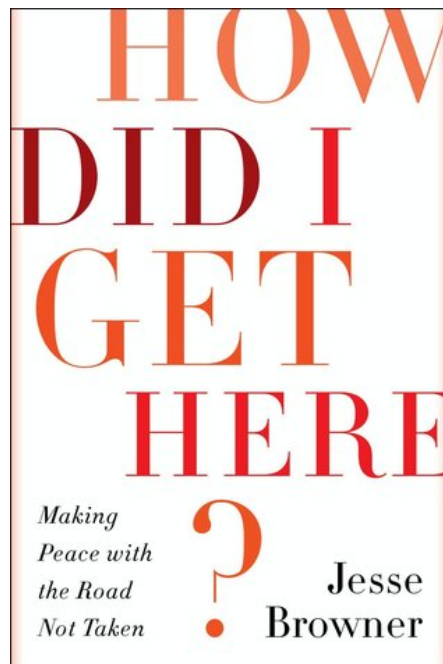




How Did I Get Here?: Making Peace with the Road Not Taken

Jesse Browner

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A literary exploration that asks seeks to answer the question: Have I lived the life I intended?

Jesse Browner, a novelist with a full-time job at the United Nations, has written a book reminiscent of the Talking Heads classic song "Once in a Lifetime." Based on an essay he wrote for Poets and Writers Magazine, Browner asks hard questions about life choices, about the tendency to believe there is a parallel life that might have been more fulfilling or more free. He wonders: Is the true artist made by single-minded devotion to his craft? Do we compromise our dreams in service to responsibilities to family and jobs?

These questions prompted Browner to take a hard look at himself and the evolution that brought him to this moment of existential doubt. In *How Did I Get Here?* he divides his adult life into five distinct phases—ambition, love, work, fulfillment, and serenity. Sketching portraits of himself at every stage, he looks for idiosyncrasies, commonalities, and clues—signposts that lead him to today. He also draws on the lives of others, from Franz Kafka to his sister to indie rocker Elliott Smith, in search of understanding. What he finds in his courageous quest is bravely honest and inspiring, touching on what it means to live a life with intention and meaning.

How Did I Get Here?: Making Peace with the Road Not Taken Details

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P.A. says

The grass is always greener on the other side. Until you get there. Lots of quotes about life from other famous authors. Not really much in the way of answering the title question unless the answer is that we all follow the path laid out for us and end up exactly where we're supposed to be.

FTC stuff; I received this book through a Goodreads, Firstreads contest.

Sharon Tjaden-Glass says

For me, the best parts of this book were the sections in which Jesse talks about the creative process and the imagined parallel lives that artists often believe they should be living. I think that--all too often--it's easy for artists to fall into despair that their creative work isn't achieving the heights that they imagined. But Jesse's reflections helped to guide me to an understanding that we need to see the creative process in a more realistic light--that it's not healthy to allow our art to be our source of happiness. That it's more healthy to draw our happiness from other aspects of our lives--our family, our friends, perhaps our careers. Because we don't create art in order to be happy. We create art because we need to. We must. We have messages to communicate. Sometimes those messages are heard and respected. And sometimes they are ignored.

There were sections of the book that I felt belabored points and I found myself skimming through these sections. But overall, I felt that this was a satisfying read for all artists, no matter what they are creating.

Lise Pomerleau says

So much of this book resonated with me. The author and I have a lot in common: difficult childhoods, early dreams of becoming an author, marrying young, and ultimately deciding to take the road more travelled by, in order to build a strong family and stable career. And thus, we both questioned our decisions to choose a civilian rather than a bohemian lifestyle, which supposedly might have made all the difference to our success as writers. Browner examines the lives of others who followed the road less travelled by to discover if they really were more happy or successful. He also uses Kafka as an example of a tormented writer trapped in a life he hated, and wonders if it is not this push/pull that contributed to his creativity. I would have given the book 5 stars but for the detail he puts into the mini biographies of others - I skimmed through all that. I wanted to know about Browner, and his musings and conclusions. Those aspects were fascinating and enlightening. As the queen reader of self-help books, I can say that this one had a deep impact, and made me realize I have fallen into patterns I acquired as a young person, that need to be changed. As survivors of difficult homes, as he said "irremediably broken in several dimensions", we both strove to prove our worth in the world, and no matter what we achieved, we found ourselves falling short of the mark we had set in stone for ourselves. I have recommended this book to young people close to me, whom I don't want to see make the same mistakes.

Anthoferjea says

Not bad, a little unfocused at times. Kind of like 5 essays on the same thing, of varying quality. Liked the Elliott Smith and Kafka stuff, as well as the stuff about the egotism of the traveling poet.

Sarah says

Jesse Browner asks himself a question that many of us have asked: “Have I lived the life I intended?”

Here’s a spoiler if you haven’t figured it out yet- probably not, but you can make the best of where you’re at any darn time you please.

He’s a writer wondering if he could divert all of his efforts into writing the book of a lifetime and whether or not it will pay off for him, emotionally, spiritually, and so on. This book is his own questioning, his own exploration, on a journey that can sometimes seem almost intensely private.

But that’s what writing that book of all books is about, yes?

By compartmentalizing his life until now into five very distinct phases- ambition, love, work, fulfillment and serenity he revisits the things he did right and the things he did not so right looking to others for comparison and quietly rewriting and revisiting his own truths.

We all want to live with intent and purpose. This isn’t reinventing the wheel, but it was brave of this author to share his own path while he’s still walking upon it. There really aren’t suggestions or exercises from a “self-help” perspective, so much as it’s a peek into his own obstacles and growth.

I received a free copy of this book from Goodreads First Reads.

Celia says

I would call it more of an essay than a self-help book. While, the author, Jesse Browner, seems like a very decent person, I thought the book focused too much on his life and his problems; he did not make his problems universal.

The book was more a mid-life reflection than about the road not taken. To me the road not taken refers to things we could actually had differently done. What would have happened if I had accepted that job that I turned down? What would life have been in that house we could bought instead of the one we actually did?

For much of the book Mr. Browner is wondering if he could have written the great American novel if he could devote full-time to his writing. To me this is a hypothetical question (also a question unique to Mr. Browner). Even most professional writers are unable to write great books. Many professional writers have to write bad books because of the pressure to make money.

Men may be better able to relate to Mr. Browner's mid-life issues. I think many men in mid-life get very upset about their careers, while for women careers are just one of many issues that they obsess about. Mr. Browner reminds me in some ways of my father who in mid-life was very depressed about not getting the

recognition that he felt was his due as a scientist(he did do some original scientific work).

Helen Geng says

*** for concept

** for execution

Worth another re-read.

Donna says

Full disclosure: I did not read all of this book. In the first pages I found myself less and less curious about the author, who was relating his own experiences. Then I jumped to a rambling chapter about his sister, whose road was equal to a path of following her self-centered lover. I couldn't finish the chapter which was laced with psychoanalytic theorizing. Not recommended.

Stanley says

Lessons from a UN civil servant/published novelist. A haunting book, this is the other side of the carpe diem tale. Browner goes on a rant at times, but he understands the real reason we read memoirs - not (only) curiosity about how others live, but to compare their life trajectories to our own and glean insight on what to do with the rest of our days.

Toni says

Smart and interesting writer, but I am still trying to decide what it adds up to.

Julie Rettko says

The most helpful parts of this book were when the author referred to the artist within us and all of thoughts we go through...this book validated some of those for me. Being someone with a "real" job, but wishing I had more time to be an artist, I've been able to make peace with the road I traveled.

Peggy Hayes says

An interesting book - I can't think of any I've read that were quite like this one. I found that there was a sentence or two every chapter that really resonated with me. Those made me think that the author had gotten it exactly right. I didn't really follow all the references to literature and authors - I think I might have enjoyed the book more if I had...

Kristen says

Uncorrected proof

I was hoping for a universal "self help" look at wondering what could have been. Instead this book is very self centered. I was not able to relate to the author or his problems.

Christine Tasche says

Jesse Browner's a great writer. He does a wonderful job of explaining his thought processes and his emotions -- he is able to articulate things that seem beyond words somehow.

In this book, he works through a sort-of midlife crisis: what if he had never taken his stable job, if he had instead continued to pursue a career as a professional writer to the exclusion of everything else? He draws in examples of other writers & artists, he discusses the historical examples of Parisian bohemians of the 19th century... it's such a well-researched book for what is essentially an inner dialogue for the author. If you've ever wondered if you've done the right thing by choosing a "safe" path in life, you'll probably enjoy this book.

Also, check out his interview on the podcast, "The Good Life Project." That's where I first heard about this book. :)

Michelle Vandepol says

If you've ever wondered if your life choices got in the way of your art, read this book. Browner examines his life and the diaries of the artists who brought us the art world ideal of the noble tortured artist from Franz Kafka to Elliott Smith. Prepare to re-examine the way you see your life, your art, and your excuses. Loved!
