with a very low opinion of 'Dick' Burton while Jack Speke is cast in a heroic light. More than once Dugard's fawning over Speke left me to ask "Was Speke really that good a guy?" For example, Dugard brushes off his obsession with game hunting as nothing unusual but goes on and on about how much of a shameless hedonist Burton was. And 'stiff upper lip' warning, Dugard will praise Speke's far too much for comfort especially considering the mysterious nature of Speke's end.

Ultimately for those new to the subject, it's an enjoyable but biased read.

Quentin says

A tale of some of Britain's most famous explorers and what made them tick. The threads of their tales are woven between seven shared character traits, and that somewhat cumbersome rope is further tied up in the saga of the first two Brits to reach the source of the Nile. Somehow it all works, and all three strands of the story end up being well told. On the whole, it is entertaining and easy to follow, although each of the story's three parts have some fairly significant flaws.

The eponymous 'Explorers' all have interesting stories, as one might expect. However there is a fair degree of airbrushing going on, and Dugard prioritises his story-line at the expense of historical accuracy. Their adventures are also unapologetically Euro-centric and pro-colonial, which may have been palatable on the shores of Livingston's Zambesi, but is less so currently. There are also parts which Dugard either poorly researched, exaggerated or simply made up. Proud Norwegian Roald Amundsen would turn in his watery grave to know he was described as Swedish; and the death of Captain Cook (sorry, spoiler alert) differs markedly from historical consensus. With these in mind, I can't help but wonder what else he chose to edit to his liking.

The seven character traits of said explorers were an interesting diversion from the main plot, and offered a chance at reflection and analysis of the wider world. However, these monologues tended towards preaching, and the reader is left wondering whether Dugard wanted to write a cliched self-help book.

Finally, the tale of Speke and Burton, and their quest for the source of the Nile, is told well over the course of the book. It's a fascinating and nuanced tale, although as above, fact and fiction are used somewhat interchangeably, so if you're after a factual account then look elsewhere. Their story culminates in what should have been the climax of the book, but the 'Nile Debate' falls flat, and the author isn't able to carry the suspense to a satisfactory conclusion, resorting again to self-help tripe to see the book out. Perhaps it's a fitting end to a mostly entertaining read that doesn't quite fulfil its potential.

Jill Robbertze says

I rather enjoyed this book which, although not exactly gripping, was very interesting. Dugard tells the main story of 2 explorers and their search for the source of the Nile. Throughout the book Dugard intertwines the theme of what characteristics are required for success in both exploration and for success in life : curiosity, hope, passion, courage, independence, self-discipline, and perseverance and in doing so, he also writes about other very interesting explorations throughout history and how these characteristics have come into play. I give this one 3.5 Stars.

Veronica says

All I wanted was an entertaining history but this is something else. Not feelin' it. Time to move on...

Paul Pessolano says

“The Explorers” by Martin Dugard, published by Simon and Schuster.

Category – Biography/Philosophy Publication Date – June 03, 2014

Martin Dugard has put together a fantastic book about explorers and what he believes it took and takes to enter into the unknown.

Dugard builds his book around the hunt for the source of the Nile River and the two explorers that led the search, Richard Francis Burton and John Hanning Speke, and their subsequent feud over the source of the Nile. He also intersperses several other explorers and their exploits within the context of his hypothesis.

Dugard believes it takes seven disciplines to become a true explorer. They are: Curiosity, Hope, Passion, Courage, Independence, Self-Discipline, and Perseverance. In his book he takes each of these disciplines and matches them up with the trials and tribulations that explorers face.

Some of his stories are absolutely mind-boggling in that one wonders how these explorers continued on their quest when they flirted with death and discomfort through most of their endeavors.

Dugard also uses his book to take these disciplines and apply them to our everyday life. Maybe the days of the true explorer are gone but one can certainly use their example to overcome the obstacles that one must face on a daily basis.

A book that will satisfy a reader who enjoys a riveting tale about early explorers and also a reader who is interested in what drove these men to undertake seemly impossible tasks, and the philosophy that kept them focused on their objective.

Richard Starks says

Martin Dugard has written about explorers before - most notably in his excellent book, Into Africa, which recounts the story of Stanley and Livingstone. Here he tells the well-known tale of Burton and Speke (that's Richard Burton and John Speke, although infuriatingly Dugard insists on calling them 'Dick' and 'Jack'); but he tries to make their exploits have wider significance by building his book around the seven qualities he thinks all successful explorers must possess.
This means he can bring in the tales of many other explorers too, as well as add some interesting, but often irrelevant, footnotes. It also means he can expand the readership of his book and make it relevant to all of us today, since the seven qualities are, he says, ones that we need if we wish to be successful in life. After all, we are all 'explorers' of a kind, if only of our own experiences.
The problem with the book is that he shoehorns the various explorer stories into fitting the mold of the seven qualities; they could as easily be made to fit another set of qualities. Worse, he doesn't seem to believe his own thesis and never makes a serious attempt to develop it in a meaningful way. What we're left with is an interesting book, but one that's built around an idea that isn't really there.

Rose says

Collection of tales of various explorers centered on Burton and Speke. Nice to have tales in one place but all have been told considerably better elsewhere. The book is totally without documentation and he manages at one point to confuse Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. The structure of virtues demonstrated with examples of explorers did not work for me. There are no illustrations or maps.

Paul says

I won a free copy of this book from the First Reads program. I entered the giveaway because I thought it sounded interesting and at the very least I would learn something. It turns out I found the lives of many of the explorers mentioned in the book to be fascinating. From Captain Cook's voyages to the discovery of King Tut's tomb, this book is a who's who of explorers. It analyzes the traits that make explorers different from the common man and I found myself identifying with some of the explorers.

This book tries to get into the heads of notable explorers and discover why they purposely endure all kinds of hardships, far from home; and it's usually not just for fame and fortune. It's an innate desire to keep challenging themselves. And in the process, they find their true strengths and weaknesses, and who they really are.

P. says

Usually I don't like to be snarky in a review, but this book deserves it by not just being dumb, but spectacularly, impressively dumb. In the interest of being (slightly) fair, I should admit that I'm probably not the intended audience—the book's meant to be (I guess?) a self-help book that's for some reason burdened with historical anecdotes about explorers, and I only read it because I won an advanced review copy and

didn't realize until too late that it was not simply a history of Richard Burton and John Speke, as the misleading summary implied.

As a favor to you, whose time is precious, here's the whole book in one sentence, so you don't have to read it (you shouldn't): curiosity, hope, passion, courage, independence, self-discipline, and perseverance are important, and because explorers have all of these qualities, so should you.

As I said, the book is dumb. The organization makes little sense: the book is separated into sections according to the seven virtues the author believes every explorer possessed, virtues which I suppose he must have decided on through the carefully analytic and scientific process of guessing what might sell well. This organization might work, I suppose, for a self-help book, but here it is arbitrary, as his main thesis is that a person must encompass all these qualities at the same time, and thus should be self-evident to some degree in each anecdote. Why not just number the chapters? Or arrange them chronologically (as they basically are anyway)? The only concession to this organization are brief, vague, and trite meditations on the virtue that show about the same depth of thought as a undergraduate freshman puts into a paper that's due the next day: "And while curiosity peaks in childhood, when the entire world is new, a lifelong habit of curiosity is empowering." Thanks, Dugard.

The author also has the terrible habit of trying to morally frame whatever he says. He's forgotten that most basic tenet of writing—show not tell. Here's a sentence from the prologue about Richard Burton, whom we haven't even met yet: "The fancy words and well-crafted arguments of a hedonist intellectual like Richard Francis Burton have no place [in the hunt]." These aren't Speke's thoughts, like in a novel, but the author's, who fails to grasp the irony of calling Burton a hedonist, in contrast to Speke, just in the middle describing the latter blasting small birds out of the sky for the hell of it. He also can't let a sentence stand on its own; when someone runs a spear through Burton's face and the brave explorer runs down the beach, Dugard tells us flatly, "The fact that Burton managed to run down the beach with a very long spear sticking out both sides of his head is remarkable." It sure is. That's why you don't need to tell us.

In fact, the author really seems to have it out for Sir Burton. He starts calling him (I'm not kidding) Dick Burton, akin to referring to Shakespeare as Bill. Later, when Burton gets that SPEAR TO THE FACE and is grievously wounded, Dugard can't help but tell us that our hedonist also has syphilis to boot. The author takes pains to point out multiple times that the honorable Speke never touched women (even at home!), without ever grasping that the explorer might simply not like them (Dugard didn't learn his own lesson of curiosity enough to think this through).

I think you get the idea. But one last thing I can't resist pointing out are the footnotes which fluctuate between being interesting, irrelevant, and, most fun, truly mystifying, such as informing us that a sentence about explorers being outcasts is actually a paraphrase of Bruce Springsteen speaking about rock stars ("Given that explorers have frequently been labeled as the rock stars of their time, the comparison is apt," the author asserts with his usual authority, leaving us to wonder what he's been reading and if we should tell him that the idiom does not refer to literal rock stars). I mention these footnotes only because I happen to own a copy of Burton's Arabian Nights translation, and his footnotes are almost as entertaining as the stories themselves. Dugard could've learned something else from the explorer.

In short, if you want a self-help book, look elsewhere. If you want a book on explorers, surely there are better ones. If you hate Richard Burton, then this is for you.

Eric says

This book is like a expanded power-point presentation called The 7 Traits of Great Explorers. Each chapter is devoted to a separate trait with ample anecdotes tossed in as examples of the trait. The Burton-Speke expedition runs through the book as the glue that binds the whole mess together. The author is clearly anti-Burton. Nearly every time Burton is mentioned its in a negative way. This in and of itself isn't a bad thing. Burton was a controversial figure. However, the author goes out of his way to bash Burton at every opportunity like on page 88 when he spends several paragraphs explaining the role of the reptilian brain (the most primitive part of the human brain) and then says Burton has an overdeveloped one. The other problem is the factual errors. At one point he talks about the man-eaters of Tsavo, two lions that terrorized an African railway crew in 1898. The author states the lions killed 135 people. That number is widely considered wrong. The briefest of Google searches will show that. The number most often sited is 35. The whole thing reads like a motivational self-help book.

Then there is the general sloppiness. On page 96 there is a quote from an AD for the Shackleton expedition. Next to the quote is a footnote staring the ad may be apocryphal. The sentence following the quote says the same thing.

And then there's rampant speculation. On page 100 he is talking about Shackleton bring trapped in the ice in the Antarctic. He writes that we don't know how Shackleton figured out this problem but "research into the life of Leonardo Da Vinci suggests that his process involved a series of seven questions." Really? The author is bringing up How to Think like Leonardo Da Vinci?

Where are the sources? Where is he getting any of this?

I've come to a point where I don't trust what the author says without fact-checking as I go. A lot of what he says is correct but some of it is biased or dumbed-down and some of it is wrong.

Android Dream says

There is a lot wrong with this book, which others have already highlighted (poor structure, self-help disguised as history, ridiculous foot noting). I couldn’t get past the author leaking his middle aged white male biases the entire time. If you wish to read about heroism and adventure, there are many superior story tellers out there.

Craig Fiebig says

Remember when we used to go into bookstores? You would read NYTimes Book Review and check out interesting recent works. For awhile it seemed as though everyone was reading Boorstin, "The Discoverers". You picked it up, with two hands, read some pages and thought, "Dang ... I should read this" but worried you might come down with tennis elbow from the weight? Well "The Explorers" is like Boorstin-Lite. In every respect. The prose, meh; the insight, okay ... B+ (an old B+, not what passes for a B+ today); the nuggets of "I didn't realize that" make it worth the read though. This is a decently entertaining book, probably ideal for a flight across the country or your next pool/beach side read. Add it to your 'To Read' list and when you need a break from serious history or current events, give this a shot.

Gretchen says

If you want to read about explorers, this is a five star read. The Burton/Speke Nile story is the anchor, but many other explorers are mentioned in support of the character traits Dugard isolates. Most of these explorers are on the obscure side, so the stories were new and fresh. This aspect of the book was a five star read for me.

The psychology, however, felt forced. I loved the way he wrapped up the book; I feel like that is all the psychoanalyzing that needed to happen, especially since he is not an expert himself. It would have been awesome if he had addressed the ideas he was aiming for more broadly, perhaps in terms of grit (via Angela Duckworth's book). I will admit that I am far less of a physicalist than Dugard apparently is, so I look at people like the explorers in terms of character, habits, and choices, rather than lizard brains and dopamine. So I could simply be biased against the worldview. In any case, though, it saw many inconsistencies between the seven traits, especially in the examples used. Why did that story fit hope rather than courage? Or this one fit curiosity rather than perseverance? Then the final cop out of adding discretion as a trait, yet not a trait, which is different than a lizard brain how, exactly? Anyway, the psychology needed a bit of polish, from where I sat.