

The Point *of* Pointless Work





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*For the compassionate people in our lives
and in this world. This one is for you.*



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I published a book four years ago and sold it online and door to door to the bookshops in San Francisco. It had an initial print run of 4,000 copies. The book went on to be read by nearly three million readers and sold over a quarter of a million copies in print. I wrote another book two years later that sold to one of the Big Five publishers at auction. These pages tell the story of those experiences with publishing and reflect on the transformative power of hobbies.




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of
Pointless Work







PREFACE

And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. —John Steinbeck, East of Eden




I once read that a debut author's first book is often the author's most autobiographical. My experience was a bit different. For me, editing meant taking more of myself out of the work with every pass, until, by the end of it, I had completely disappeared. I had a terrible fear of laying myself bare to a world I had yet to fully understand. With my first foray into publishing, it didn't matter that I was absent from the writing. I had intentionally designed the book without evolving a place anywhere on its pages for an author. With the second one, I felt, in retrospect, that I put too much of myself onto the page. I checked out of publishing for a year






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after going through that mill. I couldn't write anything worth sharing. I couldn't write, period. I had stacks of unread books gathering dust, and I had lost all interest in the pastime of thinking about nascent ideas and refining those that showed some promise. That process that had once given me tremendous relief, coupling me as it had with the ability to be in full control of my time and to have the luxury of choosing what to work on, now took the form of a train that passed by at regular intervals. And yet, I never seemed to want to get on it.



I recorded an interview one Wednesday morning, and by the end of it, the interviewer commented that my answers had been awfully succinct. *Were they really?* I shrugged. An inside roaring like a furnace though nothing but a wisp of smoke was drifting out, it seemed, manifesting in that moment as a shrug. Interpreted as callousness, no doubt, but of course, it was not so. Then one morning, I started writing again. I had compelled my mind to roam free, and in return it had rid me of that debilitating state of indifference that was holding me captive. I finally stepped off that platform bench and onto that glittering railcar. My year of idleness had given way to a sudden current that propelled me towards life and reactivated in me the conviction that there was value in engaging with the passive, the non-essential.




Though the story I'm about to tell begins with a published book and ends with another published book,




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the story has less to do with publishing and more to do with achieving purpose while navigating a complicated world. I stumbled into publishing as a self-publisher. I stumbled into it, then worked for a couple of years on a project with an independent publisher, and then I worked for a couple more years with one of the Big Five publishers in New York and a top publishing imprint in London. Those three experiences broadly cover the various ways one can publish a book nowadays. The two physical books that came out of those experiences have been read by nearly three million readers, translated into nearly two dozen languages, and as of the end of 2017, have sold over a quarter of a million copies in print.



That eventual success came about through a series of accidents and lucky breaks. I went through the standard items one might go through when developing a product that in this case happened to be a book—things like commissioning talent (illustrators and voice actors), meeting with printers, querying agents, pitching to publishers, and tracking finances. I had some memorable experiences, like my run-in with Tim Berners-Lee, or the time I emailed Marvin Minsky from a hospital bed while high on drugs, or the time I pitched a piece to a journalist at *The Wall Street Journal* by trying to convince her why she shouldn't write about my book. And then of course I had those life-changing personal







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interactions with readers that make it all worth it.

My goal for this book is singular. If writing or some other hobby is something you've long been considering, perhaps these pages will nudge you towards actualizing that aspiration, by highlighting why it's useful to engage in seemingly pointless work, by which I mean undirected work. This is not a "self-help" guide. God, no. Nor is it an essay. Consider it, as Goethe wrote in his introduction to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a friend who has some answers and insights that you're welcome to interpret in a way that best suits your circumstances.



Throughout, I've tried as best I can to maintain two qualities. Firstly, to attribute any faults or shortcomings to myself. My intention, after all, isn't to write a memoir (despite having the requisite hairstyle for that), but to focus on a specific idea within the context of a set of experiences. And secondly, to be forthright about all the ups and downs of those experiences. I have no interest whatsoever in being perceived as anything I am not, nor as something I ought to be.



There is a scene in one of Chekhov's short stories that has stuck with me ever since I first read it. Two childhood friends bump into each other as adults. They embrace, they reminisce. Then one of the friends finds out the other is a two-star privy councilor, and following that revelation, the dynamic transforms from a relaxed one between two human beings interested in each

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other to one marred by formality, to the utter disgust of the privy councilor. My promise to you is to write plainly and conversationally.

—A.A., *October 2018*



TAKING RISKS

Better to accept the burden of unhappiness and try to turn it into something worthwhile, poetry or music or painting: that is what he believes. —J. M. Coetzee, Youth

In the fall of 2012, I experienced several setbacks. Having resigned from a job a few years earlier supervising a team of thirty engineers and gone back to school, I had applied to two graduate programs in hopes of beginning a career in academia. That plan was cut short by the thin envelopes the mailman kept delivering. Then a perfunctory reorganization at my day job moved me into a milieu where things weren't ideal, and a health issue had me going into hospital twice a month for nearly two years. Most alarming of all, my hometown, thousands of miles away, was in a state of chaos, and I had come to learn from a recent phone call of the phenomena of people going to bed in their outdoor clothes.

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Neighbors were being visited by marauding masked men in the dead of night, and if it were one's lot to disappear, or rather *be* disappeared, before sunrise, they had determined to at least do so while dressed decently.


Those things alone are manageable. Most of them—from a far enough distance—are even petty. What really pushes a person over the edge are the tiny inescapable details of everyday life. When compounded, they strangle you. When compounded, you begin to sense that you are somehow at a great disadvantage in life because of how you are perceived. The person passing you on the street whom you know, but who avoids your gaze, might as well be carrying a pitchfork. The landlord passing up on your application in favor of somebody else's—who then tells you it's because that somebody else makes more money—might as well be avoiding your gaze on the street.

A dreadful dissonance was consuming me. That feeling of despair that had wrapped its spindly, pale fingers around my temple, terrible though it was, gave rise, strangely enough, to another feeling. That of hope, of a way out—a germ of a drive to be productive in new ways. And in that instant, I recognized that my predictable life had shackled me. It had robbed me of the vitality necessary to achieve new heights. I started coding at eleven, I got my first check at sixteen, and I ran a web-site in high school that proved lucrative enough that it




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made me ambivalent about attending college. That was my identity. The passage of time has a way of chiseling experiences into an avatar one is able to hide behind. It's not easy to walk away from that.



It had been a long time since I'd felt hope amidst confusion. I was twelve the first time it happened. I found myself reading Alex Haley's autobiography of Malcolm X, a dusty mass market paperback my father had likely bought during his student days in England. It was an unexpected crossing of paths, being that this was the mid-nineties, before broadband had become ubiquitous, at least in my tiny city. A civil rights movement over in America was not at all something that I, many thousands of miles away in a region wrapped in its own turmoils, would have learned about on my own time, nor been taught in school. And yet there was something primal in that movement, something quintessentially human that I was able to connect with. Harlem's beating heart resonated with me.



I went through high school and then college borrowing many of Malcolm's mannerisms, intonations, and turns of phrase, putting them to use in the debate sessions my friends and I had at various cafes. Some weekends, those sessions would go on until the early hours of the morning. "No, that's what you're saying," was a line I used often. So are you saying the very poor ought to be paying more in tax? No, that's what you're



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saying. *Bam.* Line of questioning disarmed.


I rarely told anyone where those rhetorical sledgehammers came from. I remember recognizing even at that young age that the nuanced concept of adoring some of someone's ideas while disagreeing with some of their other ideas was a burdensome one. There's a cognitive inclination to generalize a part to a whole and to create strong associations between people on the basis of weak links, and that kind of a thing can become an unnecessary distraction in a setting like a debate.

There was one quality above all that stood out to me in Alex Haley's portrayal of that bespectacled man from Harlem, and that was his clarity of thought to proclaim, always sincerely and if necessary publicly, that he refused to be a prisoner of his own personal history, inclusive of all its missteps and tragedies. That ability to not lose sight of a goal, and to adapt midway while in a personally vulnerable position, was new to me. All throughout my childhood, the exemplars of virtue on offer were one-dimensional saints from bygone eras. This was different. Here, I was seeing aspiration as being not towards infallibility, which I am now convinced is a terrible way to impart morals to children, but towards a quality that was much more human. Here was someone who was complex, someone who had broken himself down in prison only to build himself up again, and then twelve years later, at the height of his popular-




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ity, he was breaking himself down again to build himself up anew. A Lockean mind in action. I later found that quality in other people, and in places known to be notoriously ruthless. I remember reading about a senator-turned-President's approach to fostering relationships and putting the greater good ahead of his ego. I was double-impressed with that because of its rarity in an unforgiving space like politics.



And so it was, with those types of convictions having been decanted into me during my most formative of years, that in the fall of 2012 I set about looking at my present with fresh eyes. I abandoned every good and every upsetting experience and began working over the course of a year on four projects that I had never tackled because I figured they weren't relevant to my immediate focus. Now, I saw those same projects in a new light. I saw their value in the incidental benefits that came from engaging with them.




The first project was an analysis of the architecture of a popular software system. It made it to the front page of an influential tech blog and upset a few people who neither liked the report's candor nor its findings. The piece received 27,500 visits. For a side project I had no expectations of, I felt the number was respectable. That immediate feedback jolted me back to life. Another project was a piece on the education levels of world leaders, which received about 10,000 visits in its




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first few days, and went on to receive around 100,000 visits. It triggered apologists from several autocracies, to whom it had come as a shock that their leaders crumbled upon close examination. Another project was a piece on the casualties and causes of death in a little-known conflict in a nation with some of the most brutal *lèse-majesté* laws on earth. I was somewhat worried about the repercussions from publishing that one, so I did so anonymously. *The New York Times*' Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Nicholas Kristof shared it with his fans. That piece received 11,100 visits.



Those three experiences, all of which happened within the span of a few months, demonstrated to me that it was possible to escape the clasp of mental desolation merely by producing work. It was nice when that work resonated with a large number of people, but the very act of producing work was in and of itself nourishing.



The last project I turned my attention to was a silly pamphlet-like website on logical fallacies that was meant to put my notes and scribbles from years earlier to better use. I wrote most of it from a horrendously filthy cafe in downtown San Francisco, at a table right across from a restroom. They eventually stationed a security guard inside that cafe in the hopes of curtailing both the shoplifting and the questionable activities that went on in that restroom. All the same, I had my head down when I was there, working on something I didn't

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have the slightest inkling would take off in the most unexpected way.



STICKING WITH IT

An aspiration is a joy for ever, a possession as solid as a landed estate, a fortune which we can never exhaust and which gives us year by year a revenue of pleasurable activity.
—Robert Louis Stevenson, *El Dorado*


As the idea for *Logical Fallacies* took shape, I started scouring the internet for freelance illustrators. I ran a design agency for two years, so I had a good sense of how to approach illustrators and where to look for them. The artwork for the project would have a sort of woodcut effect with expressionless characters drawn in strong black ink and filled with minimal, or perhaps no, color—a hat-tip to eighteenth and nineteenth century books and book covers.

I came across the work of an artist from Medellín, Colombia—Alejandro—who had a piece that looked uncannily similar to that style. His career had started




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only two years earlier, and he was already publishing phenomenal work. I reached out to him asking if he was available for commissions. He was, and so our relationship began. I hadn't finished the book at this point, but I wanted to get another pair of eyes looking at the project. It would allow me to see the pages as that other person, and that in turn would offer a useful perspective on the work.



My creative briefs included sketches, captions, and a general description of each scene. We often went over a concept multiple times until it looked perfect, which is to say, until it satisfied the two primary qualities of humor and engagement that the artwork was meant to maximize. I seldom questioned his design choices. A few times he recommended changing something fundamental, and I can't recall a single time when I didn't go with his recommendation. When we were done with all the commissions, he went over a few of the scenes again, and cleaned up a line here or a lettering there. He didn't have to; it was his way of showing dedication to the work.



We ended up working together on four projects over the course of five years. And when I think back to why that relationship lasted so long and continues still, I realize that it's not only talent that brings value to a partnership, but also the human side of the relationship. For instance, a belief that without the other person the



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work would not be as good.

In June 2016, just as I handed in my final manuscript for another book project that Alejandro and I had worked on, a friend sent me a link to a piece that *Wired* had just published about a book on the same topic. I was working from home that day. I sat down at the dinner table, scanned the article on my phone, and felt a rush of cold sweat flash across my back and forehead. We'd been scooped. My visceral reaction was to abandon the project despite having spent close to two years on it. I couldn't see the value in spending another second on something that somebody else had already done, especially if that other work showed all the signs of having been done well.

But of course I couldn't abandon this project. We had a contract, we had a release date, albeit a year away. I had people counting on me and I wasn't going to let them down. And as I was thinking through how on earth we could make this thing work, I realized more vividly than ever that this project had something that was not scoopable—a competitive edge that no one else had. The project had sixty-five pieces of original art that allowed it to reach a special type of audience. This isn't mawkishness, it's to make the point that in a long-lasting partnership, that level of trust in and respect for the other person's ability to deliver is essential.

Decision-making is another important component



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of an enduring partnership. It is not always easy to know ahead of time how the effect of a design decision will be received by an audience, so there has to be complete clarity early on about who makes the deciding calls on contentious issues. This is true of creative collaborations, and is also true of the relationship between, say, a publisher and an author, where the publisher is more often than not the ultimate decider. There, it is not a collaboration. It is an *acquisition*. One that leads to a partnership—hopefully, a lifelong one—but an acquisition all the same. A publisher’s principal job is to make design decisions that sell books, not to be a patron of high culture, and that’s a perfectly responsible and rational position. I sometimes have to remind myself of that.


Then there’s knowing what to prioritize. Someone asked me once, on a scale of one to ten, how I ranked myself as an author. The question caught me off guard. I answered, “I hope that the books are good, despite me.” And that is genuinely my aspiration with every project. To build it in such a way that it can live on without me. When I reflect on past collaborations, I find that the successful ones all involved people who were laser-focused on making a project, be it a book or anything else, as good as possible for the longest time possible, and who considered any impact of that work on their personal selves merely incidental. I cherish




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those relationships.

And finally, there's integrity. When it comes to human relationships, I've never understood the inclination to play games, to try to be clever, to exploit hope. A long-term relationship is based on unwavering, genuine integrity and to the extent permissible by one's circumstances, a high degree of transparency. "Making it" shouldn't come at the expense of others. Some human qualities only become apparent with time and effort. That is why I enjoy spending time with people. Every conversation, no matter how short, reveals someone a bit more. That is also why I enjoy reading all kinds of books. Every book reveals its author.



We spent the next four months finishing up all the scenes in the book. Each one took about two weeks from start to finish. The whole thing was looking spectacular. If that previous series of work had jolted me back to life, these past few months had straightened my back and raised my chin. By early January 2013, the website was in a good enough shape to be launched.



But I couldn't do it. I couldn't share with the world this website that I had now titled *An Illustrated Book of Logical Fallacies*. Something about the switch to a different medium filled me with uncertainty. A book is perceived as the culmination of some monumental effort, and there are legitimate and historical reasons for that. But I made websites. Websites are iterative artifacts, ad



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infinitum. If something is wrong with a website, you fix it, and that's really all there is to it. There isn't anyone—to my knowledge—reviewing websites. *This website has a white background. I like fuchsia. Two stars.* Not so with a book.

To alleviate my fears, I contracted an editing agency based in London and sent them the prose only. I wasn't worried about the artwork. I wanted to make sure the writing wasn't terrible. They took a month to go over it and got back to me with some suggestions. The feedback was positive, for the most part, and that made me feel better. The most memorable suggestion was to change the title so that it appealed to a broader audience. And so, sitting in a cafe on Market at Fremont in downtown San Francisco, on my walk home from work, I changed the book's title to *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*.



I needed the approval of further strangers before I could share the project more widely. That I showed such a dependency at that time is something I pondered many years later. And on reflection I realized it wasn't all that unexpected a behavior. One of the first things you're stripped of during a time of personal turbulence is assertiveness. You're in a delicate state of mind and any positivity directed at you helps you regain your self-esteem. Negativity potentially has the opposite effect, which is why subjugation is such a devastating weapon, because it completely destroys one's ability to



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see oneself as independent.

That delicate state of mind was not new, of course. I had assumed it in my first year of college—a place I strode into at seventeen, an Icarus with waxy wings that were about to be put to the test. There is a cognitive bias in which one's inability to see one's faults causes one to mistakenly believe that one's abilities are greater than they actually are. I majored in electronics, even though I didn't know the first thing about it. Everything I had done up to that point was software. But when you've never failed at anything, you're emboldened. And such a view of reality, if not adequately nurtured, siphoned, may lead to blind spots later on in life. That's the paradox of success at an early age. There's a fine line between being audacious enough at that age to feel you can achieve anything and between having the presence of mind to recognize what deficiencies you need to work on. Not only technical skills, but human ones.



It was in college that I came to terms with the depths of my deficiencies. Achieving that level of self-awareness at such a tender age isn't comfortable. It never is, I suppose. It was like childbirth, or California state tax, or that passage in Nietzsche where the man must descend into pain and suffering before he can climb the mountain. A necessary discomfort one has to endure in order to, hopefully, achieve something valuable on the

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back of it. As Gibran puts it, “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”

In hindsight, it was a spectacularly formative experience. Nothing helped me grow more than the realization that I had room to learn. When you’re learning, awareness gives way to discomfort, which gives way to growth. Albeit, a potential side effect of such an evolution is that it can make one uncertain about things, in the world and in oneself. Unregulated, that awareness can wreak havoc on one’s ability to live a fulfilling life.

I started reaching out to a few people to see if they would be willing to endorse the book. One person who came to mind was Marvin Minsky. I had taken one of his classes in graduate school, and I had even been so bold as to go up to him after class one time and ask if I could take a photo with him. (He said yes.) He was a towering figure in Artificial Intelligence, and he had a serious interest in philosophy too, so he seemed like a fantastic person to boost the credibility of a project like this one. I spent a week drafting the email to Marvin, then sent it to him on a Wednesday morning during my walk to work. He got back to me right after lunch.


Wow! I just started to read your beautiful book! It will be hard to match the standard you’ve set, but I’ll try to say something quotable!

I was over the moon. Here I was, shuffling to the beat




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that is corporate politics, elbows interlocked with those either side of me, no one quite knowing who is being swung and who is doing the swinging, and yet I had before me an email from someone I admired, acknowledging something I had a hand in making. It was such a reaffirming moment.



I then reached out to Aaron Koblin, who was head of the Data Arts team at Google at the time, and who now runs a startup in Los Angeles. His office was right across the courtyard from mine. Aaron got back to me right away too with a beautiful quote. Then a few weeks passed, and the email from Marvin never came. I couldn't send him a reminder. What if he had decided he didn't want to endorse a book by a random stranger with no real track record of writing anything? He was in his late 80s, and I made up all kinds of excuses for him. I just couldn't work up the courage to send a follow-up email. That is, until I was admitted to the emergency room—a regular occurrence by this point—and hooked up to an IV that shot Dilaudid into me. It was in that state of complete mental dislocation that I wondered, What better time could there be than now to email the great man? I've never since read that email and I have no recollection of what I wrote. All I know is that I didn't hear back from Marvin again. I was tremendously sad to read his obituary in *The New York Times* a year or so later.



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By now it was July 2013. I decided it was time to publish the website and see what happened. Put it out there and then look for signs of a rash, as a colleague would say. I added a note near the bottom of the website asking readers to report any errors or omissions to the author. That way, it was clear that the project was by someone who was interested in improving the work, rather than by an authority. I shared the link on Facebook, Reddit, and Hacker News. Introvert that I was, I had all but sixteen followers on Twitter, I wasn't active on Instagram, and my Facebook engagements left a lot to be desired.


Even so, the website ended up being liked or shared on Facebook approximately 300 times within the first few hours and had been visited by approximately 4,500 visitors by the end of the day. By now I knew that the project had at least passed the test of not being terrible. The next day, I shared it on Reddit's *r/design* and *r/teachers* subreddits and by the end of the day, the website had been visited by another 4,000 visitors. Then I did something that I had never done. I read the comments. And to my surprise, they were not cynical at all. They were full of all kinds of useful suggestions for making the book better. Like varying the textures, or starting chapters on the recto page, or avoiding lines that had a single word (runs). With every change I made in response to those suggestions, the website was looking




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more polished. Those two days were exhilarating.

Interest subsided after about a week. The website had a few thousand engagements on Facebook by that point, but the rate was decelerating. It was time to unleash the cavalry—\$5,000 on Google Ads. It's not a lot of money to spend on advertising, generally, but it did amount to a considerable portion of my total savings at the time. There was a large spike in visits after the first week, as you'd expect, but traffic went down when the campaign ended. The same happened in the second week. The website wasn't sticking. And a project that doesn't stick is doomed to oblivion.



Then in the third week something spectacular happened. As luck would have it, an editor at io9—the science and technology blog—wrote about the project, and that started a network effect that went on for years. Andrew Sullivan shared a blog post about the book. Fast Company wrote a piece. GeekDad wrote a piece. It was shared by Laughing Squid, American Mensa, Dangerous Minds, I Hate Pseudoscience, all of them popular websites and groups. BuzzFeed wanted an interview. Then Fast Company came back again wanting an interview. Boing Boing ran a short piece, as did Open Culture. A series of philosophy blogs and websites wrote about it. And the website was going down like gangbusters on Twitter and Facebook. It made it to Hacker News' front page at least once and to Red-





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dit's front page at least three times. I had read about the phenomenon of waking up to hundreds of emails. I was experiencing just that. Hand on heart, I was getting hundreds of them.

And as the project gained a wider audience, there was a desire on the part of a plurality of the project's fans, I began to notice, to cast me as a subject-matter expert. I was grateful to have been entrusted with such a role, but given my inescapable and perpetual fear of pretense and insincerity, I found that I wasn't able to move to that beat. A reporter once asked me, "I bet you're that person who will point out flaws in your friends' arguments?" The truth is, I wasn't. I'm not. I never, not once, posted anything that would bolster that notion of me as some sort of expert on logical fallacies. I never poked holes in any of the contentious issues that might be dominating the news or reacted to any of the many inane things public figures and politicians are prone to saying.

Still, I followed social media and engaged with anyone who mentioned the project. In some cases, I would reach out to the person and ask if it were fine to quote him or her. That's how Alice Roberts, whom I knew of from her BBC show, agreed to endorse the book. Many others were exceedingly kind in their praise and, similarly, allowed me to quote them. The act of asking is easier said than done. At first I couldn't do it, but I



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eventually overcame that fear, often by closing my eyes, furrowing my brows, and pressing *Enter*.

As the project caught the attention of more specialized readers, I started getting emails about technical errors in the book. I would fix each error, deploy the fix to the website, thank the person who reported it, and then publicly credit that person on the book's wiki, all in a matter of hours at most. My favorite was an email from a professor, an Oxford University graduate, who suggested changing my definition for deductive reasoning in the kindest, gentlest, most thoughtful way imaginable. It was as if the project had brought out the most sensitive and caring people on the planet and placed them before me.

By now, I sort of realized why Marvin perhaps hadn't replied. The book had too many errors when I shared it with him. And people have different ways of reacting to something that requires more work. Some jump in and feel compelled to make it better. Others remain silent and watch from afar. Others still distant themselves from it.

I was watching a show the other day. The very first episode was about a chef in a small European town, who for years ran a restaurant that never got much traction. But he kept at it. And then one day, there happens to be bad weather, and a food critic makes a detour and by chance stays the night in that town. He has dinner at





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the chef's restaurant, writes a glowing review the next morning, and you can imagine how the rest of the story goes. That story mirrored what my experience with *Bad Arguments* was looking like. Sticking with it was proving key to increasing its odds of doing well.

By August, the website had half a million visitors and tens of thousands of Facebook shares and likes. One day I woke up to find an email from a Fraser from London in my inbox. He ran the Foyles bookshop in London's South Bank. I loved Foyles. I remember being no older than five and running through its gigantic store. That was the best thing about being a five-year-old in England. You could do anything in public or on a bus or in a crowded restaurant and no one told you off. People just rolled their eyes, tutted, sighed, and their insides burned to a crisp. "If you ever publish this, let me know," he wrote. I thought, why not. That seems like a great idea. Plus, I now had data that suggested there was genuine interest in the project from an enthused and sizable audience.


If sticking with this silly project had brought me this far and had done wonders for my wellbeing, then maybe sticking with it a bit longer might prove equally worthwhile. Plus, I imagined it would be a lot of fun printing an actual book. Going back to the notion of a comfortable life, one of the benefits of doing your own thing, I've found, is that it allows you to break free of






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the shackles of common knowledge and wisdom and all the assumptions and biases of a collective. You're not as rigid, which is tremendously liberating. In this case, it made me think that of course I could publish a book. Why not?



I reached out to the acquisition editor for philosophy books at MIT Press. It was the first place that came to mind, as I remembered going in there often on my walks back to the dorm. The editor was kind in his reply, but he passed. I reached out to Chronicle Books, most of whose books at the time seemed to be about farts, cats, and farting cats. They never wrote back. Same with Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Same with Quirk, whose titles included the satirical *William Shakespeare's Star Wars* books. I thought they would be a perfect fit. I wanted to reach out to McSweeney's, but their submissions window was closed. No one else would accept an unsolicited manuscript, which meant that I needed to look for a literary agent. Since I didn't know any better, I looked through a website called QueryTracker and created an arbitrary list of ten or so agencies and began to approach them. About half of them got back to me.

One agent said the book wasn't long enough, and might not sell well. We talked on the phone and he suggested adding more content to it, following which we might pitch it to a publisher like Andrews McMeel. Two agencies passed. Another said the book might not



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sell well unless we took down the free version, and that wasn't something I was willing to consider. Another said some of the scenes weren't funny, and that I should look into making them as funny as the one with the cat and turtle, the one where the turtle goes, "That escalated quickly." I smile when I remember that email. I imagined the agency being run by an Otto Von Bismarck-type character. Thick mustache, big belly, Teutonic accent, cane in hand, a stochastic model of humor at the ready to judge every manuscript that came through the letterbox.

In the end, there was some interest in the book, but it wasn't overwhelming. Part of this was likely due to the fact that I hadn't been too discerning in my choice of whom to contact. I had reached out to agencies without reading too much about them, figuring that data alone would be enough to vouch for the project. I didn't realize that there is also a significant emotional element to querying. The other thing on my mind was that if I did want to publish traditionally, I would definitely miss the holiday season, which was now less than four months away. And any benefits achieved from refining the work over the coming year or so would be outweighed by the loss of sales and momentum during the end-of-year buying season. And so I decided that it made sense to print the book myself.

STUMBLING INTO THE INDUSTRY

When you don't fit in, you don't have to compete, I once heard a comedian say. An important decision I made at the outset was to recognize that while I was no Orwell, and hence unable to compete with other authors solely on the basis of my writing, I *would* be able to carve out a space for this book by focusing on the whole package—the prose, the artwork, the interior design, the cover design, the endpapers, the endband, the paper stock, and all the other elements that could make the physical book an object of desire.

I had to make the case for a reader who already had access to the digital content to want to buy the physical version of that same content. And the way to do that was to make that physical version beautiful enough that one could imagine it hanging on the wall of an art



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gallery. In fact, I find myself in that mindset once again with these pages, which is why my editing of them has me writing simultaneously in a word processor and in a desktop publisher. The way words look on a page is as valuable, I feel, as what they're saying.

I worked with an agent in Berkeley to get the book offset-printed in Asia, where the cost of printing and production per book would come to around six and a half dollars. Offset printing versus digital printing—at least the digital printing that was on offer back then—resulted in noticeably darker shadows, and so the black ink on paper felt richer and more vivid. That, coupled with a coated text stock, made the black ink art look fantastic in print. When printing at scale, offset printing is also cheaper than digital, so that was another consideration. I met with several printers in San Francisco and in Oakland who also did offset printing, but their rates were never as competitive as the international printers, even at scale. The same was true of online services like Blurb and MagCloud. Both sent me really nice books.

I laid out the book in InDesign in a few days and printed proofs using MagCloud. With a trim of eight by eight inches it was looking good. I bought an ISBN from Bowker and placed the fancy bar code on the back cover. Bowker charges \$275 for a block of ten ISBNs and \$25 for a barcode that encodes the book's ISBN





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and price. The barcode is an unnecessary cost, since you can create one using any number of free online tools that can work with the EAN-13 and EAN-5 standards. It was all looking fairly official. The cover featured an image of two animals in jackets and boots, one carrying a torch, Indiana Jonesing inside someone's head. "Inside the head. You want them inside the head?" Alejandro had asked at one point. It was hilarious.

It would take about eight weeks for the order to go through to Hong Kong and for the shipment to make it back to Oakland. It was early September, so even if things took a bit longer, I should still receive the books in time for the holidays. Fingers crossed. I had \$37,000 in my savings account. And I put all of that into printing and launching the physical book.

The mailing list I had started a month earlier had about 2,000 subscribers. Since the click-rate for my emails were consistently above 50% (a metric I was able to track through MailChimp), and considering that the call to action for joining the mailing list was, "Are you interested in a print copy of this book?" I figured it was reasonable to order 1,500 copies of the book. In the two weeks that followed, the number of subscribers went up to nearly 5,000 and was continuing to grow. I called the agent and upped the order of that first run to 4,000 copies. He asked if I was sure. I wasn't, but I said I was.

You might be wondering why I didn't just take pre-





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orders. Why carry the entirety of the risk? Why not just run a Kickstarter campaign? There were three reasons I didn't set it up as a Kickstarter campaign. One, I didn't want to disappoint people. It was my first time printing a book, and I was willing to let everything go to waste and abandon the venture if the book did not turn out right. I wanted to carry the totality of that risk, and not transfer any of it to the book's fans. Two, I wanted things to be intimate, which is why I communicated with readers through my personal mailing list. I wanted full control over the communication channel that connected me with readers. And three, I didn't want to pay Kickstarter a commission to do what I could do with a website, Stripe, and MailChimp. Having said that, I wouldn't mind one day running a Kickstarter campaign to see what that experience looks like.

For the book's cover, I went for a printed wrap, which meant that the cover art would be printed on a stock of my choice and then wrapped around a board and glued on. The book's pages, a quarter of an inch or so shorter than the cover on all sides, would then be glued to the board at the spine. For the cover stock, I chose an embossed one called Rainbow BB-171 that I'd seen used on a graphic novel a few months earlier (*Crater XV*). It looks and feels stunning. I'd go to bookstores to touch and smell covers and jackets and papers (City Lights is a shrine at which I continue to pay my respects



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many nights a week). You can see the stock in some recent titles like *The Monk of Mokha* in which it's used for the endpapers and *The Perfectionists* in which it's used for the cover. I didn't want a dust jacket. I was partial to the engineering principle of "the fewer moving parts, the better."

The book would be printed in four colors, since the page backgrounds were in color. The artwork is all done in black ink, and it's the coffee-stained texture of the background that gives the illusion that the artwork is in color. The paper stock would be 170gsm matte-coated stock, since I wanted something heavy enough to offset the fact that the book was only sixty-four pages long. I chose Open Sans for the sans-serif font and Georgia for the serif one, though if I had to do it again, I would likely go for Gill Sans and Garamond, or perhaps Baskerville. Granted, Adobe Garamond Pro, which I'm using in these pages, has a few quirks. For instance, the "XV" and the closing parentheses on the previous page overlap unless I manually increase their kern. The endbands would be medium orange, the endpapers charcoal grey. Each book would be shrink-wrapped, as I didn't know how well the cover would hold up during the four-week journey by boat. The spine would have white text on Pantone Neutral Black C, and the edges would be wavy and bleed onto the front and back covers. That way, I wouldn't have to worry about the spine looking bad if

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the printer misaligned the cover. I had seen that exact thing in a book published by one of the big houses, no less, and it's jarring.

I sent in the files. Then the waiting began. During that time, I commissioned a former BBC newsreader to voice the audio version of the book. That's right, an audio version of an illustrated book. I wrote a short script with dialogue for each of the illustrations that demonstrated the fallacy in a more conversational way. It was a lot of fun putting that together, and the voice artist's interpretation of the script worked really well. He was fantastic at accents. I had no expectation that the audiobook would ever break even. It was merely meant to help the project reach a wider audience and hopefully get those listeners interested in the book. But the audiobook did break even within two years.

Another thing I wanted to do was to get a celebrity to record something silly on audio or video and use that to promote the book. Of the people I reached out to, the agents for Frankie Boyle and Stewart Lee, two British comedians, got back to me and shared mailing addresses to send the books to. I wanted Frankie to take a photo with the book, and I wanted Stewart to place the book on his head and take a photo of it, like he had done with a stuffed toy giraffe at the end of his *41st Best Stand-Up Ever* live act in Glasgow. I never heard back from either of them. In hindsight, what a peculiar

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request that second one must have seemed. What on earth was I thinking?

I wanted to get Morgan Freeman to record something, but I thought, even if he does agree, that's going to cost me a lot, and I had all but run out of money at this point. So I commissioned a voice actor who happened to be a former radio show host to record that piece. He did an uncanny impression of Morgan Freeman. I wrote a self-deprecating script in which a celebrity is asked to endorse something that he doesn't want anything to do with, and he lets the listeners know that! The voice artist read it hilariously and even improvised parts of it. I couldn't say it was Morgan Freeman, as I wasn't sure how litigious the man might be, so the copy around it describes the clip as an endorsement by a famous celebrity.


The other thing I did during that period was all the preparatory work that would be needed, and needed fast, once the books went on sale. I set up a webpage for the project's print edition. I had to price the book at \$16.99. I didn't want to sell it at that price. It was too high. But I had no choice. Even with the benefit of printing in Asia, I had a margin of just \$1.50 per book before taxes. I created a graphic that listed all the costs involved in producing the book and included that on the website.

The website was my only point of entry for prospec-

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tive customers, so I had to make the acquisition flow as seamless as possible without hindering the user experience of readers who just wanted to read the online version. A huge pop-up when you visited the website asking you to buy the book was therefore out of the question. What I had was a blue button in the top-right corner with a call to action (“Buy the book”). That took you to a page that showed a hi-res photo of the book above the fold, and then everything else below that. I also had a tiny animation indicating how far the book was from being available in stores. For instance, when it was en route to Oakland, I had the badger from the cover on a freight ship, the HMS Bad Arguments, sailing towards California. The link to buy the book from Amazon was a referral link that I had set up through Amazon Affiliate. The annual revenue from that ended up averaging a thousand dollars.

A significant part of the project was the infrastructure and the development workflow I used to maintain it. For the former, I used a hosting provider with a track record of reliable service. They offered machines that were capable of withstanding a sudden demand for bandwidth without buckling. They weren’t cheap, but reliability was going to be essential for this project. For development, I maintained my code in a public repository on GitHub—a website that’s primarily used by programmers to collaborate on projects in a decentral-




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ized way. It also serves as an effective way of versioning and backing up content, and offers project management features that allow users to report issues and the owner to track progress.



I asked readers to submit comments or suggest fixes using the platform, or if they liked, to build derivative works on top of the project. I had released the project under a Creative Commons BY-NC license, which meant that anyone could use the content or assets for any non-commercial purpose so long as the original work was attributed. Many did just that. My favorite one was a version of the book aimed at children that replaced the exposition with rhyming verse. That one's still a work in progress. Another thing I did was go onto Amazon to fill out the placeholder page I had setup for the book. To my surprise, there were two five-star reviews there. One had fourteen recommendations by other customers, and the other had ten.



I emailed the mailing list with an update and went through an anxious stretch. And with good reason. Eight weeks had passed and there was still no word about when the books would arrive. In fact, they hadn't shipped yet. I got on my bike, hopped on the train to Berkeley, and tried to see what was going on. I realize now that the agent was doing the best he could to get the printer in Hong Kong to stick to the schedule. At the time, given the gravity of the situation, I was only




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able to see the immediate and catastrophic effect of the delay—breaking my promise to readers that they would be able to buy the book in time for Christmas.


The eight-week schedule was no longer realistic. I paid \$600 to have eight boxes of books—240 books in total—sent by courier. That way I could take promotional photos of the book and possibly even send a few copies to London and Australia. And that’s exactly what happened. Foyles ordered eight copies, and the book made its debut at their store in the South Bank! Crow Books in Perth, Australia got a shipment next. I asked Foyles for a photo of the books. It all still seemed unreal. They sent me a shot of the books on their *Foyles’ Choice* shelf. The subject line read “Full disclosure: Not a photographer!” It didn’t matter. That picture made it all worth it.

As November approached, I began to feel agitated. Not following through on my promise to readers was not an option. Then one morning as I was checking Google to see who else might have mentioned the book, I came across a one-star review on a website called Goodreads, which until that point I had never heard of. I clicked on the link and read the review. It was by a college student majoring in philosophy (the scariest kind of college student). So revolted was the author of that review by the book’s concept that his entire exposition consisted of a




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teardown of each of the book's pages, and ended with an apology that his lack of willpower prevented him from going into further detail about why the project was terrible. What a punch in the gut that was—a dagger right into my abdomen. The review broke what I imagined were the fundamental rules of constructive criticism, as it did nothing to compel me to fix things. It only made me defensive. You want to reach out and say, "Hey, I'm not a commodity," but you don't, obviously, because of the unwritten rule that author and reviewer should generally not come into contact with each other.



I came across a piece in *The Guardian* once. It opened with a quote by Isaac Asimov that really stuck with me. It said that writers either bleed "copiously and visibly" in response to a bad review or "copiously and secretly." If we all bleed, then I supposed it would be best for everyone involved if the bleeding were done in secret. Alas, I now had three problems. One, no money in the bank. Two, a book that was somewhere on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. And three, a furious reader to whom my silly website had proven a terrible affront, and whose one-star review was now on the first page of Google's search results.




That experience reminded me of the aphorism that says you can please some of the people some of the time. Pleasing everyone is never a realistic option. What you hope for is that a sizable plurality of people like




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what you do enough to allow the work to endure by remaining financially sustainable—a viable minimum rather than a potential maximum. One aspires towards the potential maximum, but doesn't expect it. The other lesson is that criticism is an effective tool for affecting change, as long as it's constructive. Anatol Rapoport has excellent advice about how to criticize. A critic, he says, ought to begin by stating the other side's position in a fair and objective way, then mentioning the areas of agreement, and only then mentioning the areas of disagreement. The approach does wonders when the goal is to turn something into a better version of itself rather than to posture.



It was near the end of November when my phone buzzed, and an email popped up from the agent saying that the books were in a container a day away from the Port of Oakland. Three pallets, boxed up and stamped and ready to go. Each pallet had approximately forty-four boxes on it, with each box holding thirty books and weighing twenty-nine pounds, for a total weight of 3,800lbs. I had never seen so many of something before. The agent was kind enough to shrink wrap each pallet and prepare them all for pickup. I was ecstatic. I went onto the Amazon seller dashboard and initiated the inbound fulfillment process, which gives you a pickup date and a bill of lading for up to three destinations. Amazon decides which storage facilities your






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books go to. They had one pallet heading to Phoenix, Arizona, one to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and one to Chester, Virginia.

For the next two weeks, I was glued to my phone, constantly updating my dashboard to see where the trucks were. Even on Monday nights, when I played soccer with friends near Cathedral Hill, I would occasionally head to the sidelines and check my phone for updates. The Thanksgiving holiday slowed things down considerably. I loathed the turkey during those few days. Then December came around. December 1, 2, 3, 4. My birthday was somewhere in there or thereabouts, but I was too preoccupied to really care. And then on December 5 at 2:57 p.m., the inbound shipment order to Phoenix changed status to “Receiving,” which meant that Amazon had started processing the books into the fulfillment center. Within the hour, a dozen or so orders came through. Amazon wouldn’t let me take preorders because I was selling through their marketplace, so I’m still not certain how those orders got placed so quickly. I could have mitigated that issue by signing up for an Amazon Advantage account, which allows for preorders, but the financial tradeoff of a 55% discount on all orders would have been crippling. Plus, I didn’t like the piecemeal way one was forced to fulfill purchase orders versus being able to ship a pallet to their warehouse.

By December 6 at 5:21 a.m., the delivery to Phoenix





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had been received in full. The timing worked great as I was planning to go on a trip with family a few days later. I was relieved that readers would be able to order the book in time for the holidays. I sent out an email to the project's subscribers informing them that the book could now be ordered. Hundreds of them had ordered it by that evening, and it so happened that because that initial group of orders came from such a focused group of readers who all knew exactly what the book was about, it wasn't long before Amazon began recommending the book to buyers of popular titles like *What If?* in their *People who bought this, also bought this* section. And that did wonders for momentum in the weeks that followed.

I brought four boxes of thirty books each with me on my trip, in case I needed to fulfill orders while away. There were twenty-four books per box. Of the 4,000 books I'd had printed, I ended up recycling around 300 due to defects. I gave most of them to Readers Bookstore at Fort Mason. Some of the defects were minor, like a tear in the shrink wrap or a bump in the spine. Others were more noticeable. The yield rate was disappointing. At that rate, I wondered if the price difference versus domestic offset printing was even worth it, considering the lead time of four weeks for freight shipping. Foyles, who had originally ordered eight books and then twenty, now asked for sixty books. I mailed them the books




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by courier and absorbed the cost of shipping. I didn't care that I was losing money on those orders. I was focused on maintaining the perception that the book was legitimate. And a legitimate book has a reliable supplier that can restock on demand. It didn't matter that in reality, I was in shorts, a straw hat, and sunglasses, hauling books in my daughter's stroller to the nearest post office.



About a week into my trip, I received an email from an independent publisher in New York that I had never heard of. They were a startup working out of a small office on East 23rd Street and 3rd Avenue. The editor was exceedingly kind in her praise and told me that she had seen the book selling well and was interested in acquiring it. This was less than three weeks after the book had gone on sale on Amazon. I thought about the offer. On one hand, distributing through Amazon meant that I kept 68% of the revenue—before cost of goods and expenses—whereas the independent publisher was offering a 7% royalty, which would go up to 8.5% in a pay period (six months) depending on sales. And so, the terms were 7.5% for sales over 50,000 in a pay period, 8% for sales over 100,000, and 8.5% for sales over 100,000. I would retain the rights to the audiobook and they would offer me a 25% cut of revenue from electronic book sales.



All in all, distribution through Amazon was cost-

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ing me around six dollars. That included Amazon's commission, its labeling fee, storage fee, subscription fee, referral fee, closing fee, and the cost of inbound shipping. Commissions (artwork and audiobook talent), web hosting, and advertising cost around three dollars per book. And production cost around six and a half dollars per book. That included printing, binding, shrink-wrapping, customs, and freight. Given the book's list price of \$16.99, which a seller can enforce in Amazon's marketplace, all of that left me with a profit of around a dollar and a half per book before tax. The margin was insanely tight, but I was betting on sustaining the project longterm through a combination of donations and, hopefully, larger print runs in the future. With offset printing, the cost of producing a book drops quite a bit as quantity goes up. And also, I was in control of the cost of distribution. If selling through Amazon became financially untenable, that was something I could mitigate.

On the other hand, the publisher would immediately solve the problem I was currently having of distribution in brick-and-mortar stores and in stores outside the United States. Even within the United States, I had no plans for how I would go about doing a second printing. I could, I suppose, go down the original route of ordering from overseas, but that required a lot of oversight and involvement, and with a full-time job



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and increasing family obligations, I couldn't see it being a feasible long-term strategy. Was the time saved worth the share of revenue I was trading it for? I didn't have a good answer, and I still don't. There are so many moving pieces in publishing that it's really hard to know what might or might not happen with a switch like this.

The other thing the publisher could do is dramatically reduce the book's retail price, due to economies of scale and their leverage in the industry. They were in a much better position to negotiate more favorable terms with printers than I was. They were deeply rooted in the industry and knew it well. I was a thirty-year-old man with irritable bowel syndrome. This would be a big win for readers. They would be able to buy the book not for \$16.99, but for \$14.99, or most likely, much lower than that online.

Eventually, I said OK. I should have negotiated for better terms, but I didn't. Royalties for the electronic book in particular would have been an easy one to push for. The publisher gave me until May 2014 to keep the self-published edition in the market then agreed to extend it to July 2014. After that date, they would take over the book's Amazon page, pause sales, then resume them in November with an updated edition that would have a slightly different trim and a few tweaks and updates, all of which were brilliant ideas.

Again, distribution is one of the reasons to go with




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a publisher over self-publishing, though for print-on-demand, that is now a solved problem considering the advent of services like IngramSpark. The other reason is having your book in the Library of Congress, I suppose. Ignoring Amazon for a moment, distributing to brick-and-mortar stores means going from one store to another, which is what I had done, and convincing them to stock the book. I managed to convince Book Passage in San Francisco's Ferry Building, which gets a significant amount of foot traffic, to stock the book on consignment even though the associate there was initially hesitant. She must have felt sorry for me as I was preparing to head out, head hanging low, feet dragging, eyes looking up at passersby and then down again. Like a scene out of *The Elephant Man*—"I am a human being!" She not only took a few copies, but she surprised me a short while later by marking the book a Staff Pick. Every time I have gone into Book Passage over the past four years, there has always been a stack of ten or so copies of the book right in front of the cash register.


I did the same with the bookstores in the Mission District. I went there with a backpack full of books and had successes at Dog-Eared Books on Valencia Street, Alley Cat Books on 24th Street, and Adobe Books further down on 24th Street. The University of California, Berkeley bookstore took one copy too. Most of those places ended up placing reorders. I walked into an anti-



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quarian bookshop in Nob Hill one time, which I later learned is a venerable institute in the city and beyond, and asked the owner if he might be interested in stocking the book. My audacity must have shocked the owner into silence as I have no recollection of what exactly he said in response. In total, local bookshops in the Bay Area ordered 155 copies within the span of three months. Foyles ordered ninety-five copies. Amazon wouldn't allow me to ship to Canada, due to a restriction on book exports that I never quite understood, so I subsidized the cost of shipping and mailed ninety-one books to Canada. Total sales in print through all channels came to around 3,500 copies before the agreed-upon cutoff date of July 1, 2014. After all that hard work in laying the groundwork for those relationships, it was tough for me to have to tell everyone that I could no longer supply them books and that they ought to wait until November for the second edition. But of course, I did. By now, the online edition had seen nearly two million visitors, and the print edition was showing every sign that it was about to take off.



I liked working with the editor. She was genuine, thoughtful, and her instincts were second to none. She had agreed to my one term of keeping the online version of the book, and so the path forward was new territory for both of us. Readers had already started asking

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if they could contribute to the project by translating the website. The answer, of course, was yes. That had been a large part of the motivation for sharing the work under a Creative Commons license. The first to be published was the Spanish translation by María Corchero. It came out on March 10, 2014, and remains the most popular derivative of the work. Last I checked, it had been read by 161,000 visitors. The Brazilian Portuguese translation by Diogo Lindner came out eight months later, on November 9, 2014, and is to date the second-most popular translation.

Other volunteers have translated the book into Arabic, Portuguese, Simplified Chinese, Slovak, Finnish, Hebrew, Czech, Bulgarian, French, and Dutch. And translators are currently working on other languages, including Esperanto and Greek. With each new language, the project found a new audience. The Finnish translation by Mikko Muilu and his colleagues made it into *Aamulehti*, a Finnish daily newspaper with the second largest circulation. It was beautiful to see that organic growth up close and in real time. I continue to be in touch with many of the project's contributors, and have developed friendships with several of them. I'm indebted to them all.

The agreement between the editor and me also allowed me to maintain my relationships with three publishers with whom I had signed agreements for foreign



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rights. The first was a Russian publishing house based in Moscow that had crowdsourced the funds to print the book. The second one was an Italian non-profit. The third was a South Korean publisher. I have seldom seen a publishing house produce books as stunningly as the Korean presses. They are artists at work. I can't see how anyone who picks up a Korean book wouldn't want to abandon everything and immediately get into publishing. Of the American publishers, Knopf and McSweeney's are probably my favorites in terms of design. I love their attention to detail.

The book's second edition came out in November, as planned. It had a slightly different trim, which I preferred to the original square one. It made it onto two regional bestseller lists. The cover had a catchy tagline—*Learn the lost art of making sense*—that I also liked. The refreshed back cover and the small tweaks here and there made the book appear more polished. We eventually sold foreign rights to Larousse for the French edition, to Sextante for the Brazilian Portuguese edition, to Citadella for the Slovak edition, to Thinkingdom Media for the Simplified Chinese edition, and to Wu-Nan Books for the Complex Chinese edition. Farsi, Slovak, and Vietnamese editions are forthcoming.


As the book gained a wider distribution, readers started sending me photos of the book in various cities—The MIT Store in Cambridge, Books Inc. in



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Berkeley, Strand Bookstore in New York City, The Tate Modern in London, Powell's in Portland, Ben McNally Books in Toronto, Poet Books in Tasmania, and most recently, Amazon's brick-and-mortar store at Santana Row in San Jose. They also shared photos of themselves with the book. My favorite one was Orange Chair Guy who shared photos of the book on, well, an orange armchair, while striking various contemplative poses. A short while later, a community college ordered 1,000 copies of the book—one for each of their first-year students—and were gracious enough to invite me to visit.

At the time of writing, the book's online edition has had 2.6 million visitors (3.2 million views), it has been liked or shared 155,350 times on Facebook, and the book has been translated into twelve languages by volunteers. Thirty-three people have contributed edits, corrections, or content to it. As of the end of 2017, the print edition has sold 137,000 copies in the United States, 10,500 copies in the United Kingdom and Australia, and over 128,500 copies in the rest of the world, for a total of 276,000 copies sold. It has been translated into six languages by international presses. The audiobook has been purchased 1,350 times. The mailing list, which I email twice a year, has 6,500 subscribers. And over 1,400 people have donated to the project, with most donating more than the suggested amount of two dollars. Going by the royalty checks I receive twice a



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year, the English edition's gross revenue has likely been upward of two million dollars.

In retrospect, was trading 68% of revenue for 7%–8.5% worth it? It's difficult to know with certainty if the book would have achieved the same level of sales had it remained self-published. I don't believe it would have. I credit that brilliant editor in New York and that distributor with contributing to the book's success. Even so, when you compare that trade with similar ones in other industries, it does seem somewhat extreme. For instance, if you're offering to give away a portion of your company to an investor in exchange for cash and expertise, you wouldn't dream of giving away nearly as much.


There is something undeniably appealing about being published by a publishing house. In addition to the actual service being rendered, there's a romantic, nostalgic aspect to it. I absolutely love it. But one aspect of it strikes me as a bit odd, and that's the prevalent view of the average author as a mere content provider. I don't know if that model is for everyone. I'd be partial to a model that establishes better parity between everyone involved in the making of a book, much like there is parity between everyone involved in the founding of a business. That parity would likely be achieved to a great extent once an author has leverage through brand equity (that is, once an author has an established name




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and fanbase), or by working with a literary agent.

Making and managing a book, one could argue, isn't that different from founding and managing a business insofar as they are both complex systems that aim to maximize some desired outcome. I mention this in reflection, not as dogma. I don't think one way of publishing is categorically better than the other. Just that there are different means of reaching the same end, and for some authors and for some projects, one way will be more fulfilling.



Having said that, removing myself from the book's sales and distribution processes back then freed me up to think about other things. In strictly creative terms, seeing an idea to maturity and then handing it off does seem like a more efficient use of creative energy than sticking around forever and pointing to the past.



SELLING A BOOK AT AUCTION

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings,
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss...
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it...
—Rudyard Kipling, “If”—*

While maintaining the *Bad Arguments* website, managing translations and publishing them on the website, handling foreign rights, fulfilling orders from readers and bookstores outside the United States, and taking care of all the moving parts involved in the eventual handover to the publisher, I began thinking of a follow-on project. This was in January 2014, less than three weeks after the book was first released. My desire to keep moving stemmed, again, from the terrible fear



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of falling into comfort and, worse, back into that debilitating state that had held my faculties captive for the longest time. I would use about 70% of the revenue from *Bad Arguments* to fund this new project and cover the cost of commissions, infrastructure, and advertising.


The project would be an illustrated novella about a clumsy tailor called Hans who goes into a hotel and then, through a set of strange circumstances, finds himself in another world, perched on top of a gigantic pitcher plant. Things aren't what they seem in this world. There he befriends a woman named Joanne, and together they attempt to make sense of their new surroundings. To escape dangerous predators and navigate tortuous paths in thick forests, he has to exercise his faculties like never before. Hans eventually realizes that the world he is in sits in another world, which in turn sits in another one. And the whole thing is run by a former computer scientist who may or may not still be alive and in control of it all.

The artwork would borrow many cues from Wes Anderson's style—rich colors, intricate details, symmetry, characters looking straight at the camera, and so on. I had recently seen *The Grand Budapest Hotel* three times within the span of a week, and so his style was very much on my mind. I planned for ten pieces plus a cover. I would release the novella in three parts, each




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a year apart. A staggered release would allow me to test the audience's appetite for the format before dedicating more time and resources to the project. It would serve as a sort of pilot.



The project's primary goal was to infuse fundamental concepts from computer science into a narrative and not point those lessons out to readers, the idea being that they would absorb them and then perhaps recall them later in life. It took eleven months to put that first part together. I wrote most of it from a cafe run by two sisters on Folsom Street. The end result looked fantastic. The website was minimalistic, with black text on a white background, and the artwork was linked in the margins. I had a wonderful quote from the executive director of the Mozilla Foundation—Mozilla's education, teaching, and advocacy arm—that I added to the top of the website. Unlike *Bad Arguments*' format, this one worked much better on mobile. I pitched the project to the publisher that had acquired *Bad Arguments* and they got back to me with an offer, which I said I would think about. Everything was looking great. The project would follow the same model as before, with a free version available to readers online and a print edition available for purchase. By now, it was December 2014.



Then I lost confidence in the project. A feeling washed over me that suggested that the format might not work as well as I had hoped. I was asking too much

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of readers. Subtext works great in fiction, but it's not particularly useful for teaching. During that period I realized I had once felt that same disconnect—that same lack of tessellation, you might say—in a completely different field. I did freelance photojournalism for a while, and quickly learned that perhaps nine tenths of the success of a shot is due to the rapport that a photographer builds with a subject in the few seconds needed to take a photo. The transparency, the eye contact, the slight nod of the head on the photographer's part, the smile, the shot, showing complete and utter respect for the subject's world that I was encroaching on. Sticking a camera in someone's face or trying to be overly discreet are bad moves. If I sense any breach in that seconds-long path towards a rapport, I back away. And that's what I was feeling with *Hans*.

I released the website anyway, since I had spent about \$15,000 on the project. It came out on March 15, 2015. On that day, I also revealed the names of the two forthcoming installments—*Part II: Hans in the Belly of the Nihilistic Tuna Fish*, and *Part III: Hans in the Mantle of the Socially Awkward Deep Sea Octopus*. Those with young children will recognize the song I borrowed those names from. That first installment ended up getting around 25,000 visitors over its useful lifetime, which confirmed my suspicions that it wasn't something that would likely stick. But the project, despite




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having been cut short, paved the way for another idea not too long afterwards. What if I formalized a story space, I thought, and broke it up into scenes, analogies, artwork, and prose, then allowed readers to submit one or more of those elements and weave together their own stories? They might end up with a story that begins like Coates and ends like P. G. Wodehouse. How great would that be? I had read about a startup during that time that had just raised nine million dollars from Google Ventures. They sold personalized picture books, and they were having a lot of success. It seemed like a great way to make the format engaging. Three years later, I came across another startup at the Bay Area Book Festival, which was doing something similar.



The project would be grounded in three pedagogical tenets: one, analogies are a good way to learn new concepts; two, learning something using a variety of methods can help one better understand that thing; and three, stories are the oldest form of learning. A story would be an ordered set of scenes that defines an arc. A scene would be a set of three elements, each of which engages the reader's attention in a different way. Given a story made up of three scenes, if readers contributed just six additional scenes to the story space, one could in principle create twenty-seven unique stories.

During that time, I met up with a friend who was in town for a few days, and she mentioned in passing





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that she knew the director of research at Google. Let's call him Sam. Naturally, I sent him an email the next day. Sam wrote back a few hours later and suggested a lunch meeting the day after. I've found that a good rule of thumb is that people who plan to reply to you will likely reply within two days. We met over lunch that Wednesday. I was so nervous on the train ride to Mountain View that I experienced what I later learned was vertigo, where you feel like everything around you is spinning. That sensation eventually gives way to nausea. Right after I got off the train, I spent twenty minutes sitting on the chairs outside the Greek bakery on Castro Street. I was still feeling lightheaded by the end of it, but I couldn't afford to sit there for much longer, so on that warm summer morning, I walked for forty-eight minutes from the Mountain View train station to Google's campus.

Sam was gracious. He showed up in one of his iconic Hawaiian shirts and took me to lunch. The main take-away for me from that meeting was Sam's reaction to my explanation of how *Hans* was like *Sophie's World* and *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *Alice*—Sure, those were all successful, he said, but how many just like them weren't? Put differently, they were successful despite their educational elements. That short meeting with Sam would start a series of thoughts that accelerated a few months later during my—by now annual—solo drive across the



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country. It culminated with an idea that would combine the narrative aspect of *Hans* with the interactive aspect of the formalized story space concept and the exposition style of *Bad Arguments*.

I worked on that idea during each of the five nights I spent in hotels on my drive back from Florida to California, and by the time I got home, I had something that felt compelling. It was a set of fifteen scenes, sprinkled with malaprops. In each one, a character attempted to solve a problem in one of several ways. The reader would therefore see how various ways of solving the same problem fared relative to each other, and in doing so, learn not only about concrete fundamental algorithms and data structures, but also a general way of thinking about problems. During the meeting with Sam, the term algorithmic thinking had come up, which had reminded me of the person who likely coined it back in 2005 or thereabouts—a professor whose class I had once taken on formal methods. And so I christened the project *Comparisons: Algorithmic Thinking in Everyday Life*.

I wanted to try my hand at submitting to the big publishers and seeing what that experience would be like. I went to Alexander Book Company on Second Street and started looking through books that I figured had a similar audience to mine. I checked to see who the

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agents were for those books, since authors typically thank their agents in the acknowledgements. The first book that came to mind was *What If?* by Randall Munroe. I created a list of agents and headed home.

I spent a further two weeks finishing up a proposal for the idea that had come together on the road. I sent a query to the first person on my list. He was a literary agent born in Texas, now based in New York, and as luck would have it, he had gone to the same university as me, albeit to its school of literature. I made sure to mention that in my query. Given that it was a week before Christmas, I expected to have a few more weeks to go over the proposal—to flesh it out and clean it up. An auto-reply came back saying the agency was closed for the holidays and that I should hear back in around six weeks. Perfect.


The next day I got another email, this time from an associate saying that the agent I had contacted was interested. That was followed up by an email from the agent. “Can we talk on the phone?” I took the call and the agent mentioned that he had really liked the idea for the book. He went over what a literary agent’s role is—to have the author’s back during every stage of the publishing process. It would begin with spending time on the proposal to ensure it was as strong as it could be. Then deciding when to send it out, as there are book fairs all throughout the year, and it sometimes makes



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sense to tap the market during a particular season. Then managing the sale to a publisher. Then managing the agreement with that publisher. Boilerplate agreements are typically most favorable to a publisher, and an agent can work with the publisher to make sure it's equally favorable to an author. The agent is then available throughout the year or so it may take to go from the manuscript to the finished book. If the publisher does something that's not reasonable, the agent is there to sort it out. He or she may also help get endorsements, suggest shows the author can go on, make introductions, and so on. In return, the author gives up 15% of all royalties associated with the project. For the value a good agent is able to bring to a project, that 15% is well worth it.

He asked if I needed time to think things over, or to look at other agents. I said no. And so our relationship began. I signed a representation agreement, and we then moved onto polishing the proposal. It was early January 2016, and the plan was to finish the proposal before the London Book Fair in mid-March. The proposal would have a chapter breakdown, a section on why the book ought to do well, which would share various data points from *Bad Arguments*—visitors, sales in print, foreign rights, mailing list size, endorsements, and so on. It also had the first five chapters of the proposed project in full—prose and artwork.




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It was going to be tough finishing five chapters in six weeks, but it was doable. Alejandro was on board with the tighter schedule too. I took two weeks off from work, which was nearly all the vacation time I had left, and within five weeks, the proposal was ready. I sent it to the agency. They made it better. The agent shared a list of a dozen imprints he thought would be a good fit for the project. He sent emails to all of them. The book was now out in the world. Seven imprints replied. We picked a day and the plan was for me to do back-to-back phone calls with all of them. I took that day off from work, and now had negative vacation days left.



The first call was at 8 a.m. Pacific Time with an imprint of Penguin Random House. We talked about algorithmic thinking as a transferable, timeless approach to teaching computer science. I mentioned that when people talk about coding, what they really mean is three things: programming languages, data structures, and algorithms. This book would focus on the latter two. They were interested in a life-hack approach to computing and wanted to frame the book that way. They liked that the book didn't pander to readers. The imprint had a large variety of titles, everything from literary fiction to non-fiction to popular science to illustrated books.



The next call was with the trade division of a publisher based in Boston. They aren't one of the Big Five, but are well-known for their educational books and text-



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books. They published *What If?* and *Thing Explainer*, by the same author, as well as Umberto Eco, whom I'd heard of, but never read. I talked about the book's value proposition of teaching computer science, but framing that teaching as a general-purpose thinking tool, a term I had borrowed from Daniel Dennett. They wanted to reframe the project by focusing more on computing and less on algorithms, which would have required a good amount of effort, and I was already out of vacation days. So that was a problem. I liked that they published only a few titles every year, and didn't focus solely on bestsellers. They tried hard to make every book work.

The next call was with another imprint of Penguin Random House. I made the case for algorithms being like math in that they are both ubiquitous and hence worthy of attention. The ideal reader for the book I was proposing would be a non-specialist interested in computer science, or perhaps a parent. We talked about shortest path algorithms in global positioning satellite systems, recommendation engines on websites like Amazon and Netflix, and file compression algorithms. We also talked about the tradeoffs of explaining algorithms by analogy.

I chatted with an imprint of Hachette next. The highlight of that call was our conversation about *Bad Arguments* and how the community aspect of that project had evolved. My answer that much of it was due to



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sheer luck seemed to underwhelm the editor. I learned that the imprint has the highest number of bestsellers to published books. I had mentioned in the proposal that one of my aspirations was strong editorial direction, and that, along with strong marketing were two things they prided themselves on. They also mentioned that there were lots of things they felt they could do with the book online, which was wonderful, since that was my general thought for marketing the book.

Next was yet another imprint of Penguin Random House. I went into the call slightly partial towards them since they publish my favorite author, by far—J. M. Coetzee. They also happened to have published Stanislas Dehaene's book *Number Sense*, which was one of the inspirations for *Comparisons*. I learned that they have a strong frontlist of non-fiction books and an equally strong backlist.

Next was an imprint of HarperCollins. They were passionate about narrative science, humor, and “big idea” projects. They had a relatively small list of books, which allowed them to give a lot of attention to each book. No book would get lost in the shuffle. The final call was with yet another imprint of Hachette whose list of books includes Malcolm Gladwell's. This was a fantastic call. The editor was technical, and he and I shared an alma mater. He liked the book's emphasis on there being more than one way to do something and its pri-



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mary focus on efficiency. He mentioned that publishers are really good at presenting work to a general audience, rather than a niche one, which in non-fiction would mean taking an idea and showing how it is broadly applicable. Much like me, the editor had begun his career writing software and eventually came to publishing because he was fascinated by how transformative books could be, and he wanted to be a part of that.

All in all, calls like these are an excellent way for an author to get to know a publisher. Some agents like to be on these calls, but my agent preferred not to. And I have to say, in hindsight, it was the right decision. The conversations were much more intimate and less formal that way. One interesting thing to come out of this experience was my realization that there were too many imprints out there to keep track of, and that it wasn't always easy to figure out which imprint belonged to which publisher. So I spent a few days putting together a visualization of the so-called Big Five trade book publishers in the United States and their imprints. It was for my own benefit, primarily, but it proved popular with a lot of people in the industry. Last I checked, the piece had been liked or shared 5,400 times on Facebook and visited by 52,000 visitors. Nine executive editors, editors, and readers have since contributed to it.

When more than one publisher is interested in a proposal, the book goes to auction, and the publishers



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have the opportunity to bid on it. If there's more than one bid in the first round, the agent arranges a second round. Four publishers entered bids in our first round. Of those, one had a hard limit and wasn't able to go any higher, so three publishers went into the second round. The bids were all competitive. I was walking by the San Francisco Public Library on Market Street, heading to Van Ness Avenue to get lunch when I got the call. Two of the publishers had nearly doubled their original bids.


My agent walked me through the three offers and reminded me of the publishing houses and the acquisition editors and what each of them would be able to bring to the project. We chose one. He said that particular publisher had asked for world rights, but he only wanted to sell them North American rights. He didn't expect it to be a problem, but he would have to get on the phone and work it out with them. The audacity of the man. I wished I were a literary agent at that point. What an amazing gig it must be, to be in the business of making people happy. I skipped lunch that day.

The next morning, as I was pushing my daughter's stroller to school, I got a one-line email that read "CALL ME." I assumed the worst. The deal was off. They must have insisted on world rights. What a shame. I dropped my daughter off, stepped out into the courtyard in front of the school, and made the call. He told me the good news. The publisher had accepted our terms. The




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project was now unofficially signed by a major publisher. “Don’t go out buying a yacht just yet.” He explained that payments happen in installments. An author gets, say, a fourth on signing, a fourth after the manuscript is handed in, a fourth after the book is published, and a fourth a year after that.



I was indebted to my agent, and I still am. He had brought two years of experimentation to a beautiful place in a matter of months. There’s a daily newsletter called Publishers Lunch that I’m subscribed to. They share daily acquisition updates and have a scale of euphemistic categories indicating how lucrative a deal is. According to them, a nice deal is a book sold for between \$1 and \$49,000, a very nice deal is \$50,000 to \$99,000, a good deal is \$100,000 to \$250,000 and a significant deal is anything more than that. We sold the North American rights to one of the Big Five publishers. It was a great deal. Though we hadn’t gone with one of the imprints whose editor had made a strong and personal appeal for the project, I emailed that editor. I was grateful for his time and looked forward to our paths crossing again. I needed him to know that.




The first thing the publisher requested was to change the book’s title from *Comparisons* to *Bad Choices*. I had chosen the original title because it didn’t overpromise anything nor attempt to suggest any causal links. It was a boring, matter-of-fact title that described the




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book's approach in a word. I'm partial to titles like that, generally. *Bad Choices* wasn't too bad, I supposed, as it did remind me of Donald Knuth's descriptors for algorithms—good and bad to denote efficient and inefficient ones. It was somewhat ironic that I had spent two years on this project in order to escape the clasp of the previous project, and now the two were prominently joined at the hip. After a week or so, I received four books in the mail from my editor. They were titles she felt I might enjoy reading, by an author whom I'd mentioned in our first call. She included a card on which she'd written a note. I'm notoriously unsentimental, but I framed that card.



Next, my agent recommended meeting with the publisher in person. I agreed, but there was just one problem. I don't like flying. I hadn't boarded a plane in years, with one exception, and I was medicated during that flight. But I didn't tell him that. We agreed on a week in December, which coincided with Comic-Con, and I drove for six days from California to New York. I loved every minute of that drive. There's something about driving solo, about being slowly consumed by the open road that is infinitely calming. It reminded me, for some reason, of that contraption from Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," with its heavy gears turning and clicking and banging over the course of many hours so that the person strapped to it may experience a spiritual





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awakening unlike any other. Only to then die. Not the best analogy, I suppose. I drove along one stretch in Nevada in pitch darkness to the soothing sounds of one of Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History* podcasts. The trance was only broken by the neon sign of a Burger King where I stopped for a much-needed bite. The drive through Wyoming and Nebraska was absolutely breathtaking.

I walked into the publisher's building at 375 Hudson Street on the day of the meeting, and I suppose irrespective of who you are or how far you've come in life, that kind of an experience is thrilling. Reading about an institution your whole life, seeing their logo on a good number of books on your shelf, and then finally walking through its doors. It was magical. I was grateful to have landed such an opportunity. At moments like that, you feel all your very best work is still ahead of you. We had lunch at a nice restaurant, then I sat down with the team—marketing, publicity, editor, executive editor, agent, and me—and talked about the project. To clarify two terms that might occasionally get confused, marketing focuses on promoting the book through channels like ads or reviews, whereas publicity ensures the book's readers have an opportunity to hear from the author by means of interviews, radio shows, tours and so on. We brainstormed ideas for promoting the book, and fleshed out two concepts.

The first idea was a story about friendship, good in-





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tentions, and clumsiness. I had taken a printout of one of the characters in the book with me on the drive—Feynman, with a plate on his head; Plate Guy for short—and had taken photos of him at various stops: a field in Fernley, Nevada, a bookstore in Fort Wayne, Indiana, another bookstore in Salt Lake City called The King’s English that I really liked, a mom-and-pop cafe and diner in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and dozens of other locations. I had mocked up a storyboard, and it struck me as a fun little picture essay that readers might enjoy.

You pass through a lot of small towns on a cross-country drive, and I remember this one little town where I’d spotted a Dairy Queen that looked to be right out of the 1960s. I parked the car and was about to get out to take a picture of Plate Guy inside, doing something silly like ordering a burger or eating an Oreo Blizzard, when I noticed that everyone inside was staring at me through the pane. A middle-aged man was holding a burger with both hands, elbows on the table, a gaping mouth ready to receive the burger, and yet he was frozen in place, transfixed. It was like a scene out of a Stephen King novel. I got back in the car and sped off.

The second idea was a ninety-second clip inspired by the Minotaur passage in the book’s chapter on mazes. Three beavers have to escape a maze and avoid meeting an untimely demise. I created a clip with a proposed storyboard and set it to the song “Run Boy Run” by





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Woodkid. I reached out to a studio in Barcelona whose work I'd come across online. Their style seemed perfect—quirky and detail-oriented. They were fans of *Bad Arguments* and gave me a quote, which, sadly, was an order of magnitude higher than what I had budgeted. So that idea never materialized. I'm sure readers would have loved it.

We ended up releasing a series of weekly 600-word pieces in the five weeks leading up to publication day, and associating each piece with an animated version of a character from the book. That way, we could share them on platforms like Instagram and hopefully get some momentum going in anticipation of the book coming out.

The animations were subtle: eyes opening and closing, or looking from side to side. Photoshop actually has a Timeline window that allows you to create simple frame-based animations, and that's what I used. Each piece would take a concept from the book and talk about it using topical examples. My favorite was the one on curation and bias. It reacted to several news stories at the time about how terrible algorithms are because they cloud our judgment and force us into filter bubbles. In isolation, this can be a valid point, I suppose. But when contrasted with, say, newspapers, which were being held up as a platform that was somehow less immune to such bias, it was a preposterous proposition.




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By June 2016, the manuscript was ready. I sent it in. The book had been scheduled for an April 2017 release, so we had plenty of time. After about a month, my editor mailed me a marked-up copy of the manuscript with notes written all throughout the margins. It's a fun experience, when you think you have something that's hopefully compelling and here is this other person whose sole responsibility is to make it better. By August, the manuscript was ready. I shared the manuscript and illustrations with three of my coworkers—all software engineers or computer scientists—who had offered to go through it and provide feedback. This was something I hadn't done with *Bad Arguments*. Within two weeks, I had heard back from all three. Their suggestions were fantastic, and I incorporated all of them into the manuscript. Once the manuscript was frozen, so to speak, it was handed off to a copyeditor. I was surprised to find that the copyeditors were all freelancers. I had always imagined the big houses having dedicated copyeditors who all wore thick glasses and sat in lavish offices full of sharpened pencils. I asked Benjamin Dreyer, Random House's copy chief, about this once and he replied that when he'd joined back in the nineties, there were indeed three in-house copyeditors. When they retired, the publisher determined that it made economic and organizational sense to outsource that responsibility to freelancers.



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Once the manuscript had been copyedited, things went quiet for a long time. That's how traditional publishing works, it seems. Action comes in bursts. This period was difficult to bear because I had no control over the process and I had limited insight into how things were progressing. Had we fixed those last typos for sure before sending out the review copies? Were reviewers getting back to our requests for blurbs, and if not, how could we fix that? Was the marketing plan in place, and if not, how could we fix that? When you're the one navigating, you can react to exogenous factors that impede your planned course and adapt midway. But when you're one or more degrees removed from that process, you become a true believer. It's a tradeoff that can work for an author who delegates with ease, though it may prove challenging for an author who is obsessive about a project's every last detail or one who prefers to know everything about how a project is going, including bad news. It was around this time too that I heard from the agent that the publishing contract was finally ready for review. It had taken several months for the agency to painstakingly go through it line by line and request various edits.



Next came the sales to international publishers who were interested in the book. There was a good deal of transparency on the part of the agency about how things were going, which publishing houses were interested or

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had made offers, and which of the offers they recommended. In some cases the domestic agency works with a foreign agency to close deals. And in those cases the foreign agency takes another 10% cut, so total commissions can amount to 25%. The agency sold the UK rights to a 250-year-old publisher of which I was a huge fan. Its editor was completely in sync with the project. In the weeks and months that followed, the agency sold the rights to the Simplified Chinese, Complex Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Russian, and Turkish translations. The Japanese agreement was the most memorable one as it was only two pages long.

Foreign rights are never a given. Sometimes they happen, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they come in one after the other at the beginning of a project; other times they can come in slowly over a longer period of time. Sometimes the agreements are structured on a royalty basis, other times it's a lump sum for a single print run. With this project, we were lucky that six international publishers were excited about the concept. Two have been published to date—the Simplified Chinese and the Korean editions—with the rest planned for release soon.




PUBLICATION DAY

If quick, I survive. If not quick, I am lost. This is “death.”
—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*




The book came out on April 4, 2017. By sheer coincidence, *The New York Times* ran a story that morning about algorithmic thinking. It referenced a lot of the same ideas and people that I did in the book. It was reassuring to see a clear appetite for that way of thinking about computing and about the value of teaching it to younger people. That was on a Tuesday.

I'd switched jobs a month earlier, and so I had all but two of my vacation days. I took the next two days off from work to do back-to-back interviews with fifteen radio stations. I paid for a landline and bought a corded telephone. I also bought a CDMA flip-phone,




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on account of its better signal quality in the city and throughout the peninsula. This was in case I had to take a call while outside the apartment. That happened twice—once with a reporter who was working on a piece for *Wired* and once for a podcast. It was nice that not all the interviewers were technical, which gave me the opportunity to talk about the book in more practical terms.



As I went through the radio interviews I began noticing a pattern in many of the questions I was being asked. They were focused on a proposition I hadn't, at least consciously, put forth, which was that thinking like a computer could help people become better decision makers. With any product, perception is key, and I realized there and then that the book's message had mutated. Of course this isn't uncommon—someone turns a Kinect into a motion-sensing vacuum cleaner, and in doing so opens up the Kinect to a wealth of practical applications it wasn't designed for. That license that's extended to the market, while tremendously useful, can become a problem when a product's emergent interpretations prove unappealing. Looking back, I'm able to recognize all the micro-decisions that led to the misapprehensions that followed.



For instance, to the reader who did not know me personally—the vast majority of readers—the book's title and subtitle framed the book as a self-help guide.



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There were no two ways about it. I had grossly underestimated the impact of those elements of the cover on readers, and so I had acquiesced to the publisher. An author I admire was once asked on stage what he would say to critics of a book he'd written, on account of its provocative title. The author replied that the book's title, thankfully, came with a fairly long footnote—the rest of the book. I found it witty at the time, but now I appreciate that it is an issue worth thinking about since people form impressions of things in different ways.

Another decision was my overloading of the term algorithmic thinking. I was using everyday tasks—one half of what that term has come to mean—to make the teaching of algorithms more relatable. I hadn't realized that through association with that term, and despite all the scaffolding I had put up in the book's preface, the expectation remained in some readers' minds that the book was about why algorithms ought to inform human decision making. When you're in the thick of things, your eyesight isn't as sharp.

On Thursday, I was scheduled to do a book signing at a bookstore in Santa Clara. Santa Clara is about an hour and ten-minute drive from San Francisco. The strip mall the bookstore was in had a Whole Foods and there might have been one or two other stores there. Truth be told, I didn't want to do it. I would be in a place so remote, in the middle of the week, on a possi-



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bly rainy day, that it was unlikely anyone would show up. I was under no illusions. But the US publisher had proposed it and I was willing to give it a shot.


One person showed up. I spent most of the night chatting with the manager, who was exceedingly kind. He was tall, with long silver hair and a big bushy beard. The store had only recently opened and it was clear that the manager had gone to great lengths to make sure the place looked neat and tidy. I walked around the store for a good while and ended up buying a picture book for my daughter. It was fairly quiet in the hour or so I spent there before the event. At one point, a couple walked in and browsed for a bit, then left.

The next morning, on Friday, I was scheduled to do an Ask-Me-Anything on Reddit. I had done one three years ago for *Bad Arguments* and the thread got twenty-seven upvotes and a dozen or so questions. I had no expectations about how this one would go, though I did have one advantage going into it, and that was that thanks to the US publisher, the Reddit moderators had agreed to add me to the sidebar, which can be a significant help in getting a post visibility. I started taking questions at 7:15 a.m. just as I got on the train to head to work. By the time I reached my station at around 8:30 a.m., my fingers were sore. My mind was racing. That genuine, personal, intimate—albeit ephemeral—connection with people was something I had missed so




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much. It reminded me of the time I mailed hundreds of books out to readers. Going to the post office, filling out the customs form, writing the address on the cushion mailer, wrapping the book in bubble wrap or black tissue paper, holding it together with a silver sticker, sealing the envelope. It was such a joy it made me wish I had the means to take care of my family so that I could send mail to people full-time.



Readers from different parts of the world were writing about how much they enjoyed *Bad Arguments*. Some had followed the work in the beginning and were excited to see its progress several years down the line. Some asked about publishing. Others asked about writing. In that bubble, I felt comfortable disclosing for the first time one of my most personal struggles: my health issues over the course of two years that had played a crucial part in motivating me to develop *Bad Arguments*.



I answered questions for about an hour and a half on the ride home. It's another forty minutes to walk from the stop to my place. I went into Four Barrel Coffee on a packed Friday night and answered questions for another twenty minutes on a flaky 4G network until my laptop's battery finally gave way.

By the end, the thread had over 6,200 upvotes and 235 comments. It started raining as I was leaving the cafe. I walked the rest of the way home in the rain like Prince at the Super Bowl. Like Andy Dufresne after he

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escapes Shawshank. The marketing director at the US publishing house sent me an email that evening saying that they had sold the highest number of copies in a single day to date.

While I was thrilled, I was also secretly worried about the long-term viability of the project. My rational mind told me that there was a rocky road ahead. For one, the book had no endorsements on its cover or inside flap, and people are influenced to a large degree by what others think of something.


I recall an experiment I once read about where a group is asked, say, “Was Gandhi older or younger than eighty when he died?” And another group is asked, “Was Gandhi older or younger than seventy when he died?” Then both groups are asked how old Gandhi was when he died. The first group would give a higher age, on average. Available knowledge exacerbates our biases. Other familiar manifestations of that bias are sales of books or movie tickets following a nomination for a major award, or after winning one. *The Imitation Game* made \$43 million in its first six weeks, and then \$48 million after being nominated for and subsequently winning the Academy Award for Best Picture. I remember Fiona Mozley’s *Elmet* having two reviews and an average rating of three and a half stars on Amazon before being shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. Things really took off for it after that.



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My UK publisher had actually sent review copies of the book to several people and had included in each packet a pair of mismatched socks. It was a brilliant idea, meant as a reference to the vignette in the first chapter. You do all you can and hope for the best. Simon Singh, author of *The Simpsons and Their Mathematical Secrets* and *Fermat's Last Theorem*, surprised me with a wonderful tweet on the morning the book came out. Daniel Whiteson, who co-wrote *We Have No Idea*, a popular science book, posted a touching tweet a short while later. In my mind, I had assigned high probabilities to a number of other people sharing the book. The takeaway for me from that day is that if you want someone to do something, be unequivocal about it. Don't be coy. Tell them, "I have a book coming out. I'd like to get the word out. Would you mind writing something about it?" That's a much better approach.




I did an interview for the MIT alumni society's website shortly after that, and a few weeks later I did another one for the business school's website. Other than those pieces, the book had two reviews. The first was by Jenny Bristol. Jenny is amazing. She was one of the first people to review *Bad Arguments*. "Share [this book] with your friends, encourage your family members to flip through it, casually leave copies in public places," that review had read. The book had another review elsewhere. I didn't recognize the book in that review. It




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seemed so foreign. The reviewer was put off by all the math. She had expected something along the lines of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, it seemed. She was frustrated by the academic concepts I kept bringing up when what she really wanted were practical tips. There was a clear disconnect between author, artifact, and reader, which was disappointing. I was disappointed in myself that I hadn't foreseen that ambiguity early on and quashed it.



I got a request to write a piece for a financial website on how algorithms can help you save money. You want to save money? Spend less than you earn. That's what I told them, and boy did I lay it on them . . . in the shower, gesticulating to a wall. The request, again, seemed to want to project me as a sort of expert, a role I had no interest whatsoever in assuming. I couldn't turn into, dare I say it, some sort of a charlatan to help sell books.





I realized there and then, and more vividly than ever, that some pragmatism was in order, and that if I wanted to protect the project's fundamental message, I would have to take a proactive role in telling its story. I blocked out everything and anything on social media, on my phone, on my computer, and in real life that reminded me of books or of publishing. I stopped following my feeds, stopped reading the news, stopped going into bookstores, and stopped scanning the daily Publishers Weekly emails I'd kept an eye on in case



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there was news of new imprints. To be more effective in solving the problem at hand, I had to completely free my mind of all distractions.

Then I did something I'd always felt uncomfortable about. I reached out to several people I knew in some capacity and asked them if they might consider endorsing the book. Endorsements would be the best way to clarify to readers what the book was about and what it was trying to achieve. I remember a passage in one of Paul Auster's letters where he talks about how a friend of his dedicated a book to Paul, and yet there was no indication leading up to that point that their bond of friendship was so strong as to produce an act of kindness as profound as that. It's not always easy to show our vulnerable side to people who know us.



Jamis Buck, who wrote *Basil & Fabian*, a fantastic illustrated story about mazes, as well as another book called *Mazes for Programmers* that's probably the most authoritative book on mazes, sent me a generous quote a week later. A few days later, César Hidalgo, whom I hadn't asked for an endorsement, shared with me the kindest compliment: "Perfect for anyone wanting to understand the basics of computer science." I asked him if I could quote him, and he said yes. I was thrilled. I associate César with an uplifting period in my life.

I was a graduate student in Engineering Systems back in 2010. That division is now part of the School of



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Engineering at MIT, though previously it lived in a kind of limbo state between several departments. My aspiration had always been to either join the Media Lab or to do something with a group there. I remember having a photo of their old building hanging on my bedroom wall eight years earlier when I was an impressionable twenty-one-year-old graduate student in Pittsburgh. I wrote to the principal investigators of three groups at the Media Lab, and César was the only one to reply. We ended up working together on three projects and two articles over the course of two years.

The exact circumstances of our first meeting were, in hindsight, quite funny. We had agreed to meet on the couches in Building E14. I waited there for what must have been twenty minutes, and nobody showed up. I eventually headed back home and sent him an email saying something like, oh well, sorry we couldn't meet, perhaps next time. He wrote back right away. As it turns out, it's not that uncommon for a building to have more than one couch.


That wouldn't be the only time I had an embarrassing encounter with someone who occupied a corner of my mind. One time, I was in the office, back when I was working at Mozilla, and in the kitchen area next to my desk I see none other than Tim Berners-Lee. Instinctively, I went up to him, shook his hand, and said, "It's an honor to meet you." He smiled and walked






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away towards a conference room. Then he stopped, turned back around, walked towards me and asked, “Sorry, who are you?” to which I replied, “Ali.” It was the kind of pithy resolute line Moses might have gone for atop Mount Sinai, tablets firmly in hand, robe billowing in the wind. The man—the poor man—opened his mouth, about to speak, then had a change of heart, nodded, and walked away. Good times.



During that same period, I made the spectacularly bold decision to email Vint Cerf to ask him if he wouldn’t mind endorsing the project. Vint Cerf is a Turing Award winner, a co-inventor of one of the core protocols that the Web relies on, for which *Wired* christened him a father of the internet, and a senior vice president and the chief internet evangelist at Google. Plus, he had stated in the past that he gets a book a day to review. And here I was, a meek and bespectacled Harry, asking Dumbledore for a favor. The front of the boy. Sometimes in life, you throw a line into a lake and you go do something else.



Besides focusing on endorsements, there were two questions I wanted to explore. One: Would a Facebook campaign be an effective way of reaching the book’s target audience? And two: Should we change the book’s subtitle?

I budgeted \$3,200 for a set of Facebook ads to start running in early June 2017. The first Facebook cam-

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campaign targeted readers in the United States who were interested in keywords like “Khan Academy” and “Summer of Code.” That second one is an annual event that receives a lot of press. I also targeted interest areas like STEM, EdTech, Girls Who Code, K-12 teaching, and books. The ad’s headline read, “Sit back and enjoy these 12 vignettes about data structures and algorithms.” Its caption read, “There’s More to Computer Science Than Coding.” The numbers were as follows:

Impressions	289,166
Link clicks	9,084
Reactions	551
Comments	37
Shares	221
Cost per click	\$0.21
Clicks per 100 impressions	3

The second Facebook campaign targeted grandparents in the United States. The ad’s headline read, “School is out. Know someone who might enjoy an illustrated introduction to Computer Science this summer?” Its caption read, “With 12 Vignettes and 65 Original Illustrations.” The numbers were as follows:

Impressions	141,212
Link clicks	1,405

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Reactions	30
Comments	3
Shares	14
Cost per click	\$0.41
Clicks per 100 impressions	1

With the first campaign, 81% of clicks came from men and most clicks came from those aged 25 to 34. With the second one, it was a more even split, with 53% of clicks coming from women, and most clicks coming from those aged 55 to 64. The week after starting the first campaign, weekly sales were up 45%, then 44% the week after, then they stayed within 10% of that increase for the three subsequent weeks. I'd estimate that around 330 copies of the book sold were due to the Facebook campaigns. As such, each book sold cost \$9 in advertising. That \$9 per copy had other positive effects too—the website's Facebook likes and shares were at 368 before the campaigns; that went up to 1,200. Total visitors to the website were at 25,000; that went up to 38,500 by the end of the fifth week. Last I checked, total visitors were at 49,000 visitors.

Even so, it was not a financially sustainable means of increasing sales. I was getting roughly three clicks per 100 impressions with the first campaign and one click per 100 impressions with the second one. I ran shorter campaigns targeting adjacent audiences, such as

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those interested in Web comics, or in Neil deGrasse Tyson. Had I budgeted more for the experiment, I would have used the learning from those first five weeks to further split the audience to reduce the cost per click. My target was something around \$0.10, which is what previous campaigns for *Bad Arguments* had averaged. So, in answering the first question—would a Facebook campaign be effective—I would say, maybe.

For the second question—should we change the subtitle—the answer was less ambiguous. Having looked through readers' comments, interpreted some of the responses and non-responses I had received from various people, and having seen the effects of the Facebook campaigns, which focused on the book's technical side, it seemed like all the evidence suggested that the subtitle was indeed a contributing factor to the book not reaching its audience in the United States.

Then again, it could be that the topic was simply more niche than I had imagined. You make decisions based on the data that's available to you at a given time. In this case the evidence seemed to suggest with high probability that what the book offered was novel. Whereas with *Bad Arguments* I had taken scribbles from the notebook of a college student and turned them into something that looked like a book, then beta tested it live in the field with readers, here the process was somewhat more traditional in that I had spent two years



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experimenting with various approaches to teaching computing to a broad audience. That string of relative successes and failures had converged over time into the book's final form. And during that time, I had compiled a list of forty-four people focused on the same problem I was focused on.

As the months went by, I worked constantly to get journalists and bloggers to write about the project. An editor at Medium's education blog, Bright, was enthusiastic about the idea of a piece on why it's important to teach children not only coding, but algorithms too. Last I checked, that piece had 3,700 visitors. Leo Laporte from This Week in Tech invited me on the show a short while later, and that was tremendous fun. Later on, I spoke on other shows that were equally enjoyable.

By now it was August. Five months had passed since the book was released. Adrenaline had given way to exhaustion. A pastime had transitioned into what seemed like a race against time. Switching jobs earlier in the year had exacerbated things by adding a three-hour commute to my workdays, though that commute had afforded me, over the course of several months, a draw towards a new language. I was constantly falling asleep to the Russian production of *The Idiot*, which would play to my subconscious for hours. Those spindly, pale fingers I remembered from not too long before had yet to make contact, but every so often, whenever I squint-







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ed, whenever I was tired, I could make out their shadow curling around a door frame.

Then early one Friday morning upon waking, I opened one eye to check the time on my cellphone and could hardly believe it. I sat on the edge of the bed, eyes fixed on my phone, still in a daze. It was Vint. He had enjoyed the book. And he had sent me the most spectacular compliment.

Nice work. I liked the casual way in which you introduced algorithms and the method of evaluating them for their efficiency. Hints about broad applicability also helped a lot. One of the more clever ways of introducing computational thinking to the general public.




People have different ways of dealing with something that is not perceived to be perfect. Vint recognized the good in the project. I replied with one line. Had we been face to face, I would have shaken his hand and not said a word. That's how profound his act was. "Thank you. Genuinely," I wrote. Those three words were enough to convey the effect he had had on someone he had never met in his life. I must have read his email over a dozen times throughout that day. I couldn't believe it. The project had been vindicated. In the best way possible. By an inimitable giant. It's fascinating how every interaction we have with someone contributes a line to that person's story. How great it must be to be a contributor




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of highlights to other people's stories.

A few months later, I asked the US publisher if they might agree to me sharing an excerpt from the book online. After some deliberation, they said yes. I was grateful. Readers in the United States could now read the book's first seven chapters, as well as listen to the first vignette read by my daughter. The redesigned website looked really nice, especially on mobile. Shortly afterwards, the project got its first contribution from a reader. He worked at Khan Academy and pointed out a formatting error in the book. Just like with *Bad Arguments*, I thanked him, fixed the error, and credited him for the fix.



A few months after that, the book's UK publisher shared with me two bits of great news. One, a journalist had mentioned the book in *New Scientist*. And two, the publisher was releasing a paperback edition the following February. The updated cover had the *New Scientist* quote, they had removed the subtitle from the front cover, and the book would include the endorsements we had received over the past months. When I got the physical copy of the paperback, I loved how the updated cover looked.



Just as I was determined to ensure the book reached its intended audience and how I spent the better part of a year reaching out and knocking on doors, a publisher aims to put in just as much effort. That is why it's



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essential to team up with one that's the right fit for the project—one that's passionate about the concept and willing to fight for it, for the longest time if necessary. You don't want a publisher that views your book like produce with a short shelf life, because if your book doesn't do well in its first few weeks, it's going right into the incinerator. As an agency that once sent me a rejection email put it, bluntly yet accurately, "We have to feel real passion for a project to talk about it for years and years. You need someone to represent you with enthusiasm and verve." An acquisition is a series of people convincing other people that a project is worth investing in. The author convinces an agent. The agent convinces an editor. The editor convinces his or her immediate team, who then have to convince various teams in the publishing house. For instance, the sales force has to be confident that the book is something they'd be able to successfully sell to buyers throughout the industry. When everyone is onboard and enthused, a book's odds of succeeding increase.

The time was now right for me to turn the page on the project and move on. I sent an email to the mailing list with the year's highlights and promised a project in 2018. And then, for the first time in ten months, I stepped out of my bubble and plucked up the courage to walk into a bookstore.



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For the holidays, and to celebrate *Bad Arguments*' fourth anniversary, I thought of sharing a surprise with my subscribers—a limited edition inspirational postcard with characters from the book that I would mail out to thirty readers, drawn by that same illustrator from Medellin. The central character would be a girl in her front yard on a summer evening. The moon and stars are out. She is wearing a sundress.

The girl is about to step inside. On the porch, the turtle from *Bad Arguments* looks up at her. She has just taken off a cape that was on her back and thrown it behind her. The cape is made up of waveforms meant to represent noise. The waveforms would form the cape's outline. Behind her is her front lawn, and behind that is a fence. Behind the fence are the peeking heads of various characters from *Bad Arguments*—Cat, Pig, Raccoon, Dog, Donkey, and so on. At the bottom in all caps is the word “ONWARD.”

I asked readers on the mailing list if they knew someone who might enjoy receiving the postcard as a surprise—someone who might be feeling down, or sick, or lonely—to fill out a form with that person's name and address, and I would then send them a postcard in time for the holidays. In case people were interested in buying blank postcards to send themselves, I would offer packs of ten for a nominal fee. The postcards would only be available during the holidays. The





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waveforms didn't quite work when we mocked them up, so I replaced them with the following passage from J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*:

You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape. You are like a stick insect that has landed, God knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain. You raise your slow fragile stick-legs one at a time, you inch about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing. Why did you ever leave the bushes, Michaels?

The thirty winners were from all over the world. I mailed postcards to London, San Juan, North Carolina, Montreal, Calgary, Oklahoma, Maine, Oregon, Michigan, Wyoming, New York, Tennessee, Florida, Samaheej, New Jersey, Tehran, Virginia, Ohio, Toronto, Edmonton, Queensland, Yen Bai City, Porirua, Manama, and Skopje. All but one made it to their destinations. The one that didn't was returned due to US export laws.

In the weeks that followed, I received in the mail and online several personal letters from readers. I was touched. A memorable side-lesson from this experience was that right after the deadline, the frequency of new subscriptions skyrocketed. And the reason for that could only be that visitors were seeing the link to the





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giveaway on the book's website, realizing that the deadline had passed after they clicked through, and then signing up for the mailing list, which they could do right from that second link. The desire to not want to miss out on something had proven a much stronger call to action than asking readers to sign up for news about future projects.



THE POINT OF POINTLESS WORK


A few months ago, a friend asked me what I was currently working on. I said I had a few ideas, but none of them was yet developed enough that I could articulate it with confidence. The most promising idea I had was something on empathy. It would be a picture book where the prose runs in opposition to the illustrations, so by the end of the story, you realize that the story isn't about the protagonist, or rather, that the protagonist is this other nondescript character floating in the background. It would teach children to look beyond the apparent, so that when they then see someone, say, giving a presentation, it becomes second nature for them to imagine that person the night before, in a pair of pajamas and a wooly hat, doing a dry run in front of a family member. How different that dynamic must have




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been.

But while sketching out the outline for that project, I found myself writing about something else. I sat down on the train and started writing, and three weeks later I had these pages that captured my thoughts on the point of pointless work, a title that bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Abraham Flexner's essay from almost a century ago on useless knowledge. My working title was in fact *The Usefulness of Useless Work*, but then I walked into a bookstore and came across a bound edition of that essay, published in 2017; I figured it was too recent a publication and that I ought to therefore change the title to something else.



What are, then, in closing, those benefits that come from engaging in such work?



One, it is cathartic. It allows you to not get too tied up with events that might otherwise be debilitating. Life's downs and people's quirks no longer bother you as much. It all becomes a sort of play with you merely a spectator rather than a performer. I recently learned that many an astronaut experiences such a state of mind, and that it even has a name—the overview effect.

Any disappointments that befall you in that side-work don't feel as bad. It becomes akin to investing with play money. Engaging with the world through undirected work not only leaves one with a sense of hope, which is why prisoners take up hobbies like carpentry



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or painting, but it also serves as a regulator of general wellbeing. It's funny how that metaphor is always top of mind whenever I'm washing the dishes or cleaning around the house. Those activities seem—to me at least—like regulators that I can appeal to in order to prevent mental buildups. And if not regulators, then an open field where you can kick a ball as hard as you want, in whatever direction, using whatever method, without a care in the world. Do it often, and you'll inadvertently build muscle as well.

Two, it is liberating. If you're not burdened by any notion of career or legacy, nor the need to be under the spotlight of publicity, nor doomed to the drudgery of a Sisyphean work environment that encroaches on one's view of one's self worth, you can reinvent yourself ad infinitum. You can work on whatever you think is of value and whatever brings you personal satisfaction. You can be a different person with each project. It's tremendously liberating. It's easy to forget that Kafka was also an insurance officer. Wallace Stevens was also an executive. T. S. Eliot was also a banker. Anton Chekhov was a doctor, as was John Locke. Coetzee was a programmer. I read that when Stevens won the Pulitzer, it came as a shock to the employees of Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Stevens? Poetry? Pulitzer?


For the work to become a liberating force, of course, it is essential that one be in a state of mind and in cir-






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cumstances that can provide adequate space for such a force to brew. An important element of such a set of circumstances is a certain degree of financial freedom. In my mind, and again this may not be the case generally, nor is it necessarily sound financial advice, the moment one becomes beholden to an institution to the extent that one's free will is at stake, either diminished or curtailed, it becomes impossible for one to interact with the world with the degree of clarity and tranquility necessary for creative work to emerge. And, more crucially, for one to consider that work a worthwhile endeavor. That state of mind has allowed me to recover from setbacks without much fanfare.



Three, you never know when something you've dabbled in might come in handy. If a project doesn't immediately succeed, then some mashup of several such projects might ultimately do well. All those tiny, non-essential, incomplete things you might have worked on over the course of several years—though individually they might not have worked—may coalesce into something that does. I began this story five years ago, but the reality is that it began ten or so years before that. All but two of the projects I spent much of those early years on, to the cost of other things in life, ever persisted or made a notable impact. And yet, I see remnants of those other efforts in things I ended up focusing on many years later.





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Four, it elevates your abilities. More often than not, in between some work ultimately getting attention and its previous string of misses and snubs, the work goes through an evolution. Those micro-failures along the way become opportunities for reflection that can be re-directed at the work in the form of constructive decisions. In traditional work, that evolution might not always be allowed to take place, for reasons of money and time. But when that evolution is allowed to take place, you the creator end up improving too, and that elevates the level at which future work begins. It starts from a stronger position. That is an ideal general approach to creative work: enduring the good and the bad, then reflecting on the recent past, and in doing so, leveling up. No regrets. No looking back after that. Just moving forward at a relatively higher level of ability and with a finer, more discerning degree of execution. As a crude example of a single simple metric, I wrote thirty words a day for my first book (I was horrendously slow), 150 words a day for the novella, 750 words a day for the second book, and around 1,300 words a day for this one.

Five, it vaccinates you against tunnel vision. The tendency to be absorbed by a single discipline is abolished by a state of mind that views the knowledge and affordances of one discipline as tools that may be just as valuable when applied to problems in some other discipline. Engaging with work that has no obvious point





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broadens the mind.

Six, it gives you complete agency. Affecting change is so much more likely when *you* take charge of your time and *you* determine the risks and *you* decide which ideas to pursue and which partners to bring on to help with the effort. As silly as it may sound, it's for a similar reason I walk everywhere.

Some social constructs are, by design, meant to weaken, to demoralize, to contain that individual agency. Groups have always bothered me. Clubs, exclusivity, the whole lot. They trade individuality for some notion of a main that I seldom find appealing. That trade is not always sinister. Sometimes, it's the exact opposite, but the effect remains the same.

Seven, it eliminates those barriers that may play a part in impeding curiosity, such as time, expertise, pace, and pride. Not being constrained by any of those barriers makes it easier to take an idea to its limits without having to worry about the repercussions of failure, or the need to ask someone for permission, or having to convince them that you're good enough. Losing interest in something because one's peers are moving at a faster pace is a serious impeder of curiosity. One sees it most vividly in children. Taking yourself out of the fast lane allows you to regain control of your ideal pace.

It is with that thought in mind that I'm experimenting with a new idea for this project—a tiny pub-



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lisher whose immediate task is to fulfill orders of this book, though its eventual goal is to help empower new and aspiring authors who, like me, may have come to publishing through a side door that happened to be propped open. I'm working with a domestic printer in Oregon to take care of the first print run and hopefully future print runs as well. I've named it Cormorant after a prehistoric-looking seabird that has a distinctive way of drying its feathers. I like the image of that bird because it has endured despite its imperfection.

And eight, it's incredibly fun. I remember Stephen King once being asked on stage whether he knew how a story he was working on would end, to which he said, "No, where's the fun in that?" The mystery of it all really is tremendous fun.

These qualities may well be found elsewhere in life. It so happens that I found them all in the same place. And I felt compelled to share these pages, in case you do too.





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To learn about future releases of this book or about future projects, sign up for the mailing list at the link below.

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