

The 25 Best Books of All Time for Health Promotion Professionals

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Abstract

Best books lists are the ultimate opinion pieces. In this editorial, this journal's editorial team go out on a big science limb together and proclaim the 25 books relating to the health promotion profession that we consider "must reads." While several of our selections are standard bearer textbooks that have informed the training of graduates from Schools of Public Health for several decades, many of our best books finalists are best-selling books that have garnered tremendous accolades in the popular press. This best books list for health promotion professionals has been published on publicly accessible blog sites and I invite readers to visit those sites and weigh in with their reactions and recommendations for books that they believe should be included in future lists.

Keywords

best books, health promotion research, health equity, health education, health journalism

Assembling a best books list of any kind is fraught with the potential to disappoint, dissimulate and devolve into controversy about what books did and did not make the list. I must say up front, I just love that! What better way to provoke thought about what has brought us to this point in our profession's journey than to reflect on the seminal books, thought leading authors and the most influential theories and concepts that guide our work? This editorial has 2 aims relating to advancing the effectiveness of health promotion professionals. Foremost, I hope this list informs your professional reading list plans for the coming months and years. I am confident that if you've missed reading some of our "top 25" books, you won't be disappointed digging in to any of these. Second, any such list is apt to spark a dialogue about what's missing and I invite readers to weigh in with your opinions! Bring on the incredulity! This is your chance to inform a future "top 50" list.

For those who are interested in entering into a public debate about the merits and misses on this list, I invite you to visit public posts at my LinkedIn page and the HERO website blog section where I summarize this best 25 list.^{1,2} Use the reply feature and join the conversation about books you would like to see on our future best books lists and share your thinking about how the book has influenced your approach to health promotion. Also, feel free to express your umbrage about the gaps in our list. A passionate plea or a bit of finger wagging may be all it takes to get others to add one of your favorite influencers to their reading piles. You'll see below that I give this top 25 list a running start with 10 of my favorites but to hedge against my bias's as a career health educator initially trained decades ago, I've invited this journal's brain trust of associate editors to round out this honor role.

All Time Greatest Books in Health Promotion

Recommended Top 10 by Paul Terry

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures. By Anne Fadiman.³

Lia Lee is a young girl suffering from severe epilepsy with Hmong refugee parents who favor traditional remedies. Tensions between science and spiritual beliefs always need to be considered when developing health promotion initiatives and Fadiman's impeccably researched story illustrates how the primacy of culture agitates already fragile tensions. Health educators may have formal training in educational principles and experience with health communications practices but how sensitive is our profession to the distrust that occurs when cultural traditions are misconstrued or ignored? One usually does not expect rich character development as a part of non-fiction writing but Fadiman's long term commitment to studying what went wrong between health professionals and family members makes the book inspirational as well as dispiriting. Social worker Jeanine Hilt shines in her role as a health promotion advocate who defies bureaucracy and exemplifies what person centered care and allyship involves.

Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Could Cure the World. By Tracy Kidder.⁴

Health promotion is already an inspiration filled profession given the number of smart, passionate do-gooders filling our ranks. Tracy Kidder's biographical treatise on the trials and tribulations of Dr. Paul Farmer puts inspiration on steroids with

a story that makes seemingly impossible health promotion challenges seem downright doable. In the context of the sputtering contact tracing efforts to contain COVID-19 in 2020, Farmer's unbound tuberculosis (TB) control efforts in Haiti and Peru are a profile in systemic discipline bolstered by unflinching political will. Kidder's book offers a definitive explanation of the directly observed treatment, short-course (DOTS) for curing TB that is couched in a vivid narrative of Farmer's path from a very poor upbringing to earning a massive grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation along with the admiration of the founders of same. The *Partners in Health* organization that Farmer leads has codified their "preference for the poor" and I'm hoping for a sequel to this book, one that will most certainly find a poetic denouement to Farmer's amazing journey.

Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic. By Sam Quinones.⁵

I regularly commend "Dreamland" when the subjects of addiction or the opioid pandemic arise. What's more, I have touted Quinones's research as a "Silent Spring" equivalent. Where Rachel Carson wrought long overdue scrutiny on the disinformation spread by the chemical industry, Quinones lays bare the culpability of the pharmaceutical industry, and Purdue pharma in particular, for their criminal approach to driving demand for opioids. The fuel poured on the unfolding tragedy for communities was not only the unfettered distribution practices of pharma but also included medical educators framing pain as a fifth vital sign, shrewdly organized illegal drug dealers and naïve athletes and soccer mom's raiding each other's medicine cabinets. The factor I found most disturbing relating to over prescribing of opioids was the way in which one study about opioids as a low risk pain control alternative snowballed its way through countless professional journals, conferences and popular media reports. Quinones's thorough investigation delineated how a single acute care study, one that shouldn't have been generalized to pain management for chronic conditions, became a gold standard study for justifying what amounted to medical and public health education malpractice.

Saving Gotham: A Billionaire Mayor, Activist Doctors, and the Fight for Eight Million Lives. By Tom Farley.⁶

If there were a master class in population health management and health promotion, I would nominate Dr. Tom Farley as the lead instructor. It is one thing to learn from textbooks about how to affect life-saving changes in smoking and nutrition policies, but it is another thing altogether to learn from a New York City public health department insider detailing the blow by blow advocacy, politics and decision making needed to make epic changes. Farley, who is presently the Health Commissioner for the City of Philadelphia, profiles the many brilliant characters needed to advance bold public policies. *Saving Gotham* celebrates 2 dynamos, in particular, who were

most instrumental in overcoming the controversies attendant to battling smoking and unhealthy eating. Mayor Michael Bloomberg is the uncommon leader who put data ahead of politics and who put saving lives ahead of his political reputation. And Thomas Frieden, Bloomberg's health commissioner before he became Director of the CDC, was the lead engineer for tobacco bans in bars and for criminalizing the use of trans-fats in restaurants. In an era where undermining policy changes has become a blood sport, Farley's story codifies the smarts and stamina needed to overcome fierce ideological, bureaucratic and private sector resistance.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. By Rebecca Skloot.⁷

We are at the cusp of an era where genetic testing and DNA abetted "personalized medicine" is showing the promise of preventing tremendous suffering and saving millions of lives. The multi-billion dollar industry that is patenting genes and selling cells can all be traced to "HeLa" tissues. That is, to the cells of Henrietta Lacks, a poor southern farmer who had tissues harvested from her for research while she was being treated for cancer at John's Hopkins. This, without her knowledge or consent. We are also ensconced in a time where race and racism are being recognized as a major public health issue. Much of the distrust of health institutions by Blacks can also be traced to the ethics and treatment inequities between blacks and white that Skloot documents so adeptly. For health promotion interventionists, the program planning bromide "nothing about me without me" takes on profound ethical layers under Skloot's careful research into how Skloot's life has benefited countless others.

High-Level Wellness: A collection of twenty-nine short talks on different aspects of the theme "High-Level Wellness for Man and Society." By Halbert L. Dunn, M.D., Ph.D.⁸

Many have suggested that their health promotion strategies are "moving from wellness to well-being" with an implicit notion that wellness is mostly about physical health where well-being addresses broader emotional, financial and societal needs. Halbert Dunn coined the term "wellness" and though his book that defines the term is copyrighted in 1961, his essays are anything but anachronistic. Dunn defined high level wellness for the individual as "an integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable. It requires that the individual maintain a continuum of balance and purposeful direction within the environment where he is functioning." Advocates for health promotion approaches that account for culture, meaning and purpose, agency, social justice, life satisfaction and socio-ecological influences will find that Dunn's vision for wellness may finally be coming close to realization, albeit, co-opted by a different term.

Thinking, Fast and Slow. By Daniel Kahneman.⁹

The health promotion profession demands that we strike the right balance between individual and social responsibility for health and use the best of behavioral and social sciences to improve population and personal health practices. Kahneman's book offers rare insights into how human nature can compete with or come up alongside behavior change efforts. Though Kahneman is a psychologist, he was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in economics for his research and writing making concepts such as cognitive bias, loss aversion and prospect theory accessible and understandable for scientists and the public alike. For the back story behind Kahneman's genius and his bountiful partnership with mathematical psychologist Amos Tversky, I emphatically recommend Michael Lewis' book: "The Undoing Project: A Friendship that Changed our Minds."¹⁰ Lewis previously wrote the sensational book "Moneyball" and only years later came to understand that many of the ideas popularized in that best-selling book were closely aligned with Kahneman's behavioral economics concepts.

Health Program Planning: An Educational and Ecological Approach. 4th Edition. By Lawrence Green and Marshall Kreuter.¹¹

What if health promotion professionals were charged not only with improving health but were expected to enhance quality of life worldwide? And what would the health promotion profession need to do differently if our charter went beyond promoting health policy and was expected to organize citizens and communities so that well-being was advanced via all policies? Sound audacious? It is! Still, this has been the challenge issued by this profession's classic textbook for nearly 50 years. Thankfully, it is also the text that prescribes the diagnostics, assessments and planning processes and tools needed to achieve these ambitious goals.

Health Behavior: Theory, Research, and Practice. By Karen Glanz, Barbara K. Rimer, K. Viswanath.¹²

If you were going to be stranded for a year on a deserted island what would you bring? It's the party game question I needed to answer for myself mid-career when I accepted a Fulbright post to teach public health education in Zimbabwe. Without hesitation I spent my lean required textbook budget on the book that offers the most comprehensive review of theories of behavior change and research into community health improvement. Each new edition has added to the book's profusion of case studies and compelling illustrations of successes at improving individual and collective well-being in schools, communities and workplaces.

Rose's Strategy of Preventive Medicine. By Geoffrey Rose, Kay-Tee Khaw and Michael Marmot. Published by Oxford University Press, USA (2008).¹³

A strength of the health promotion profession is that we draw inspiration from eclectic disciplines. For those not

formally trained in health promotion and particularly for those who come to this work via training in (downstream) therapeutics, I'm hopeful they take a big drink of this field's prevention (upstream) Kool-Aid. Population incidence rates are too often conflated with individual cases so a dose of Geoffrey Rose is essential reading for the uninitiated. From the book's abstract: "Rose's book explores the options for prevention, considering them from various viewpoints—theoretical and scientific, sociological and political, practical and ethical. The applications of Rose's book's ideas are illustrated by a variety of examples ranging from heart disease to alcoholism to road accidents. The book's pioneering work focused on a population wide approach to the prevention of common medical and behavioral disorders has become the classic text on the subject."

Paul E. Terry is Editor in Chief the American Journal of Health Promotion and Senior Fellow at the Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO).

Recommended by Sara Johnson

Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much. By Sendil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir.¹⁴

Mullainathan and Shafir provide countless examples of the ways in which the scarcity of any resource (money, food, time) literally captures the mind, automatically and powerfully redirecting attention to the unfulfilled need. Their stories illustrate that scarcity creates a literal limitation, or tax, on bandwidth, which manifests as reduced cognitive capacity and fluid intelligence (i.e., logical reasoning, problem-solving, processing of information, decision making) and reduced executive control. These reductions translate to astonishingly large effects—leaving those experiencing scarcity with less insight, less capacity to think ahead, and less control. "Tunneling," or single-mindedly focusing on managing scarcity, is an example of these cognitive effects. As health promotion professionals, appreciating the dramatic impact of scarcity—and in particular financial scarcity—is critical because many behaviors that seem inexplicable or irrational can be better understood as expected outcomes of reduced and overloaded bandwidth (e.g., incentives that fall outside the "tunnel" are unlikely to be effective). We have the opportunity to free up bandwidth by re-structuring the nature of financial well-being programs offered by employers, using reminders, appropriately timing messages, and clearly and concisely presenting information.

Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade. By Robert Cialdini.¹⁵

Many health promotion professionals are well acquainted with Cialdini's principles of persuasion. Pre-Suasion is all about focusing attention in the moment before a communication is made or an action is requested. In this book, Cialdini provides numerous examples of—and the evidence for—what he refers to as "openers" (i.e., frames, mindsets, primes) that create "privileged moments" in which individuals are more receptive to a given message. Did you know, for example, that

people are more cooperative with others who share personal qualities, such as a birthday or first name? This implicit egoism has important real-world implications. Would-be fitness aficionados, for example, are more likely to sign up for personal training if the trainer has the same birth date, and consumers prefer products when the names have letters in common with their first name. The book contains plain language summaries of and brief reviews of research on numerous openers and attention focusers (e.g., Zeigarnik effect, mystery, metaphor) that may leave you wondering if you have any free will and will definitely inspire you to think differently about the moment before you deliver a key message. Given how much competition there is for attention in today's world, the insights in this book may be just what health promotion professionals need to capture some of it.

Sara Johnson, PhD, Co-President and CEO, Pro-Change Behavior Systems, Inc., USA. Senior Fellow, The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO). Chair, The Art and Science of Health Promotion Conference. Co-Editor, Knowing Well-Being Well section of the American Journal of Health Promotion.

Recommended by David L. Katz

Planetary Health—Protecting Nature to Protect Ourselves. By Myers S, Frumkin H (eds).¹⁶

Reflecting on the configuration of humanity into the great web of life, and on the profound implications of that abiding interdependence, I was sorely tempted to review *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, an iconic exploration of the origins of life as we know it on Earth. But while that work is foundational, it is not of, by, and for this time of crisis. Such timely pertinence and practical relevance populate the pages of *Planetary Health*, edited by Drs. Samuel Myers of the Harvard School of Public Health, and Howard Frumkin of the University of Washington School of Public Health. I have, over recent years, begun chiding any audience of colleagues willing to listen that we can no longer legitimately call ourselves “health” professional if we do not advocate frequently and fiercely for the health of our planet. If that rant were a hymn, *Planetary Health* would be the bible providing it a home. This comprehensive text covers what we are doing to harm the planet, and what we must do to heal it. Of more immediate relevance to health promotion professionals, it lays out in detail how the planetary harms we impose redound to our own disadvantage across an expanse from emerging infections, zoonoses, and yes, pandemics; to food insecurity; to psychological duress; to respiratory disease and the ills of extreme weather. This book deserves a place on any shelf where “health” holds a perch. Refer to it, rely on it, and practice as it preaches. May I get an “amen!”?

Going to Extremes—How Like Minds Unite and Divide. By Sunstein C.¹⁷

As we grapple with the toll of COVID19, mediated not just by SARS-CoV-2 but arguably even more so by social

determinants of health, I was tempted to represent the particular merits of *Why Are Some People Healthy and Others Not?* By Evans and colleagues (1994). But even causes have causes, and feeding both socioeconomic disparities and a prevailing divisiveness is our propensity to consume misinformation, and misunderstand one another. That topic is compellingly addressed along channels of politics and religion in *The Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt (2013), but fileted to pertain to every expression of division in *Going to Extremes* by Cass Sunstein, a law professor at Harvard and an advisor to the Obama Administration. Sunstein explains how information is processed selectively to foment our polarized dissent, and how social networks amplify this liability. While Sunstein focuses on the roots of radicalized terrorism, the confluence of misinformation and misunderstanding beleaguer public health across an expanse from pandemic response, to regulation of toxins, to vaccination policies. If health professionals are to meet and overcome the unique challenges of an age dominated by Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube posts; by tweets, and Google searches; by the self-affirmations of Internet echo chambers—we are duty bound to cultivate expert understanding of misunderstanding, at its origins in human nature. For that timely and urgent mission, Sunstein is our guide.

David L. Katz, MD, MPH, FACPM, FACP, FACLM, Founder and CEO of Diet ID, Inc. President and Founder, True Health Initiative, USA, Co-Editor, Knowing Well-Being Well section of the American Journal of Health Promotion.

Recommended by Jennifer Taylor

Reducing Risks for Mental Disorders: Frontiers for Preventive Intervention Research. By Editors: Patricia J. Mrazek and Robert J. Haggerty.¹⁸

This volume is a summary of a national conference based on Institute of Medicine (IOM) workgroups that provides a critical summary of theory and successful prevention/promotion efforts in mental health to that point and set an agenda that has guided work for over 20 years. The National Academies have published a follow-up report and the volume served as a catalyst for excellent work on prevention and promotion in mental health since its publication. A free PDF download of this is available at National Academies Press.

Psychology of Women's Health: Progress and Challenges in Research and Application. By Stanton, A. L., & Gallant, S. (Eds.)¹⁹

The authors of this volume have been leaders in the application of psychology to enhancing women's health and well-being. The volume provides an important summary of both the lessons learned to the date it was published and, perhaps more importantly, provides an agenda for critical research required in the area of women's health promotion and efforts at prevention of disorder. If there were an honorable mention category in this list, I would include “*The Oxford Handbook of Health Communication, Behavior*

Change and Treatment Adherence,” edited by Martin and DiMatteo.²⁰ M. Robin DiMatteo and her colleagues have been at the forefront of theory and research on the critical role that the ways the communication styles and practices of healthcare providers impact the health and well-being of their patients. This volume provides a comprehensive summary of the scientific basis and lessons in that critical area of health promotion, as well as points toward additional work required to build on and expand those insights.

Jennifer Taylor, PhD, MBA, Vice President for research at Tennessee Tech University.

Recommended by Kerry J. Redican

Is Prevention Better Than Cure? By Louise B. Russell.²¹

The main premise of *Is Prevention Better than Cure* is that preventing disease involves risks as well as benefits and the risks are usually low. Further, while the financial cost of the preventive measures looks small, careful evaluation often shows the full costs are rather large, larger than any savings. In fact, prevention usually adds to medical expenditures. This perspective is applied to discussions of vaccinations, screenings, and lifestyles. The book culminates with a whole chapter focused evaluating prevention. Louise Russell concludes that prevention is not the solution to rising medical expenditures. The narrative is very sobering and presents many points critical of prevention efforts especially in terms of medical expenditures. Many of Russell’s points have been recycled in criticisms of prevention. While there has been much solid literature documenting cost-effectiveness and cost-benefits to prevention efforts it is good to read Louise Russell’s perspective and be prepared to develop a good response to those critical of prevention.

The Road Less Traveled. By M. Scott Peck.²²

Spirituality continues to be a health promotion related topic this difficult to get our heads around for obvious reasons. The late M. Scott Peck was a psychiatrist and his book *The Road Less Traveled* has the potential to change the way the reader thinks about spirituality. In the introduction Peck makes no distinction between mind and spirit and he states *there is no distinction between the processes of spiritual growth and achieving mental growth. They are one in the same.* This is the lens he uses to unpack a myriad of topics like problems and pain, delaying gratification, responsibility, ego boundaries, world views and religion and the miracle of health. After reading *The Road Less Traveled* the reader will think about the topic of spirituality differently and that might influence the reader’s work in health promotion. One caveat: M. Scott Peck wrote a lot of books and sometimes the narrative in his books can come across as a bit “new age” but much less so in *The Road Less Traveled*.

Kerry J. Redican, PhD, MPH, CHES, Professor, Population Health Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

Recommended by Melinda Ickes

Prescription for a Healthy Nation. By Tom Farley & Deborah Cohen.²³

Although written in 2005, the underpinnings of *Prescription for a Healthy Nation* hold true as we continue to face rising healthcare costs and reduced quality of life due to preventable chronic conditions such as obesity, lung cancer, and heart disease. The authors suggest that the solution to ending the epidemics from these chronic illnesses should not rely on our healthcare system or treatment of symptoms, but rather we should dedicate efforts to prevent behaviors that lead to these illnesses through an ecological lens. Through compelling vignettes and historical references peppered with research, the reader is taken on a journey to understand the “Leading Causes of Health” as well as how focusing on “Curve Shifters” such as accessibility, physical structures, social structures, and media could help support behavior change. All of this reinforces the interconnectedness of social determinants of health, why we should focus on the world around us rather than focusing solely on the individual and the multi-faceted approach needed to improve the health of society. The final section of the book, “Healthscaping America,” also highlights widespread disparities that continue to exist and challenges the reader with a call to action to advocate for policies to improve the lives of every American. A healthier American society discussed in the book is not so far off; we just need citizens as well as health professionals to see potential opportunities for improved health and work toward creating them. Every member of allied health should read this book, particularly those in health promotion or public health, and it would not hurt if a few policy makers picked it up along the way as well.

Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us. By Daniel Pink.²⁴

Drawing on 50 years of behavioral science, Pink challenges us to reinvent our thinking on human motivation. Despite what research has unearthed regarding human motivation, we are conditioned to believe that the best way to motivate others and ourselves is with external rewards—the carrot-and-stick approach. Pink references Motivation 3.0, our desire to direct our own lives, to learn, to create, and to better the world (i.e., intrinsic motivation) as a preferred approach. The easy-to-read book references science experiments from a variety of fields, such as psychology, business, and economics, and also includes real world examples to highlight successful companies that have reinvented their approach based on the premise of Motivation 3.0. The 3 elements of true motivation—autonomy, mastery, and purpose—are examined and techniques for putting these into action are given. Although the book tends to focus on motivation in the business world, lessons learned throughout are certainly tied to how we should approach motivation in health promotion programs and diverse settings. As a health educator, we are reminded to consider approaches that will ensure long-term success, not the quick fix society often

perpetuates, and that the type of change we seek as health promotion professionals requires patience and persistence.

Melinda Ickes, PhD, Director of Graduate Studies and Associate Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion. Co-Director of the Tobacco Policy Research Program, University of Kentucky.

Recommended by Michael O'Donnell

Disease Proof: The Remarkable Truth about What Makes Us Well. By David L. Katz, with Stacey Colino.²⁵

I have read hundreds of books that summarize thousands of studies (many of which I have also read) on the link between lifestyle and health. Several of these books have helped me better understand the research and craft my own summaries of key concepts, but this book by Dr. David Katz does it better than the rest and is one of my very top recommendations for health promotion professionals because it provides the theoretical framework, succinct summary of the most important studies and real world translations of complex concepts I have needed (and all of us need) to present a persuasive argument to scientists, policy makers, business leaders and fellow health promotion professionals that not smoking, maintaining healthy weight, being active and eating well could reduce chronic disease for the populations we serve by 80%. Dr. Katz draws on the scientific findings he has gleaned through his decades of experience as a clinician, scientist and scholar, but probably more importantly, from the thousands of times he has translated these findings to patients, medical students, and professional and lay audiences. Dozens of excellent books summarize the hundreds of important studies written since 2013, including several by Dr. Katz, but the core scientific findings have not evolved substantially and this book continues to stand above the rest.

The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Society Stronger. By Richard Wilkerson and Kate Pickett.²⁶

This is the first book I read...more than a decade ago...that made a compelling, scientifically validated case that income inequality, in addition to the already devastating effects of racism and poverty, has a strong connection to premature death and a wide range of health and developmental problems including mental illness, obesity, homicide, teen pregnancy, infant mortality, imprisonment rates, levels of trust, educational performance and social mobility. The book is based on Wilkerson & Pickett's research showing that life expectancy decreases and most of these other problems increase as income inequality increases among the nations of the world and the states within the United States. Preliminary research shows these relationships may also hold at the community level. The corrosive link between inequality and health is explained by at least eight mechanisms, some of which can be measured in biochemical analysis; and the effects begin in childhood and accumulate throughout a lifespan.

Understanding this link between inequality and health helped me understand why it is so difficult for so many people to adopt the healthy lifestyle practices that are so easy for me to adopt and maintain. It also helped me understand why health status of the US population is among the worst of all developed nations despite our spending almost triple per capita those nations. It shaped my vision of the criminal justice, taxation, social services, healthcare and many other federal, state and local policies that must be implemented if a healthy population is our goal. At a more practical level, it helped me better understand how to restructure programs and policies within organizations to engage and enhance health for an entire workforce...and that is why I recommend it to all health promotion professionals.

Michael O'Donnell, MBA, MPH, PhD, CEO, The Art and Science of Health Promotion Institute

Editor's Note: See also: "Health Promotion in the Workplace" 5th edition, By Michael P. O'Donnell, MBA, MPH, PhD.²⁷ To "pay it forward" to our profession, O'Donnell has made this "must read" for those working in workplace based health promotion available as a free PDF online at: <https://www.artsciencehpi.com/books>.

Recommended by Tsitsi Masvawure

The Afterlife Is Where We Come From: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa. By Alma Gottlieb.²⁸

This is one of the most fascinating books on global health that I have ever read. Written by an anthropologist, the book examines infant mortality among the Beng people in the Ivory Coast [or Cote D'Ivoire, in French]. The Beng believe that babies come from the "afterlife," a spiritual world where they are extremely well cared for. Babies who die in infancy are believed to have been unhappy in the real world [i.e., our world] or they found it hard to let go of their memories of the spiritual world. Beng parents thus lavish their babies with expensive gifts (especially jewelry) and engage in elaborate forms of emotional labor to ensure that their babies feel loved enough to remain in the real world. Three central themes—pertinent to public health—animate this book. First is parental love, which is grossly understudied in our field. When it does come up, it is more often the *absence* of parental love, rather than its *presence*, that is the focus. Second is parent-child communication. The Beng believe that babies bring a substantial wealth of knowledge with them from the afterlife and are constantly communicating their thoughts and desires verbally and physically. Parents must therefore learn to decipher these messages and talk to their infants constantly, in order to prevent them from getting bored, sad or unhappy. The Beng present a model of how to communicate effectively with infants. Third is poverty. Gottlieb jolts the reader back to reality in the last chapter of the book by reminding the reader that infant mortality among the Beng is very high and is attributable to extreme poverty in the community as well as to limited access to health services, including vaccinations. This book urges the reader to

examine “culture” in relation to the broader context of extreme poverty and global inequities. I love this book!

Sizwe’s Test: A Young Man’s Journey Through Africa’s AIDS Epidemic. By Jonny Steinberg.²⁹

Jonny Steinberg is a story-teller *par excellence*. In the book, he introduces us to Sizwe, a young South African man who is reluctant to get an HIV test from a newly established Medicines San Frontières (MSF) HIV treatment center in his village, *Ithanga* (Eastern Cape). Steinberg follows Sizwe over the course of a year and tries to understand his refusal to get an HIV test. Steinberg is frustrated with Sizwe for a number of reasons: Sizwe is intelligent, has a pregnant wife, has easy access to antiretroviral drugs via MSF and knows people who are taking these drugs successfully. All of these things should make the decision to get tested for HIV a no-brainer. Healthcare utilization is a key concern in public health, and this book provides insights into some of the complicated reasons individuals might not utilize health services. Stigma and masculinity emerge as central motifs in the book. We also learn that the decision to test is communal rather than individual: Sizwe has to consider the material and reputational costs to himself, his wife and even to his natal family if he tests positive for HIV or if he is seen—by the wrong people—getting an HIV test. Sometimes the mere act of seeking an HIV test opens one up to public scrutiny and makes one socially vulnerable. In short, getting an HIV test is not a simple act. The book also highlights some unintended negative consequences of health programs. We learn that when MSF launched its HIV program in *Ithanga*, the whole village showed up to watch who was getting tested. The crowd quickly figured out that individuals who took a longer to leave the health center had tested positive while those who left quickly had tested negative. Hence, in the course of a single day, villagers knew who was infected and who was not. This book offers many invaluable lessons for anyone involved in health promotion, and in HIV specifically. This is a definite must-read.

Tsitsi Masvawure, DPhil, Professor of Practice in Health Studies and Health Studies Program Advisor and Coordinator, Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. *College of the Holy Cross*

Considerations for Future Best Book Lists

For those drawn to research and authorship, what lessons does this list teach us about writing that draws in readers and withstands the test of time? Foremost, it seems powerful story telling is a sure way to have familiar ideas as well as new concepts speak to us in a way that we want to listen and learn. Some books on this list are written by preeminent health promotion researchers but others are authored by professional journalists. Where the scholarly writers show they have the capacity to weave in great stories via case examples, the journalists show their facility for explaining scientific findings in ways that amplify their finely honed story telling abilities. Besides being great story tellers, the authors here are doggedly determined. The journalists follow characters and story lines to the darkest corners of countries and imbed themselves in

remote neighborhoods. They often persist in tracking a plot for years. Similarly, the scientist writers are inexhaustible in tracing the development and testing of a theory or lessons learned from practice. They discover those studies that have created arcs in the profession but also cite references suggesting whether a theory’s waning days are ahead.

Foremost from these great books, we’re inspired by the author’s passion for the value of the work of health promotion. To that end, their fidelity to truth seeking flows through pages that are a pleasure to read. As such, you can be certain they were painstakingly written. And for that, we owe these prodigious authors a priceless debt of gratitude.

Paul E. Terry, PhD

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Organization (HERO).

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