

The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery

Sarah Lewis

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It is one of the enduring enigmas of the human experience: many of our most iconic, creative endeavors from Nobel Prize winning discoveries to entrepreneurial inventions and works in the arts are not achievements but conversions, corrections after failed attempts.

The gift of failure is a riddle. Like the number zero, it will always be both a void and the start of infinite possibility. *The Rise* a soulful celebration of the determination and courage of the human spirit makes the case that many of our greatest triumphs come from understanding the importance of this mystery.

This exquisite biography of an idea is about the improbable foundations of creative human endeavor. *The Rise* begins with narratives about figures past and present who range from writers to entrepreneurs; Frederick Douglass, Samuel F. B. Morse, and J. K. Rowling, for example, feature alongside choreographer Paul Taylor, Nobel Prize winning physicists Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov, Arctic explorer Ben Saunders, and psychology professor Angela Duckworth.

The Rise explores the inestimable value of often ignored ideas the power of surrender for fortitude, the criticality of play for innovation, the propulsion of the near win on the road to mastery, and the importance of grit and creative practice. From an uncommonly insightful writer, *The Rise* is a true masterwork.

The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery Details


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Fred Darbonne says

An insightful read for anyone interested in developing their own creative capacities, Sarah Lewis helps us understand how our experiences with failure and setbacks can foster our inner resources to make corrections and fuel greater achievement. She makes skillful use of narratives to show us that many “iconic” breakthroughs are actually corrections after grappling with failure. She explores the differences between mastery and perfectionism, how near wins can motivate us, and the amateur’s “useful wonder” that can enable them to see what experts miss because their established knowledge bias can prevent them from seeing things in new ways. She differentiates between the unhealthy persistence that can come from the comfort of success, and grit, which she refers to as the “focused moxie” that is a sustained response to adversity.

Lewis takes us through an enlightening tour of creativity, failure, and mastery across a breathtaking swath of endeavor ranging from archery, arctic exploration, modern dance, urban development, the power of images, the motion picture industry, science, invention, and art and literature.

Sarah Lewis has served as a curator for both the Tate Modern and The Museum of Modern Art, is a Critic at the Yale University School of Art MFA program. She has served on President Obama’s Arts Policy Committee. A graduate of Harvard and Oxford, she will receive her Ph.D from Yale in 2014.

Claire says

I received this book as a goodreads First Reads giveaway.

Using examples from athletics, science, and the arts, Sarah Lewis examines the value of failure and "near wins" in ultimately reaching success. Included in the overall category of failure are criticism, both professional and personal, experiments that do not prove a hypothesis but point to other discoveries, and the inability to soldier on despite adversity. Essentially, Ms. Lewis' conclusion is that failure, in whatever form, can be used constructively to reach a larger goal.

There is no doubt that the author is extremely knowledgeable on this topic. Her work is well-researched and documented, and displays an impressive breadth of investigation. However, the writing style is more typical of a college textbook than a book designed for general consumption. In fact, I would argue that *The Rise* is quite appropriate for a college-level psychology course, and would be a very good requirement for Fine Arts or experimental science students.

Kudos to Ms. Lewis on a thoughtful, provocative volume geared for academia; however, I believe most readers will find it somewhat inaccessible.

Lisa says

I want to thank Sarah Lewis and Goodreads First Reads Giveaway for the copy of *The Rise: the Gift of Failure*, and the *Search for Mastery*.

I found there was a lot in this book which resonated with my own life. The book focused on how creativity, failure, and mastery all are interconnected. If you are expecting a grand solution this book is probably not for you but if you are willing to sit for a while and simply be present you will become more aware of how to develop grit, be willing to take risks, not fear failure, and create a life truly worth living.

Zach says

Reads like a compilation of other people's thoughts. So many nonfiction books these days just seem to be taking what other people have said or think or feel or do and stringing them together. Like one of those necklaces you make at a craft table at a children's carnival.

Jane says

I want to thank Sarah Lewis and Goodreads First Reads Giveaway for the copy of *The Rise: the Gift of Failure*, and the *Search for Mastery*.

I found *The Rise* read like a college text.

I will be able to use *The Rise* as a reference for a couple of college classes that I plan to take in the future, so it has value for me but it is not an easy to read as some of my other reference books that are similar in subject matter at a college level text.

David Cate says

AS the pace of our productive world continues to whirl into a rotation that is nothing short of a blur, we're starting to look back on what measurements we can as our efforts relate to success.

The first time Sarah's book moved across my radar was a podcast with Debbie Millman. Her podcast called Design Matters bridges art, design, philosophy and science into a nice cauldron of audible conversations that inspire me on my daily commute.

Sarah is an academic with a ivy league background. She's a expert on fine art and has an interesting book filled with antidotal references to success as it emanates from failure. Stirring from her experience in art and history she's able to echo the at-times frustrating and gritty paths inspired artists, explorers and inventors have followed in their life-changing success stories.

At times, academic and lofty, the book floats at an altitude that it times lofty and yet rich with perspective. Her awareness of painters, creatives, historical references and scientific studies are convincing and inspiring to anyone who strives to improve their creative pursuits and or leadership effectiveness.

Collectively, this is an entertaining and inspiring read well worth anyones effort to improve their confidence

and understanding of the creative process.

Kelly Hubbard says

My first thought on this book is chaos. It jumps from idea to idea with no clear point. The author put a lot of information on the page for you to read but there was no wrap up, no summary, no overall point on each concept. Just ideas. Just information. Just stories. It felt like she dropped all of this information she meticulously researched into your lap then left you figure out what it means and what to do with it. It is an incomplete book. Perhaps it is written this way so we can form our own opinion on the matter and not allow something like the Asch experiment to sway our views. Perhaps she took the section on incompleteness very seriously and used the disconnected parts as her way of living this principle. I don't know why she wrote it this way but it was difficult for me to read.

On a positive note, it is well researched and interesting. It is an uplifting book that encourages people to realize the many barriers to success and how to overcome them. A lot of the book focuses on taking negatives and flipping them into positives. It lives by the idea that "it's not what happens to you but how you respond to it." It strives to make the reader bend their long accepted notions of failure and attempts to make the reader see failure as a step on the way to success and mastery.

I also found that a lot of what I was reading was not new information or new ideas. For me, a lot of this book could have been heard during church lessons and talks. I took a lot of notes while reading and the notes usually referenced a gospel principle. Here are a few examples... "To convert our own energy and operate at full force, often we must first surrender." My notes on that quote, "Give it to God." Another quote, "When we stop resisting something, we stop giving it power." Another note, "Be meek. Not weak." These are only a couple of examples of the many overlapping ideas from Lewis' book and the teachings I have heard at church.

Overall, this book is a good read for those who are on a journey for mastery. It helps people to trudge on and not give up on their dreams. It gives them inspiration and even some direction on how to their achieve goals. I just wish it was done in a more polished way with a clear perspective.

Julie says

I was really looking forward to reading this book, as the topic is one I have thought about for years now. However, this book was not a pleasure to read. In fact, it was a lot of work, and I would have stopped reading it halfway through had I not gotten it in the First Reads giveaway and felt obligated to finish it.

The author's writing style really made reading this book a struggle. Most of the time, I would describe it as "lofty"--inaccessible to the average reader (I consider myself to be well-educated, but her choice of language was often way above me and/or confusing). However, at times she would have run-on or incomplete sentences. In addition, while some of the stories were interesting in places, the whole thing lacked focus, and I wasn't sure what she was trying to convey. The overall effect was that it read like a thesis with a catchy title by someone who was trying like heck to be impressive but failed to present a readable, cohesive paper that made a clear point.

Mary Louise Schumacher says

From my brilliant, insightful and soulful professor -- who encourages us to experiment and fail in her art history course. This book reads like a cultural history of self doubt. It is about the meaning inherent in the struggle to create and understand. A related recommendation: Sarah Lewis edited a special edition of Aperture earlier this year titled "Art & Justice" (also the name of our course). It should be required reading. For everyone.

Michael says

This book couldn't have come at a better time in my life. It is strength for the journey for all creative people. "My barn having burned down / I can now see the moon" - Mizuta Masahide

Courtney Whisenant says

This is the most difficult book I've read since graduate school. The author's research and footnotes were quite impressive but the writing interfered with the effective presentation of her findings. If you're like me, you will need a dictionary to aid in the understanding of many words in the context in which they're used. I've always considered myself an educated person with above average intelligence but I concede that this book was over my head. I really enjoy books that make me think and I was hoping this would be that type book for me. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to comprehend the ideas and concepts presented well enough to engage in an intellectual thought process.

Ben Thurley says

There are some nice moments in this set of reflections on various aspects of creativity – failure and the spur of "near wins", mastery and the gap between conception and execution, play and the permission to work without feedback from inner and outer critics – but the work as a whole felt forced to me. It felt like a series of essays, yoked together and expanded to book length, leavened by an almost scandalous amount of namedropping and associations the purpose of which seemed to be mostly to showcase the author's breadth of reading and interesting and varied social and professional circles.

I'd have read and appreciated any of the essays alone, I reckon. I wasn't totally convinced by the whole package.

Michael says

I was recommended this book because I had liked Grit, by Angela Duckworth. The range of stories and references are a lot broader than Grit, and the result is something a little less focussed. Still worth the read.

Martha Love says

I love that Sarah Lewis has explored how being persistent leads to success, taking a failure as a sign that one needs to continue to push forward. She calls this important characteristic of persistence despite failure being "gutsy" or having grit. I totally resonated with her discussions pointing to the idea that for success being "gutsy" is more important than intelligence. I like that she includes the idea that teaching our children the importance of learning to push forward despite failure is of tremendous importance.

This book will really get you to reflecting and reassessing some experiences around failure of your own as well as ones you have observed in others. Here is an observation that I made some years ago and find quite relative to Sarah's discussions concerning "learning to fail": While in graduate school in psychology, I noticed a couple of teachers giving some straight A students a B or even a C on a paper. And when questioned by the students who received these grades, the response of the teachers was that they thought they needed to learn how to fail in their own eyes (I never thought a B was failing but some people certainly did). At the time, I personally thought the teachers were being a bit cruel, but now after reading this book, I have reassessed that decision and can see where they were coming from. I think that the teachers were trying to prepare the students for the constant revision process that often feels like failure to the candidate who is writing a thesis. Actually, however, I did not find that these students learned this valuable lesson of learning how to fail and be persistent from this experience of one lowered grade, as they were people who had long ago learned to push forward despite failure.

Thank you to Sarah Lewis as I won a copy of *The Rise: the gift of failure, and the search for mastery* on a Goodreads First Reads Giveaways and I quite enjoyed the information and research from all the many interviews that she took the time to have in her mastery of this topic on the gift of failure.

Martha Love

author of *What's Behind Your Belly Button? A Psychological Perspective of the Intelligence of Human Nature and Gut Instinct* and

Increasing Intuition Intelligence: How the Awareness of Instinctual Gut Feelings Fosters Human Learning, Intuition, and Longevity

Clayton Fuller says

The Good: Sara Lewis is really smart and interesting. She's the kind of person you'd want to go to dinner with and say "hey, what interesting thing have you come across lately." I found this book relevant considering that I'm going through a career change (military lawyer to non profit startup)--so it was uplifting to read of the stories on failure in the book. I paid particular attention to the chapter on grit. Some of the themes she explores aren't groundbreaking--failure teaches us things that may get us to a greater success--the near win makes us hungrier, etc, but she is able to write about this in such lyrical prose and energy that they seem new. I'm fascinated by the black list and the Friday Night Experiments (which lead to a Nobel Prize).

The Bad: In the book she writes "I wrote this book, too, as a time capsule, a way to gather seemingly disparate stories to show their common themes" and at times I found some of her examples, exemplars, and quotes to be too disparate. As if she had this idea or quote and cobbled it into some of the sections because

she at the very least wanted in the book.

The Interesting: The Asche experiment part is well worth the read. This experiment showed we tend to abandon our own opinion altogether when it differs from the group and when we have to state our dissent out loud. I found this often in the military--just never knew how to articulate it. I also liked the bit about the inventor of Spanxs whose dad would ask, instead of what did you do today, what did you fail at today?

The Takeaway: I need to doggedly pursue my goals, and also find a way to apply some of these lessons to public policy. Also, sometimes I hate experts or people with a great deal of experience. Again, a function of just coming out of a really bureaucratic environment--but sometimes being an amateur means you can make real discoveries.
