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Recommended books that give career advice for Ph.D.s (essay)

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“I think of life as a good book. The further you get into it, the more it begins to make sense.” -- Harold Kushner

Sometimes there is no substitute for a good book, and in the world of Ph.D. career advising, a few standout books really make sense for doctoral students and postdocs. As you start both a new academic semester *and* a new year, this is a great time to develop some plans and ideas about your career and professional development, so I’m sharing a shortlist of the books I have found to resonate with Ph.D.s engaged in a career search.

One thing all Ph.D.s definitely know how to do is research, and while amazing online Ph.D. career resources are available (like this “Carpe Careers” column), I’ve found that many of the graduate students, postdoctoral researchers and alumni I advise on career development sometimes like to delve more deeply into a topic. The following books are ones I like to recommend -- and also are books I’ve just really enjoyed reading.

So What Are You Going to Do With That? Finding Careers Outside Academia, by Susan Basalla and Maggie Debelius. This is a book I wish I had written, because everything the authors advise is exactly the counsel that I give Ph.D.s questioning, “Why did I do all this research if I can’t get an academic job?” I find this book especially helpful for anyone just beginning to think about what a big deal it is to leave academe and those who are suffering “Ph.D. identity crisis.” (Remember, your degree is a credential -- it doesn’t define your capabilities!)

The Academic Job Search Handbook, by Julia Vick and Jennifer Furlong. This book contains tried and true practical advice from two fantastic authors with years of experience in the graduate career world. It’s the book that everyone on the academic job market should read cover to cover.

The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job, by Karen Kelsky. Just out this year, and full of no-nonsense bold advice, it’s a great complement to *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. (All Ph.D.s on the job market should have dog-eared copies of both with lots of highlighting and comments in the margins.) But take note: *The Professor Is In* is not for lightweights or those whose feelings are easily hurt. The author delivers her message to Ph.D.s

with super sass and style, and I know that I definitely want Kelsky on my side in an academic brawl.

Give and Take, by Adam Grant. This book synthesizes research on how and why people interact, which is essentially the basis of networking. For Ph.D.s, the message that *Give and Take* delivers is about finding your place in the world and understanding where your comfort level lies when it comes to communication and interaction (as well as recognizing that not everyone will give or take the way you do). I find *Give and Take* a great recommendation for international grad students and postdocs who want to grasp the concepts of networking. (And even though Grant doesn't believe in the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory, I still think this book is one of my top five favorites ever, not just in career books!)

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking, by Susan Cain. Speaking of teaching Ph.D.s to embrace networking, an unavoidable fact is that the social interaction aspects of many career activities simply drain introverts of their life force. Career thinking and doing is tough for everyone, but especially for introverts. *Quiet* helps introverts understand and embrace their strengths (and is also a useful book for extroverts to read and better understand their colleagues, employees or friends). After enjoying *Quiet*, I started following Susan's [Quiet Revolution](#) ^[1] and learn something new about introversion and extraversion every day.

Networking for Nerds, by Alaina Levine. No way around it -- you have to network in order to get a job. Ph.D. jobs are in many ways even tougher to find than "regular" jobs, which is why networking is so necessary. Levine's message to readers is all about attitude and action. Her book is full of practical advice, and those readers with logical linear minds will appreciate its structure and order, as well as its conversational writing style. I give *Networking for Nerds* as a prize at almost every career talk I give (whether it's about networking or not).

Zen and the Art of Making a Living, by Laurence Boldt. What sets this book apart from other career guides is its focus on helping readers find work that is affirming. What that means is: finding work that you enjoy and that lets you use your talents. It's a tough sell for many of my advisees, many of whom just want to find a job quickly and only grudgingly learn to identify skills and values before taking a leap into the world of work. But for those who are looking for a career book that goes beyond the basics, *Zen and the Art of Making a Living* is a treasure chest full of activities, essays and ideas. I recommend it to Ph.D.s who like to ponder and philosophize. It's huge -- not to be read in one sitting -- so I suggest it as a sort of "career reference activity book" so as not to overwhelm busy Ph.D.s.

How to Negotiate Your First Job, by Paul Levy and Farzana Mohamed. This little gem has been flying off the shelf of my office's newly created career library, and we now have a couple of copies to meet incessant demand. It's short, sweet and gets to all the points a novice negotiator needs to consider. The target audience is undergrads, but let's face it: most Ph.D.s have the equivalent amount of job-offer experience as a 21-year-old, so the advice rings true. It can also be read in less than an hour.

I know that Ph.D.s have found other amazing books to be helpful in exploring careers. Some are very specific -- for example, the most-borrowed book from my office's career library is Toby Freedman's *Career Opportunities in Biotechnology and Drug Development*. Other books -- Richard Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute* comes to mind -- are very broad. The few books

that I've listed in this essay represent the ones that I find myself recommending again and again to Ph.D.s from all different disciplines at various institutions. I would like to hear from others about books that have inspired or encouraged them on the career journey.

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