

Unsafe Thinking: How to be Creative and Bold When You Need It Most

Jonah Sachs
(Random House, 2019)

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In his latest work, *Unsafe Thinking: How to be Creative and Bold When You Need it Most* (2019), Jonah Sachs offers an insight into the ways in which creative and risky thinking allows individuals and often their businesses to push boundaries and stay original. In his introduction, Sachs defines unsafe thinking as “the ability to meet challenges with a willingness to depart from standard operating procedures; to confront anxiety, tolerate criticism, take intelligent risks, and refute conventional wisdom - especially one’s own views - in order to receive breakthroughs.” He urges readers to revolt against existing traditional and confining business models which hinder creativity instead of making use of it through examples of people who have stepped out of this way of thinking, and highlighting their success.

Having completed a Bachelor’s degree in American Studies at Wesleyan University, Sachs and his business partner formed ‘Free Range Studios’, with the aim of giving social issues the same platform and tools of success that large corporate brands use consistently in their media campaigns. His involvement with viral videos such as ‘The Meatrix’ and ‘The Story of Stuff’ led Sachs to become known for controversial videos on social issues. His first book *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell - and Live - the Best Stories Will Rule the Future* (2012) describes the phenomenon of ‘empowerment marketing’, and was critically acclaimed in Forbes magazine.

While books in this area can often force the reader to wade through business jargon, ‘Unsafe Thinking’ stands out from the crowd in this respect. Sachs’ experience as a TED Talk speaker is evident through his energetic yet clear voice and tone. He delivers his message with a fun and enjoyable insight into the world of unsafe thinking by avoiding the “safe” confinement of structure. Instead, he offers a ‘road map’ for the journey of unsafe thinking. This is divided into a number of sections:

Courage: Examines myths around anxiety and explains why it is not always a negative thing.

Motivation: Examines the division between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the importance of harnessing the power of both.

Learning: Addresses the fact that we often see a decline in creativity, learning and performance once someone becomes an expert.

Flexibility: Demonstrates the power and limits of intuition – the alternative power of counterintuitive/ridiculous ideas.

Morality: How doing the ‘right’ thing often causes people to stay stuck in their ways/safe which often leads to the ‘wrong’ thing. Instead Sachs posits an “intelligent disobedience”.

Leadership: Leading teams to do the same.

Each section is packed with examples of safe and unsafe thinking from throughout history. From Gandhi, Thomas Edison and John Cleese to the creator who stood by the rise and fall of his company, Whole Foods, and the woman who was CEO at the time of the demise of Pets.com - Sachs’s motley crew of unsafe thinkers keeps the reader interested and entertained throughout the book. At times Sachs’ narrative is thrilling - such as when he describes a group of explorers who attempted to travel up the length of the river Nile. At a particularly tricky section of the river, the men were forced to employ the use of a flying boat, only to discover a group of sleeping hippos obstructing their landing. The onus is on the reader to take the array of anecdotes and apply them to his or her own life, but it is difficult to know how to do this. It seems that Sachs offers little practical advice, instead laying out the stepping stones for inspiration.

The book appears quite groundbreaking in the first few chapters, but once you become confident in your own knowledge of unsafe thinking, it starts to feel a little stale. There is an interesting section on ‘flow’ but not something that needs to be read if you’re already familiar with the concept. Although written in an engaging manner, making the reader feel inspired while reading, it’s unclear how/if this information will be used sometime after reading the book. The ‘key takeaways’ section at the end of each chapter feels a little too close to a textbook to elicit any revelations. In terms of what Sachs calls the “science side of things”, much of the ‘scientific’ research posited by Sachs is over-simplified. The book is littered with ‘scientific evidence’ that does not seem to hold much substance: ‘scientists have shown’, ‘researchers have found’, ‘psychologists say’ - leave the reader feeling a little underwhelmed and certainly don’t add anything to Sachs’ argument, if he set out to argue anything at all. However, the anecdotes offered by Sachs are undeniably interesting and entertaining, and, despite being difficult to implement in one’s own life, the overall message of unsafe thinking and of becoming somewhat comfortable with a degree of anxiety is a positive one.