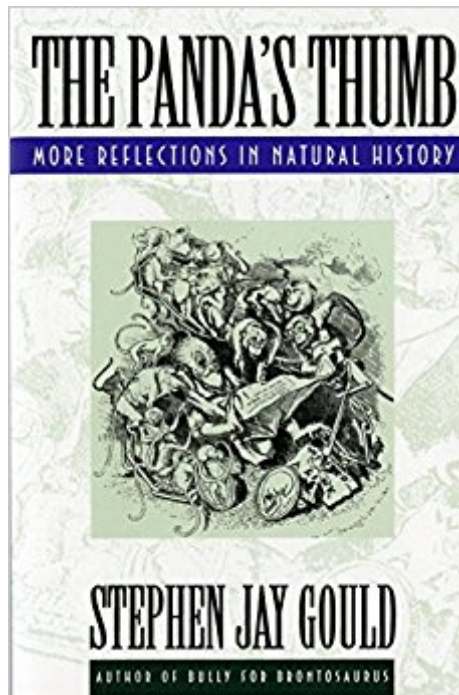




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The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections In Natural History



Synopsis

"Gould is a natural writer; he has something to say and the inclination and skill with which to say it."
—P. B. Medawar, New York Review of Books
With sales of well over one million copies in North America alone, the commercial success of Gould's books now matches their critical acclaim. The Panda's Thumb will introduce a new generation of readers to this unique writer, who has taken the art of the scientific essay to new heights. Were dinosaurs really dumber than lizards? Why, after all, are roughly the same number of men and women born into the world? What led the famous Dr. Down to his theory of mongolism, and its racist residue? What do the panda's magical "thumb" and the sea turtle's perilous migration tell us about imperfections that prove the evolutionary rule? The wonders and mysteries of evolutionary biology are elegantly explored in these and other essays by the celebrated natural history writer Stephen Jay Gould.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is a wonder what Mr. Gould can do with the most unlikely phenomena: a tiny organism's use of the earth's magnetic field as a guide to food and comfort, for instance, or the panda's thumb—which isn't one. Science writing at its best. —The New Yorker
Stephen Jay Gould is a serious and gifted interpreter of biological theory, of the history of ideas, and of the cultural context of scientific discovery. The Panda's Thumb is fresh and mind-stretching. Above all, it is exultant. So should its readers be. —H. Jack Geiger, New York Times Book Review
Gould can do no wrong. As long as he writes, you cannot help but read—and enjoy. —Isaac Asimov

Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) was the Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology and Professor of Geology at Harvard University. He published over twenty books, received the National Book and National Book Critics Circle Awards, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

I love the book I read in hardcover. The Kindle edition? Not so much. This edition is barely readable and contains many errors of formatting. Subheadings are formatted however the designer wanted (maybe on that day, another day, differently) and Gould's extensive quotes are difficult to differentiate from his own writing and responses (i.e. "Who said what?"). As a result, I have only struggled through the first two chapters of the e-book edition. As to the subject matter and some people's responses, again, I can only comment on the acknowledgements, introduction, and the first couple of chapters. In the first chapter Gould discusses a variety of 19th century perspectives on biological determinism (which is the subject of the book). He spends a lot of time in the Introduction discussing his view of history, and how scientific approaches to figuring out whether or not a certain "race" is "smarter" or better than another developed in the past. He spends a couple of paragraphs explaining that, although the title is "The Mismeasure of Man," the book and ideas refer to both men and women. Women, in fact, got used in a number of analytical and measurement schemes in the past and their smaller skulls helped some scientists downgrade some "races" while upgrading others. Because women are generally smaller than men, for example, such scientists as Samuel Morton, famous for his many skulls and development of a system for measuring dead skull contents using lead shot after mustard seeds failed the reliability and consistency test (If you're some white supremacist reading here - this guy started out putting mustard seed in people's dead, dried-out skulls, then rightly figured it didn't pack consistently and advanced to using more consistent, reliable, lead shot). Well, guess what? There's no relationship between the size of anyone's head or brain and how intelligent they are and there never was, mustard seed, lead shot, or any other measurement of skull contents. So whether Gould misinterpreted Morton - it kind of doesn't matter. How can this dumb woman "prove" this to you? Q. Was Andre the Giant's head bigger than Albert Einstein's? A. Yes. QED. I'm pretty sure you could get less lead shot in my head than in Roger Clemens' head. And I know better than to lie to Congress. That said, this review is more about the physical quality of the e-book rather than the content of the text, which I read in complete form a long time ago in hardcover form. W.W. Norton should be ashamed of themselves for how messed-up the format of this e-book is. It is barely readable. And many of Gould's books are priced over \$9.99 in e-book form. I bought this because it was the best of his titles available for Kindle at \$9.99, not more. He was one of my favorite authors of the past (I have to say now - he belabors the

point a lot - and Chapter 1 is a priori dumb - I mean it's all well and good to cover Morton's adventures with mustard seed and lead shot, but all I learned was how idiotic so many of these schemes of the past were, and also sad, denigrating facts about heroes like Abraham Lincoln (somehow I missed that he said "Negro equality! Fudge!" in the Lincoln-Douglas debates - kids, don't copy that one). I am attaching proof of what I say.

I was taking an online course for my university about race and Asian American experience in the U.S and began to wander after I had finished the course, where the construct of race began? Why? And who helped propel it through time? Anyway my professor had recommended this book for me and I absolutely love it... pick it up it's a must

Gould is a terrific writer when on the right subjects, neatly and concisely laying out in a series of essays originally written as magazine columns some interesting trivia. When he sticks to evolution, he's incredible. When he veers in to the history of science, he can be uneven and long-winded, and the forays in to geology are largely pointless. When discussing the period from Darwin's first publishing of his theory to the widespread acceptance over the course of a generation, he focuses too much on one or two unimportant characters and misses the forest for the trees. Which is a shame. The early chapters are great fun to read, and offer great insight in to how adaptation works. But unlike, say, Dawkins, Gould wanders about in an uneven fashion. That's expected somewhat in a book that is a collection of magazine pieces written over many years, unlike a purpose-written book. But some of these feel like an idea that had been sitting in a drawer for many years, he decided to write something about it, but didn't really have much to say. A good editor could have cleaned that up, but perhaps that would not have left enough material for a book.

Still vital and relevant.

Any book by Stephen Jay Gould is a good book.

I am a fan of Gould's "A Wonderful Life". I am in the beginning pages of The Panda's Thumb. The quality of the information is similar in both books. They are coffee table books for me, not really retaining anything but better than most for passing the time.

Good book that summarizes the history of human attempts to quantify intelligence.

The book touches on craniometry and phrenology (the pseudoscientific study of the size and shape of the human skull to determine intelligence, personality, and character), intelligence testing, and how human attempts to quantify intelligence have been tainted by cultural bias and a priori assumptions. I was shocked by the enormous level of unconscious racism and sexism associated with early attempts to quantify intelligence and by the horrific conclusions drawn from these attempts (e.g., eugenics/sterilization and social Darwinism). This book provides an excellent history of intelligence testing (e.g., IQ testing). My favorite part of the book is the author's explanation of Spearman's g (a.k.a. the "general intelligence" factor or "general intelligence"), which preceded IQ testing and continues to be relevant in contemporary theories of intelligence. The author gives an excellent explanation of how Spearman's g was developed (via a statistical technique called "factor analysis", which involves factoring the correlations between scores on mental tests) and the author uses vectors to explain how factor analysis works (vectors are visual, making them easier to understand). If you have any interest in statistics or applied math, you will likely find this interesting (I know I did). Gould also explains how factor analysis was used by Thurstone to develop an early theory of multiple intelligences (e.g., verbal, spatial, mathematical) before Howard Gardner established the theory of multiple intelligences in 1983. On the negative side, the author's writing style is a bit showy and verbose. Overall, this was a very interesting read and I would recommend it to anyone interested in the history of human attempts to quantify intelligence (through craniometry, phrenology, and intelligence testing), how cultural bias and a priori assumptions can negatively influence data analysis and interpretation, or the origins of factor analysis (a statistical technique used to identify unobserved variables (e.g., general intelligence) that explain a significant proportion of the variation in an observed dependent variable (e.g., scores on mental tests)). PS: Prior to the Stanford-Binet IQ test, women were thought to be intellectually inferior to men. However, the Stanford-Binet IQ test revealed that, on average, girls scored the same as boys, suggesting that women were an untapped intellectual resource (previously, women had limited access to the professions). This was one of the few positive results of IQ testing, but what a positive result it was!!!

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