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Being Wrong: Adventures In The Margin Of Error



ADVENTURES IN THE
MARGIN OF ERROR

Kathryn Schulz



Synopsis

“Both wise and clever, full of fun and surprise about a topic so central to our lives that we almost never even think about it.” —Bill McKibben, author of *Earth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*

In the tradition of *The Wisdom of Crowds* and *Predictably Irrational* comes *Being Wrong*, an illuminating exploration of what it means to be in error, and why homo sapiens tend to tacitly assume (or loudly insist) that they are right about most everything. Kathryn Schulz, editor of *Grist* magazine, argues that error is the fundamental human condition and should be celebrated as such. Guiding the reader through the history and psychology of error, from Socrates to Alan Greenspan, *Being Wrong* will change the way you perceive screw-ups, both of the mammoth and daily variety, forever.

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Customer Reviews

To err, we hear, is human. But if that is true, then why do we take erring so hard? This is the question Kathryn Schultz tries to get at in her book, *Being Wrong*. The first section analyzes error by recounting what philosophers, psychologists and others have thought about what it is and why it

happens. Next, we examines the factors that lead us to err: senses deceive us, reason is easily influenced by extra-rational factors, we trust experts we like instead of those who may be telling the truth, etc. The third section explores what it feels like to be wrong: we may get embarrassed, defensive, heartbroken, mystified, angry. And lastly, the author reveals why it is she believes error should be seen not as a gaffe to be avoided, but a gaffe that should be embraced and accepted as an an inevitable part of being a finite and dynamic human. First, I must say something I very rarely do about a book: I never once found this one repetitive or unnecessarily long. Each section, and chapter within it, is about a different aspect of error that was not discussed before, from how philosophers conceive of error, to the social factors that influence error, to our amazing capacity to deny even obvious error. And the real-world examples she chooses to illustrate all of these things are humorous, relateble, and sometimes a bit lamentable. And what is the author's unique theory about erring? The author writes first that erring is an inevitable part of being human. We are finite animals for whom probability is as close as we can come to certainty (even though certainty is what we want). Since life demands that we make decisions based on what we think will happen in the future, it is simply inevitable that some of these will be wrong.

One thing is for certain: Kathryn Schulz is a heckuva' writer. Her brilliant interchange between humor and articulation is the stuff of greatness. Moreover - and perhaps a by-product of Schulz' mastery in presentation - there are few (if any) wasted words in this text. While many books almost goad you into skimming every 2nd or 3rd word, 'Being Wrong' certainly makes every word count. For a guy with the attention span of a billy goat grazing grass, keeping me reading every word is no small feat. There is a tradeoff in such density in value. 'Being Wrong' tends to see-saw between light analogy to heavy exploration almost without warning, making for a staccato transition between example and execution. The philosophical arguments emerge as bloated at times, the case studies a tad soft and looooong. Word economy clearly has its strengths and weaknesses. Thus, I echo other reviewers in that this book might've been better served both shorter and as a potential essay. Amen. Going deeper down the content rabbit hole, it's hard to ignore Schulz' near-frequent lapses into political examples dripping with sarcasm favoring a particular perspective only. Perhaps I'm a stickler, but there something grossly unfit about an advertised objective analysis of 'wrong' justified through political opinion. After the fifth instance of this justification, I admittedly began to question the overarching arguments contained in the book. (I could care less about who you vote/d for; just don't put square peg into round hole to get the point across, ad nauseum.

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