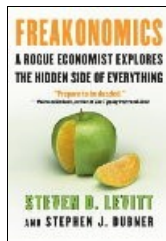


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Book Review

Freakonomics

A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything

by [Steven Levitt](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer

Posted: March 2, 2006

"Prepare to be dazzled," says Malcolm Gladwell in orange type on the cover of *Freakonomics*. I was fairly dazzled by Gladwell's own books *The Tipping Point*

and *Blink*, and figured that *Freakonomics* would provide more of the same: intriguing ideas about how life works, illustrated with oddball examples and rendered in fast-moving prose. *Freakonomics* delivers on some of this promise, but in the end I wasn't dazzled.

Freakonomics has oddball examples, to be sure, and the prose is certainly fast-moving. Perhaps the problem is that it's a little too fast-moving. In the interests of making the book more readable, coauthor Stephen J. Dubner seems to have left out the most important element: how "rogue economist" Steven D. Levitt uses the tools of economics and statistics to reach his startling conclusions. If you read Dubner's 2003 profile of Levitt in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, you won't find much that's new here.

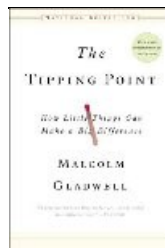
Freakonomics does contain a lot of interesting information: how crack dealers organize their business (a lot like McDonald's), why adding a swimming pool to your household is more dangerous than adding a gun, and why real estate agents get better prices when they sell their own houses than they do when they sell yours. Levitt clearly has a gift for asking interesting questions, and when the data can be read fairly straightforwardly — such as looking at test results to determine if teachers are helping their students cheat — he produces convincing and useful answers.

When Levitt turns to more complex questions, though, he is less convincing. In a chapter called "A Roshanda by Any Other Name," he asks whether distinctively black names are a handicap to those who carry them. Studies have shown that when two identical resumes are sent out, one with a "black" name such as DeShawn Williams and another with a white-sounding or neutral name like Jake Williams, it is Jake Williams who gets most of the interviews. But is DeShawn rejected because he is black, asks Levitt, or because his name "sounds like someone from a low-income, low-education family"? The real problem for DeShawn, the authors say, isn't that employers don't like his name (or don't like that he's black, which his name reveals) but that someone named DeShawn is in fact more likely to come from a low-income, low-education family (even compared with middle-class blacks) and is therefore less likely to succeed.

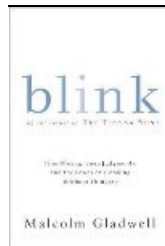
This may be true in general, but in the case of the resumes, it seems to miss the point. The two resumes tell the same story of education and past accomplishments — it is just the name that has changed. In other examples in the book, such as the discussion of dating websites, Levitt is perfectly willing to conclude that there's a lot of racism out there. (Half of the white women on dating sites say race doesn't matter, but 97% of the men whose ads they respond to are white.) Why not here?

Late in the book, in a discussion of parenting, Dubner finally introduces the concept of regression analysis, a basic tool of statistical research, and he does a good job of making it comprehensible and even interesting. But it's too little, too late. On topics such as why campaign spending doesn't really win elections and why the real cause of the drop in crime in the '90s is the decline in unwanted children caused by more readily available abortions, the authors just don't do enough to make the case solid. Perhaps Levitt's arguments are tighter than they seem here — it probably wasn't for nothing that he won the John Bates Clark Medal for economics — but you wouldn't know it from this book.

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler," Einstein once said. In *Freakonomics*, the work of Steven D. Levitt has been made a little too simple.



The Tipping Point
by [Malcolm Gladwell](#)



Blink
by [Malcolm Gladwell](#)