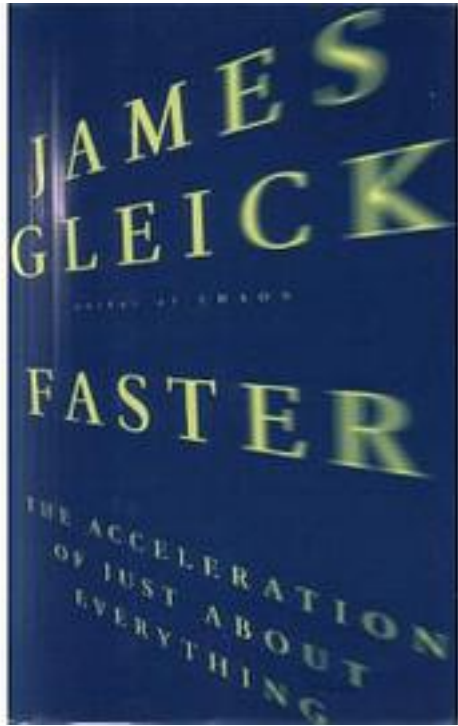


James Gleick faster the acceleration of just about everything (1999)



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James Gleick, author of the bestseller "Chaos" has created another compelling and often disturbing tale of the nature of our society. "Faster" characterizes our modern day thinking as overwhelmingly occupied with notions of time - time management, saving time, using time, keeping time, multi-tasking, channel surfing, high speed internet, moving sidewalks, high speed elevators, telephone speed dial functions, and, of course, the plethora of self-help books touting improvements in personal efficiency and productivity.

A few pithy trenchant quotations from the book will illustrate Gleick's brilliant observation of the twenty-first century's morbid pre-occupation with time, speed and the generally unhealthy acceleration of life:

"A medication is marketed `for women who don't have time for a yeast infection' - as though slackers might have time for that."

"There are ... places and objects that signify impatience. Doctors' anterooms. The DOOR CLOSE button in elevators, so often a placebo, with no function but to distract for a moment those riders to whom ten seconds seem an eternity."

"Marketers and technologists anticipate your desires with fast ovens, quick playback, quick freezing and fast credit. We bank the extra minutes that flow from these innovations, yet we feel impoverished and we cut back - on breakfast, on lunch, on sleep, on daydreams."

"It might seem that to save time means to preserve it, spare it, free it from some activity that might otherwise have consumed it in the hot flames of busy-ness. Yet time-saving books are constantly admonishing people to do things."

And yet, paradoxically, this notion of filling every millisecond of every day with productive activity is juxtaposed with the rather strange realization that:

"Our idea of boredom - ennui, tedium, monotony, lassitude, mental doldrums - has been a modern invention. The word `boredom' barely existed even a century ago."

Boredom - as silence, as emptiness, as time unfilled - was a mental state all but inconceivable a hundred years ago. But perversely, with all of the activities available at our fingertips and the ability to access those activities in seconds, we find ourselves thirsting for more and more.

I wonder what Gleick would think of the fact that there were times when I found his book so interesting that I was skimming ... just so I could absorb it more quickly. (Note to self: the next time I listen to a piece of classical music, I'm going to do nothing else. I'm going to listen to the music for its own sake). Highly recommended.

Paul Weiss

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