

Book review

How to be an Explorer of the World

Portable Life Museum

Category: Book Reviews / Self-help

Author: Keri Smith

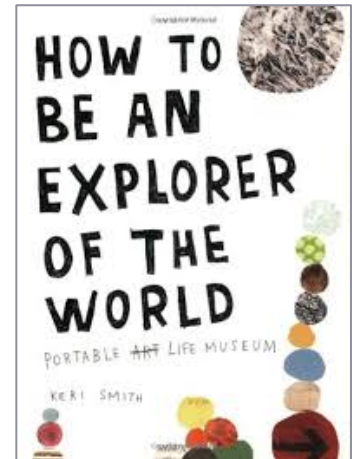
Year: 2011

Publisher: Penguin Putnam, US

ISBN: 9780399534607

Audience: Supporting Myself

Summary: An interactive guide for exploring and documenting the art and science of everyday life



An appealing but, for me, potentially dangerous book! Immediately it promises to be neither tedious nor difficult. The book's quarto size and 13mm thickness of strong, flexible leaves and cover are pleasant to handle.

The 208 black, white, grey and orange pages, many illustrated, and its fieldwork recording sheets are visually enticing. The text of handwritten capitals, even to the page numbers, ditto. I am interested, challenged.

Read in any order, adapt and interpret

Instructions are to read the book in any order, starting with whatever arouses a twinge of excitement. There are suggestions, not rules, and every exercise can be adapted, is open to interpretation and to be seen as an experiment. Many exercises involve using the senses to notice the world in more detail, perhaps even suspending usual frameworks of experience – do you recognise mindfulness, originally a Buddhist meditation practice, now increasingly used in therapy?

Fail-safe tasks that need little energy

So far a helpful book for depression: fail-safe tasks that need little energy, but require the assertive act of choice and a reaching out to the world beyond self. Many exercises ask for a walk outdoors, in itself therapeutic but often very difficult to achieve, I find. But even at the low point of being curled up in a foetal position under the bed, hiding from life, I could still listen for different sounds, notice smells or think of all the different materials surrounding me. Certainly a useful adjunct or approach to journaling, which I've stopped.

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On page 109, author Keri Smith quotes John Cage: “[The residual purpose of art is] purposeless play... This play, however, is an affirmation of life... a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent...”

I find depression to be a serious, life-denying, self-denying experience, so what a boon to have a book telling me to play! Smith also quotes Charles Eames: “Who is to say that pleasure is useless?”

In my rarer episodes of elevated mood I would definitely need to stay away from the book. In fact if I had the book, using it daily might be an early warning sign that my mood was heading upwards.

What to trade for this book?

I am, by nature, a collector and hoarder. As a child I had collections of books, shells, postage stamps, fizzy bottle labels, rock samples, cacti; today it’s newspaper articles, yarn, fabric pieces, zips, buttons, card and paper, reels of thread, knitting patterns, books and cacti again. I collect for knowledge, because I love analysing and classifying, and to have resources for creating. Especially as my husband is the same if not more so, I don’t need this book’s encouragement to collect objects, though collecting descriptions might pass muster. I even collect projects and having many on the go may be a sign of a high on its way.

I’m supposed to be decluttering. If I buy *How to be an Explorer of the World* for \$23.40 from the University Bookshop I must cull a book in exchange. I could also make art from bits of my clutter and hold an art show – helpful advice on how to is just before the glossary, bibliography and thanks – and might sell enough to buy storage containers and folders.

Lastly the imagination exercise on pages 144 and 145: What if I had the power of invisibility? If all my neighbours had secret lives? If the newspaper held all the secrets of the universe in some kind of code? If all leaves had secret messages embedded into them? And what would it be like to travel on a beam of light? Wouldn’t a psychiatrist be interested in hearing about this!

Keri Smith has written other books and has a great website: www.kerismith.com

Reviewed by Marion Beamish

The Mental Health Foundation’s Resource and Information Service brings you book reviews fortnightly. To view more go to www.mentalhealth.org.nz/books

