

Book Review

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention

Harpercollins

Reviewed W. Frederick Zimmerman¹

Creativity : Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention is the latest book from renowned University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It has some faults--e.g., the size of the sample of "creative" individuals under discussion is small and the definition of "creativity" rather too academically oriented--but it offers an important framework and vocabulary for thinking about the subject.

Csikszentmihalyi's central insight--that successful control of the way one directs one's mental attention is crucial both to personal satisfaction and to the successful achievement of creative work--is not startling, but it reflects an underlying truth that bears repeated consideration, especially in a world where it is not always easy to focus one's attention on the truly worthwhile and interesting tasks. My thoughts have returned to this book many times since first reading. Highly recommended.

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Other books by the same author:

- *Flow : The Psychology of Optimal Experience*; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- *The Evolving Self : A Psychology for the Third Millennium*; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- *Changing the World : A Framework for the Study of Creativity*; David Henry Feldman, et al

From Kirkus Reviews, 04/15/96:

A mostly fascinating look at what makes creative people who they are, gleaned largely from interviews with 91 individuals from a wide variety of fields. Despite the subtitle, social psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, who invented the idea of "flow" and authored a book with that title, writes relatively little about the enjoyable, ego- and time- transcending absorption in a task that is conducive to creativity and high achievement. Rather, he focuses on the interplay creative person, and the "domain" (sociologese for "field"), including the receptivity of experts to new ideas and inventions. He quotes extensively--too much so--from the subjects he and his research team interviewed, but there are some gems among these passages, such as writer Madeleine L'Engle's observation that to produce good literature, "your intuition and your intellect should be working together . . . making love." Csikszentmihalyi's weakest section consists of detailing ten personality polarities that supposedly distinguish creative individuals, but that are

also applicable to "balanced" or "fulfilled" individuals. His best sections consist of longer profiles of individuals as varied as poet Anthony Hecht, ecologist Barry Commoner, and astronomer Vera Rubin. Also valuable is a concluding prescriptive section with some helpful advice to the average person on how to make his or her thinking and way of living more creative, particularly a passage on how to rethink and use a disappointing experiences, such as being passed over for a promotion. Unfortunately, redundancies make the work too long by at least a third, and some meaningless or fatuous generalizations also mar the presentation (e.g., "Recent studies suggest that the amount of dalliance, marital infidelity and sexual experimentation [among creative people studied] is much less than earlier estimates had suggested"). Still, the rich anecdotal material Csikszentmihalyi has mined and analyzed make this an important study of a vital topic. (\$40,000 ad/promo) -- Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Synopsis:

Drawing on hundreds of interviews with exceptional people, from biologists and physicists to politicians and business leaders to poets and artists, the author uses his famous "flow" theory to explain the creative process. Csikszentmihalyi's objective is to offer readers an understanding of what leads to creative moments so that they can use that knowledge to enrich their own lives.

Synopsis:

Using the theories put forth in his bestselling book *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi explains the creative process, providing readers with lessons on how to tap into their own creativity through the examples of nearly 100 people whose achievements have changed our world. --This text refers to the paperback edition of this title.

Customer Comments

jcarrella@aol.com, 06/13/97, rating=6:

Interesting, but ultimately disappointing. Like all C's work, this book is stimulating and easy to read, in parts inspiring, in parts depressing. C says that no one can be Creative with a capital C, unless he masters all that went before him in his field. Accordingly, children, no matter how original, cannot, by definition be creative. A paradoxical and, I guess, creative observation. C is especially intriguing when he discusses creativity as the result of interaction between the individual, the field, and the domain. Creativity is not a private enterprise but occurs only when an individual, who has mastered his subject matter is acknowledged by the gatekeepers of his field of endeavor or if, like Freud or the Wright brothers, creates his own field. The social aspect of creativity is nowhere better discussed. Unfortunately, C articulates no clear thesis, and with the exception of long quotes from notably creative people, the last third of his book degenerates into platitude and truism.

A reader, 06/23/96, rating=5: Not as good as his other books

By and large, the book is OK, but it doesn't have the same impact as his other books. There are also some things that I strongly disagree with, namely his definition of "creativity." Real creativity" happens when the work is ultimately appreciated by society. To me creativity is anything that is the antithesis of the "consume and destroy" philosophy. Rather, creativity is "creation and conservation."

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ⁱ Updated May 08, 1999 & Last updated: November 2009 revised December 27 2022