



The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance

Steven Kotler

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In this groundbreaking book, *New York Times*—bestselling author Steven Kotler decodes the mystery of ultimate human performance. Drawing on over a decade of research and first-hand reporting with dozens of top action and adventure sports athletes like big wave legend Laird Hamilton, big mountain snowboarder Jeremy Jones, and skateboarding pioneer Danny Way, Kotler explores the frontier science of “flow,” an optimal state of consciousness in which we perform and feel our best.

Building a bridge between the extreme and the mainstream, *The Rise of Superman* explains how these athletes are using flow to do the impossible and how we can use this information to radically accelerate performance in our own lives.

At its core, this is a book about profound possibility; about what is actually possible for our species; about where—if anywhere—our limits lie.

The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance Details

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From Reader Review The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance for online ebook

Darth J says

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Rahmad says

The book portray the life and achievements of several incredible extreme athletes and introduce the concept of "being in the flow" as the reason for their amazing achievements. I would have liked a much more elaboration on this flow concept and how we can apply it in our own life.

Paulo says

Um bom livro abordando o Fluxo (flowgenomeproject.com).

Narra as desventuras dos praticantes de esportes radicais e sua ascensão, atribuindo o êxito da superação de marcas ao "Fluxo".

O Fluxo seria um estado da mente conectado ao Universo, com um poder de processamento inconcebível para os não praticantes: raciocínio, percepção, reflexos, ...

O que falta é uma abordagem detalhada de como chegar ao fluxo.

Dominick Quartuccio says

Amazing.

This book caused a shift in the way I interact with the world, and I don't think I'll ever go back.

Having never been introduced to the concept of "Flow," Kotler enlightened me from multiple vantage points: the emotional angle, the scientific element, and the dark side.

He uses the extreme sports arena to explain how we've gone from nobody being able to free climb (no ropes) a 1,000 foot mountain 20 years ago, to hundreds of people doing it today. The same with surfers riding 50 foot waves. Or skateboarders who can do a 900 (2.5 rotations). Is it genetics? Or are these athletes accessing a mental state, called Flow, to challenge the boundaries of human performance?

I'll tell you this, I read this book over a week's period of time...and the day after finishing, I applied a few "Flow hacking" techniques at my workout the next day...and set new personal bests in 11 out of 24 categories of a P90X workout I'd been doing for 2 months with incremental improvement.

Kotler's book has given me a new way of approaching the world - not just from the physical, but intellectual, spiritual and emotional as well.

Highly recommended if you've got an insatiable desire to improve your life performance.

Irwan says

I am really tempted to say, that "flow" is most probably the meaning or purpose of life. There I said that :-)

All this time this phenomenon has been called by different terms: "mystical experience", "peak awareness" and even "happiness". It has also been approached in different ways: mystical/spiritual traditions, philosophy, arts, collective movements, drugs etc. We caught a glimpse of what it feels when, for example, having a good conversation with friends when time dilates (feels faster or stand still, or just does not matter), seeing jazz band in their groove, etc.

What this book offers is a closer look of what "flow" is drawing examples from extreme sports in which the only option is "flow or die", suggesting ways to achieve it and warning us of its pitfalls. This is one of those rare self help/personal development books which is completed with a sanity check.

An inspiring read!

Bernie Gourley says

This is NOT a book about the comic book hero. It's a book about a mental state called "the flow" and how adventure and extreme athletes have used it to make tremendous strides in their sports. The characteristics of the flow include extreme focus, time dilation / time distortion, a vanishing sense of self, extremely high performance, fearlessness, and a falling away of everything non-essential to the task at hand.

Kotler is by no means the first author to write about the flow. The term was inaugurated by a book entitled *Flow* first published in 1990 by a University of Chicago Psychology professor named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi coined the term in the process of conducting a study on happiness. He found that happy people tended to engage in activities in which they could immerse themselves and find the zone. Contrary to the early part of Kotler's book--in which it sounds like adventure athletes cornered the market on flow--Csikszentmihalyi says that said activity could be work or hobby and that the flow is to be found in poetry writing, yoga, martial arts, copy writing, or potentially any activity in which the skill level and challenge are both high.

(To be fair, Kotler does get around to recognizing that extreme athletes neither invented nor exclusively exploit the flow. However, his—well-taken—point is that such athletes are unusually good a finding, and dropping deep into, the flow in part because risk-taking behavior is an important trigger. And for free climbers [rock climbers without ropes], mega-ramp skateboarders, and bodysuit skydivers sometimes there are only two possible states of existence—the flow and being scraped off a rock.) It should be noted that some of the elements of flow sound a lot like the states that have been described by various mystical religious traditions for centuries, e.g. the dissolution of a feeling of separation between self and the rest of the universe. Warning: religious readers may find it disconcerting to read that there are scientific explanations

for states that were once attributed to communion with god or the like.

While I've given Kotler's book high rating, I haven't yet given one reason to read it—and I do recommend people read it. First, while Csikszentmihalyi is the "father" of flow research, his methods were decidedly low tech--i.e. surveys and interviews—but Kotler reports on more recent studies involving neuroanatomy, neuroelectricity, and neurochemistry. Second, while Kotler delves into the science of the flow, he does so in a manner that is approachable to non-scientists. Finally, all of the narrative accounts of extreme athletes interspersed with the more technical commentary make for a very readable book, even if one is not particularly knowledgeable of—or interested in—such sports. I gave this book a high rating both for its food-for-thought value, and because of its high readability.

I will admit that I was not so enamored of the book when I first began it, and other readers may find the same irritation. For one thing, Kotler's adoration of extreme athletes comes off sounding like diminishment of mainstream athletes and others involved in "flowy" activities. A prime example of this is seen in Chapter 1. Kotler gives us an endearing description of how gymnast Kerri Strug won the gold in the 1996 Olympics by sticking a landing on a shattered ankle. However, he then comes off a bit douchey when he suggests that Strug's achievement pales in comparison to Danny Way's skateboard jumps at the Great Wall of China.

For another thing, in his zealousness to prove that extreme sports practitioners are full-awesome while mainstream athletes are "meh," Kotler makes some comparisons that seem apples and oranges to a neophyte such as me. If they are fair comparisons, he certainly doesn't explain why they should be considered so. The best example of this is when he states that Olympic divers took decades to achieve increases in rotation that extreme skiers and skateboarders surpassed in much less time. This seems unreasonable for two reasons. First, divers have a very standard distance in which to achieve their acrobatics. In other words, they don't get to build a "mega-platform" that's 50% taller like Danny Way creates "mega-ramps" that were bigger than ever before. Of course, if you can increase the distance between yourself and the ground you can increase your spins, rotations, or whatever much more quickly (yes, your danger goes up vastly, I'm not diminishing that.) Second, the divers gained zero advantage from technological improvements, but the same cannot be said for skiers and skateboarders. In other words, if you go from skis made of oak to ones made of carbon nanotubes (that are 50 times stronger and 1/100th of the weight) of course you're going to make gains faster.

Perhaps, I'm overstating Kotler's disdain for mainstream athletics, but that's what happens when one uses a national hero as a set up to show how much more awesome a relatively unknown skateboarder is (among skateboarders Way is extremely well-known but he's not a household name as the Olympian was—at least for a short time in the late 90's.) I suspect that Kotler was just trying to convince a general audience that the athletes he's speaking about aren't pot-smoking knuckleheads who are as likely to be seen on *America's Funniest Home Videos* crushing their nads on a handrail as setting a new world record. These men and women are serious people engaged in serious activities, and they give it their all. They do deserve more respect for that than they are probably given by broad sectors of the populace. Perhaps, the importance of what these folks are achieving does need to be conveyed because the demographic that reads books and the one that follows extreme sports probably has wide wings of non-overlapping area. (I'm not saying skateboarders are illiterate or bookworms don't skate--just that the Venn diagram has substantial areas of mutual exclusivity.)

As I indicated above, in each chapter we get both some insight into the nature of the flow and its triggers and stories of adventure / extreme athletes that serve as examples of what's being discussed. In chapter 2 we learn what the flow looks like in terms of brain waves (i.e. high theta/low alpha, or between meditation and a relaxed / resting state of wakefulness.) In chapter 3, we learn about the neuroanatomy of the flow in terms of what areas of the brain it lights up, and that it's at least as important what areas shut down. In chapter 4, we

learn about the neurochemistry of the flow and that a cocktail of dopamine, norepinephrine, endorphins, anandamide, and serotonin makes up the chemistry of flow, but, critically, not so much with the adrenaline. The subsequent chapters deal with triggers of the flow, and what conditions best set up achievement of this state of mind.

Chapter 9 stands out as an important, but quite different, portion of the book. It deals with the downside (or dark side) of the flow. This has a lot to do with the fact that the aforementioned internal substances (and the flow state in general) are quite addictive. While it's unfair to say, and unlikely, that the extreme athletes Kotler writes about (i.e. the ones at the top of their games) are drug addicts as some might assume of skate boarders, snow boarders, and the like, it may not be unreasonable to say that they have a kind of monkey on their backs—albeit a perfectly legal one.

As I've said, I recommend this book for anyone who is interested in this state of mind. One needn't be interested in extreme sports to get a lot out of the book.

Mario Tomic says

I was hoping that the big idea of this book would to give a few "hacks" on how to master flow in your life but the book really didn't deliver. The main value I got out of it were the stories about the pioneers of extreme sports and how they used flow to push beyond what was considered possible for a human body. Extreme sports are definitely great for getting into flow but not something most of us can apply in our lives. To sum it up, from this book you'll get a dozen examples displaying the power of being fully present in flow state and how it can push the limits of human performance. But there's no clear way how to use this information.

If you wanna learn more about this state of ultimate human performance definitely check out the book titled *Flow* by the author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It's by far the best book written on this topic and is a much better resource than *The Rise of Superman*.

Frank Ruscica says

"Flow or die," author Steven Kotler writes. In our times -- The Second Machine Age -- the choice is that stark.

From *The Rise of Superman*:

"Flow's two defining characteristics are its feel-good nature (flow is always a positive experience) and its function as a performance-enhancer. The [neuro]chemicals described herein are among the strongest . . . the body can produce."

"A ten-year study done by McKinsey found top executives reported being up to *five* times more productive when in flow. Creativity and cooperation are so amplified by the state that [a] Greylock Partners venture capitalist . . . called 'flow state percentage'—defined as the amount of time employees spend in flow—the 'most important management metric for building great innovation teams.'"

From a February 22, 2014 op-ed in *The New York Times* titled "How to Get a Job at Google":

[T]he No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it's not I.Q. It's learning ability. It's the ability to process on the fly. It's the ability to pull together disparate bits of information.

From *The Rise of Superman*:

"Flow is the secret to learning faster. A lot faster."

From the cover story of the December 2013 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine:

What happens when Big Data meets human resources? The emerging practice of "people analytics" is already transforming how employers hire, fire, and promote.

... Perhaps the most exotic development in people analytics today is the creation of algorithms to assess the potential of all workers, across all companies, all the time.

... Gild [is] a company that uses people analytics to help other companies find software engineers.

... The way Gild arrives at ... scores [for ranking coders] is not simple. The company's algorithms begin by scouring the Web for any and all open-source code, and for the coders who wrote it. They evaluate the code for its simplicity, elegance, documentation, and several other factors, including the frequency with which it's been adopted by other programmers. For code that was written for paid projects, they look at completion times and other measures of productivity. Then they look at questions and answers on social forums such as Stack Overflow, a popular destination for programmers seeking advice on challenging projects. They consider how popular a given coder's advice is, and how widely that advice ranges.

The algorithms go further still. They assess the way coders use language on social networks from LinkedIn to Twitter; the company has determined that certain phrases and words used in association with one another can distinguish expert programmers from less skilled ones. Gild knows these phrases and words are associated with good coding because it can correlate them with its evaluation of open-source code, and with the language and online behavior of programmers in good positions at prestigious companies.

Here's the part that's most interesting: having made those correlations, Gild can then score programmers who haven't written open-source code at all, by analyzing the host of clues embedded in their online histories. They're not all obvious, or easy to explain. Vivienne Ming, Gild's chief scientist, told me that one solid predictor of strong coding is an affinity for a particular Japanese manga [i.e., comics] site.

... Gild's CEO, Sheeroy Desai, told me he believes his company's approach can be applied to any occupation characterized by large, active online communities, where people post and cite individual work, ask and answer professional questions, and get feedback on projects.

. . . Google's understanding of the promise of analytics is probably better than anybody else's, and the company has been changing its hiring and management practices as a result of its ongoing analyses. (Brainteasers are no longer used in interviews, because they do not correlate with job success; GPA is not considered for anyone more than two years out of school, for the same reason—the list goes on.)

From 2014 book *The Second Machine Age — Work, Progress and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, co-authored by MIT economist Erik Brynjolfsson:

“Call it talent-biased technical change. In many industries, the difference in payout between number one and second-best has widened into a canyon.”

“The advancements we've seen in the past few years are not the crowning achievements of the computer era. They're warm-up acts.”

Flow or die, indeed.

Happily, the science of flow is advancing at the speed of The Second Machine Age, and actionable insights are taking shape.

From *The Rise of Superman*:

[O]ver the past decade, we've learned a great deal about how [creative insights] . . . happen—including how flow may make them happen more frequently. Not surprisingly, our creativity lies deeply rooted in the right side of the brain: the side dominated by the implicit system. The reason has to do with the structure of neural networks. When the explicit system (mostly on the left side of the brain) handles a problem, the neurons involved are very close to one another. This much proximity leads to linear connections, logical deductions, and all the other keystones of standard reasoning. When the implicit system is at work, its reach is much broader—far-flung corners of the brain are talking to one another. This is known to experts as "lateral thinking" . . . It means that novel stimuli can combine with . . . thoughts and obscure memories and the result is something utterly new.

Creativity has a brainwave signature as well: alpha waves pulsing out of the brain's right hemisphere. This is considered the readiness state for sudden insight—meaning not the revelation itself, rather its precursor condition. Interestingly . . . it now seems that without a calm, relaxed frame of mind the brain is incapable of switching from a beta-dominated localized networks to alpha-driven widespread webs.

But this isn't where the process ends. . . . [T]hat moment of sudden insight comes with a different brainwave signature. Exactly thirty milliseconds before the breakthrough intuition arrives, EEG shows a burst of gamma waves. These ultrafast brainwaves appear when a bunch of widely distributed cells—i.e., novel stimuli, random thoughts, obscure memories—bind themselves together into a brand new network. It is the brainwave signature of the "Aha!" moment.

"But the interesting thing about a gamma spike," explains Leslie Sherlin, "is that it always happens inside of theta oscillations. The two waves are coupled. It makes sense. Theta

processes novel incoming stimuli; gamma is what happens when those stimuli snap together into new ideas. But it's hard to do any of this on command. It takes meditators a long time to get that kind of control. This is where the athletes in flow have a huge edge—their brain is already in alpha/theta. They're holding themselves in the only state that can produce that gamma spike."

When you add these elements together it's easy to see why flow is such an effective decision-making strategy.

All told, *The Rise of Superman* is a must-read for many professionals, students, parents, entrepreneurs and investors.

A complementary read: serial novel *Flowmance Rules — A Serious Comedy* (no affiliation with Apple, Inc., owner of Siri technology).

FR adapts a business plan praised by top technologists and investors. Praise from Amazon's first Director of Personalization:

Frank [Ruscica, author of this review], I just spent about an hour surfing around your [business plan for a provider of customized lifelong learning and career services (CLLCS)] with a bit of amazement. I run a little company...We are a team of folks who worked together at Amazon.com developing that company's personalization and recommendations team and systems. We spent about 1.5 years thinking about what we wanted to build next. We thought a lot about online education tools. We thought a lot about classified ads and job networks. We thought a lot about reputation systems. We thought a bit about personalized advertising systems. We thought a lot about blogging and social networking systems. Eventually, we came up with the idea behind 43 Things.

...I guess I'm mostly just fascinated that we've been working a very similar vein to the one you describe, without having a solid name for it (we call it 'the age of the amateur' or 'networks of shared experiences' instead of CLLCS, but believe me, we are talking about the same patterns and markets, if not in exactly the same way). Thanks for sharing what you have -- its fascinating stuff.

I received this praise in 2004 (via email).

FR adapts the 2014 version of the plan, of course.

FR's comedy premise centers on tech-assisted ethical nonmonogamy, which appears likely to become main\$stream soon, particularly among the very upwardly mobile.

From *The Rise of Superman*:

[T]here are extraordinarily powerful social bonding neurochemicals at the heart of both flow and group flow: dopamine and norepinephrine, that underpin romantic love.

. . . The neurochemicals that underpin the [flow] state are among the most addictive drugs on earth. Equally powerful is the psychological draw. Scientists who study human motivation have

lately learned that after basic survival needs have been met, the combination of autonomy (the desire to direct your own life), mastery (the desire to learn, explore and be creative), and purpose (the desire to matter, to contribute to the world) are our most powerful intrinsic drivers—the three things that motivate us most. All three are deeply woven through the fabric of flow.

... “No question about it,” says Flow Genome Project Executive Director Jamie Wheal, “there’s a dark night of the flow. In Christian mystical traditions, once you’ve experienced the grace of God, the ‘dark night of the soul’ describes the incredible pain of its absence. The same is true for flow. . . . If you’ve glimpsed this state, but can’t get back there—that lack can become unbearable.”

Welcome to the pursuit of flow in The Second Machine Age. :-)

Steve Mueller says

i thought I was really going to like this book when I first started reading it. The ideas were exciting and the promise of investigating the neuroscience was appealing. The stories of the of the extreme athletes were engaging at first and then it became some sort of worship of the gods. It quickly devolved from there. Maybe if Kotler had a better editor, the book might have held my interest to the very end. I only was intrigued for about the first 1/3 of the book and then it became a chore to finish it. Glad I didn't rush to recommend it to my friends. I am also glad that I borrowed it from the Amazon library rather than pay for it.

Benoit Lelièvre says

This book tries to break down the psychological concept of "flow" and asks the question: can we master and trigger flow to improve the human experience. If anything, Steven Kotler made me optimistic about the future. We've all experienced flow at least once in our lives without knowing what it was and Kotler here breaks open the mystery like a treasure crate.

I was annoyed at the quantity of examples that padded the book, but I couldn't argue against the science of the roadmap of human improvement proposed by Steven Kotler.

Alex Linschoten says

Nothing really new here. Kotler rehashes Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" with examples taken from extreme sports. The book is too long / badly edited, so the reader is beaten round the head with many more stories than this simple concept needed. This book could have been about 1/6 the length and still got its message out. The real thesis that the author proposes (that we're in some sort of special age of superhuman performance) seems an unnecessary imposition as well. You could do worse than just reading the first chapter or two (or reading other books on the 'flow' state).

Chris Chester says

I think it's important to first note that the author Steven Kotler is the "Director of Research" for the Flow Genome Project. So although he is indeed an award-winning journalist in other contexts, he has skin in the game he's pitching with this book.

That said, I don't think what Kotler is pitching is snake oil.

The "flow" state for which he's evangelizing is essentially a wholehearted immersion in the present. Modern society too often distracts us from living in the moment, the argument goes, because we're always off in our minds thinking about work projects, social obligations and technological whiz-bang competing for our attention in the future. People are able to achieve flow states using drugs, video games, meditation, religion, music... really anything that requires or fosters intense concentration.

Once in the flow state, he argues, humans are able to work incrementally on improving our performance at tasks. With training and "flow hacking," we can learn how to enter this state of mind more easily, which will foster growth and increase human potential.

If that was the whole book, I wouldn't have any beef, really. But what annoyed me about *The Rise of Superman* was the near-deification of action sports athletes that Kotler uses as a frame to explain his point. Because practitioners of these sports need to be at their peak performance or risk death, they need to push the boundaries farther just to survive.

That's fine, I can buy that. What I don't buy is that somehow going from a 540 spin to a 900 spin is a RADICAL EXPANSION OF THE BOUNDS OF HUMAN POTENTIAL. I love watching big wave surfing, I'd love to get into rock climbing, but what the peak athletes in these sports are accomplishing are, at the end of the day, almost totally meaningless and arbitrary notches on a yardstick that stretches to infinity.

A dude jumping out of a helicopter onto a ski slope, then jumping off ANOTHER cliff and parachuting onto another ski slope is pretty rad, but that is not what I think of when I think of "human potential." To me, the advancements these athletes have made in the last several decades have much more to do with the fact that energy drink companies have paid them handsomely to be the faces of their products. That's the real reason you see all these advances -- it's not flow hacking (at least entirely), it's economics.

So while I walk away from this book with a renewed sense of the importance of living in the moment and thoughts of pushing the physicality of my daily existence to meet that goal, I'm still unsettled by the conflicts of interest involved, and Kotler's inability to imagine a greater yardstick for human potential than extreme sports.

Xavier Shay says

It's more "history of extreme sports" but I'm ok with that.

"The fight-or-flight response—a.k.a. the adrenaline rush—cocktails adrenaline, cortisol (the stress hormone),

and norepinephrine. It's an extreme stress response. The brain switches to reactive survival autopilot. Options are limited to three: fight, flee, or freeze. Flow is the opposite: a creative problem-solving state, options wide open."

"Studies have found that in professions with less direct feedback loops—stock analysis, psychiatry, and medicine—even the best get worse over time. Surgeons, by contrast, are the only class of physician that improve the longer they're out of medical school. Why? Mess up on the table and someone dies. That's immediate feedback."

"I hope you talk a little about how utterly fucked we can become when we get too old or broken or smart to keep it up. Not all of us experience a happy life after doing this shit for a couple of decades. I bet there are some PTSD similarities. It's funny, I read Sebastian Junger's *War* and I learned something: The guys coming home are all screwed up, not because they saw people die as much as they missed the rush. I would never put myself in the same category as those fighting men, but it can be hard to get excited again. Ever. And that feeling sucks."

Mani says

This is now my favorite book on flow, mastery, and finding and staying in your zone ever.

It explores the history of ultimate performance from the work of William James, to Maslow's deeper work on human thriving, to Jung's Analytical Psychology, to David Eagleman's work in time dilation after fear states during exhilaration.

It explores the role of imagination, visualization, mental rehearsal, letting go of ego so that the part of your brain telling you limiting identity stories can shut off creating that hypofrontality, know-nothing state the neurolinguistic programming folks are always reminding us is key to modeling without projection of our own intentions and tainting our observation with culturally conditioned values.

It explores the power of being able to be present to the truth here, now while also holding the model of your ideal future in mind long enough to cue your unconscious into its natural action.

It talks about training intuition through enhanced and precise, goal-specific practicing in an environment where you are fully attentive to and fully immersed in the feedback loop and not being distracted into negative emotional states based on self-consciousness and prior trauma and emotional wounds.

It digs into Carol Dweck's mindset work and how it fits into the bigger picture of willingness to perceive and process the entire truth about a given moment and what it says about your deeper self.

It even puts that marshmallow study about willpower and self control in the proper context so that those of us who would have eaten the fucken marshmallow know that there is a path to success for us hedonistic, sensation-seekers.

I repeat: This is the best researched and most clearly communicated body of work around fully transforming your self and life through embracing your passion and going bawlZ 2 da windows and walls. How to overcome the fear you will inevitably encounter and use it as your signal guiding you to your sweet spot beyond your cramping and constraining comfort zone.

Anastasia Alén says

This was sort of a disappointing book. It started well but seemed to focus on how to achieve state of flow in sports. It seemed like author tried to go deeper into topic but somehow it always came back to athletes or just people involved in sports... So I find title quite misleading. Decoding ultimate athlete performance would have been a better name.

If you haven't read Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, skip this and read the original one because Csikszentmihalyi nails it all. This...nothing new. Nothing useful, same old same old...well I can't decide whether it's good or not and for that I've rated this 2 stars. Don't waste your time with this.
