



Footnotes: How Running Makes Us Human

Vybarr Cregan-Reid

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Running is not just a sport. It reconnects us to our bodies and the places in which we live, breaking down our increasingly structured and demanding lives. It allows us to feel the world beneath our feet, lifts the spirit, allows our minds out to play and helps us to slip away from the demands of the modern world.

When Vybarr Cregan-Reid set out to discover why running meant so much to so many, he began a journey which would take him out to tread London's cobbled streets, climbing to sites that have seen a millennium of hangings, and down the crumbling alleyways of Ruskin's Venice. *Footnotes* transports you to the cliff tops of Hardy's Dorset, the deserted shorelines of Seattle, the giant redwood forests of California, and to the world's most advanced running laboratories and research centres, using debates in literature, philosophy and biology to explore that simple human desire to run.

Liberating and inspiring, this book reminds us why feeling the earth beneath our feet is a necessary and healing part of our lives.

Footnotes: How Running Makes Us Human Details

Date : Published May 26th 2016 by Ebury Digital

ISBN :

Author : Vybarr Cregan-Reid

Format : Kindle Edition 354 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Philosophy, Sports and Games, Sports, Fitness

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From Reader Review Footnotes: How Running Makes Us Human for online ebook

Luke Leighfield says

Equal parts running manual, travel diary and love letter to the joy of being in nature, 'Footnotes' calls on literature, philosophy and psychology to build a compelling argument for why we're called to run across the planet we find ourselves on. It's an engrossing read for runners and non-runners alike, and makes me want to tear off my shoes and hit the trails. Thanks, Vybarr!

"If we see with our bodies, and we change our bodies when we learn how to run, that means that we see things, or understand them, or feel them, or experience them and come to know them, in ways that were hidden from us before."

Rick says

A nice read as it is, but a must for runners with some interest in philosophy and literature. "The best runs dissolve one's attachment to the world, and allow you to become the run, not the runner."

Howard says

I enjoy a writer that digresses and spouts facts that you've never heard before. As you'd imagine, there are only so many ways you can describe running and how it affects you physically and mentally, but, if you're an English professor with a love of nature and history, the athletic soup becomes much thicker, if that makes any sense at all. This book also inspired me to bunk off work during the recent snow and take a ten mile run through a sub-zero Epping Forest, what more recommendation could you need?

David says

a couple too many literary tangents for my taste [then again, he teaches English and Environmental Humanities at University of Kent, so understandable], but mostly a lively read about his experiences as a runner. He has strong preferences [barefoot or in minimalist shoes good, treadmills or anything that keeps you from experiencing nature bad] but a good sense of humor in delivering them.

It's partly a travelogue as he visits prominent sports scientists, runs the London Marathon, etc. Definitely a non-competitive type, so not a lot of emphasis on race times or workouts -- more so his enjoyment of the process and his thoughts on how our bodies reflect our evolution as persistence hunters who needed to run distance. representative passage:

"In modernity, running is all too often seen as a behavior we might choose....whereas the truth is that, as a homo sapiens, you have evolved to be one of the best running animals that the planet has ever witnessed. Running is not what we might do; it is who we are as a species" (p. 47).

he rants about sedentary desk jobs and excess screen time but at least has a sense of perspective about it, noting that all technologies are initially distrusted by the old especially ("Around 2,500 years ago, Socrates railed against the 'forgetfulness' inculcated by the technology of writing" p. 95).

I trust his scholarship in the areas I don't know because he's right on the money in the one I do know reasonably well [environmental psych stuff organized around attention restoration theory by Kaplan's]. Could have used one more round of editing [he summarizes Orwell's disdain for "pleasure spots" in basically the same terms twice approx. 50 pages apart, e.g.], but overall a fun and enlightening read. Seems like he'd be a great guy with whom to talk on an easy run.

Stijn says

A beautiful meandering through history, literature, psychology, held together by a love for running.

?Misericordia? ~ The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?????? ✨*♥♥ says

Well balanced between a painstakingly thought out account of personal experiences, generalistic musings about the world in its glorious variety, factual research and a stream of consciousness. All without bordering on gibberish.

Q:

Whoever heard of anyone getting lost in the mountains, in bad weather, and without a map? (c)

So, running is not just about running but also about intelligence, instincts, perception, biology and nature.

Yep, and our feet are not 100% symmetrical.

Glimpses into the author's background.

Q:

It was sometime during the seemingly endless days of writing my PhD thesis that I took up running... (c)

Q:

But if you keep on being a runner, get better, develop a taste for distance, you will have changed more than your muscles and the soles of your feet. What if you were to repeat the experiment, but were to think of something, say, 11 miles away? Would you be able to do that? You need the right body to have those thoughts, being one that can cover that kind of distance so that it is possible for you to be able to recall the climbs and falls, the variety of camber, and the changes of surface you'd need to cover. Can you honestly do that? ...

It's not just this spatial relationship that has changed for me since I became a runner. I can't look at pictures of a landscape, of almost any kind, without thinking about running through them, over them, to the side of them, beyond them. ...

So the landscape is not just a backdrop to my run, but as long I have the skills necessary to negotiate the landscape, it actually beckons to us. It creates the desire, and makes the movement within it possible, too. (c)

Q:

Senses are lenses: change them and they change the world they perceive. (c)

Q:

As with any other motor skill, the better one becomes at running, the easier it is to perceive the possibility of

covering certain distances on certain terrains. (c)

Q:

But maps' greatest design flaw is that they are too concerned with destinations, not journeys. They are full of roads without any information about what it is like to be on them. They attend to interconnection while ignoring experience. They tell us what is there, but not if we can see, smell, taste, hear or feel it. A landscape is all of these things, and it is more. It is about the time of day, the changing humidity, the rising tides, the direction of the wind, the scent of what is in season, or about how the light hits the water. Maps do not look like they were designed by humans, more like by computers performing a kind of spreadsheet geography.

Q:

I know that running is all too often seen as an introspective activity, but running breaks down the barriers between what we think is inside us and what we see as being outside. Running unites us with places and creates emotional connections with them in ways that are not easily accounted for.

It seems obvious to say, but becoming a runner (rather than just a walker of the land) has an impact on the kinds of choices that you make. Your body's changes will permit access to experiences that would otherwise prove impossible. Just as we learn to read words, our senses learn to read places, and the more we do it, the more attuned they and we become to collecting and collating how places look and feel, and how they live with you, within you and without. With its sensitive potential, your body can be your means to freedom, if you will only allow it to become itself and escape the received wisdom that separates it from the mind.

Runners know in their hearts that when thoughts move, we think them differently. (c)

Q:

But it's not the rain; it's something else. The word for this smell is petrichor, from the Greek petra, 'stone'; and ichor, the golden fluid that runs in the veins of the gods and the immortals. (c)

Q:

Our ability to concentrate wears out in ways that I'll come back to, and those abilities need to be recharged. The best way to do this is through soft fascination, which is a sort of meandering, free-form mode of thought inculcated most successfully by natural environments. Instead of the mental work associated with reading, writing emails or even watching TV, 'soft fascination' is exemplified by something like leaves rustling in the wind. Time spent offline is essential for effective mental functioning. Letting your thoughts run as freely as you are is good for a healthy, working brain. (c)

Fact-pondering mission:

Q:

Navigating our way through a landscape changes the means by which we may experience it. If our heart-rate is raised, if endorphins are flooding our system, if our veins and capillaries have dilated to increase the flow of oxygen to the muscles and the brain, if we can feel the microtexture of the earth changing beneath our feet, the world becomes a different place. The world stops being a picture for us to gawp and yawn at, and the relationship between our insides and its outsides becomes a dynamic one in which the rules can change, data may be gained or lost, connections can be made, shapes and symmetries noticed. Running reminds us that our bodies and the world are made of the same stuff. A runner's sense of place, of reachable space, their vision of themselves in the landscape – all of these things are altered by a kind of movement that brings about real changes in the physiology of the runner. (c)

Q:

There are some pretty basic things about running that may have fallen from your habits of daily movement somewhere along the way between childhood and adulthood. It's not just that these are things that you will have forgotten; you may even have forgotten how to know them. So there are obvious things like: When you run are your gluteal muscles firing? Are your soleus muscles so atrophied that they can no longer function effectively during plantarflexed landing (with the foot tilted slightly downwards)? Because you have been mostly sat down since the age of five, there's a good chance that you also have an anterior pelvic tilt. You can look in a mirror and see some of these things – like poor posture, or that convex arch in your lower back, or the hunch in your shoulders. You can feel your soleus muscles – for some people they will be so insubstantial that they don't even know they are there. You can even feel your gluteals as you run, and see if they are firing, or just bobbing around like everything else seems to. Many of us have to train our bodies

back, and it's hard and it takes time. And I don't mean a fortnight of heel-raises done while attacking the washing up, I mean time.

There is good news; you are already able to do most of what is required for you to run. The bad news is that everything else you will have to learn and remember. So, these first chapters are about our bodies, everything from mechanical muscle function to what D.H. Lawrence called the 'blood consciousness', his term for innate, embodied knowledge, a concept that has its roots as much in ancient Daoism as it does in modern philosophy. (c)

Q:

Martin Heidegger is one of those philosophers who is as famous for his impenetrability as for what he actually said. He is inclined to the sort of neologisms that enrage readers. But he's a genius at seeing round 'things as they are' to the concealed machineries of modern life. (c)

Q:

The world becomes a kind of standing reserve of energy or usefulness-in-waiting. (c)

Q:

An experienced runner will tell you that the process of looking at a view is more complex than data travelling into the eye. This is because our bodies play a significant role in what we see, sense or think. (c)

Q:

The suddenness of this open space leaves me breathless.

Evolving to avoid other land predators, our eyes are particularly attuned to working laterally, paying special attention to how things appear in juxtaposition with one another. When we are presented with a stretched view such as this, our ability to make sense of the information overload is challenged beyond its capacity. (c)

Q:

Graphs that represent crime rates in urban environments show an inverse relationship with ones that indicate levels of access to green space. The greener the environment, the less crime it is likely to have.⁴⁹ It might seem that an obvious explanation of this fact would be that rural areas are more affluent, and are less densely packed, but recent studies of housing projects with access to much more limited green spaces reproduce the same results.

In one breathtaking study Mike tells me about, researchers reported that one development that had substantial amounts of greenery had 52 per cent fewer total crimes than those without.⁵⁰ Property crime dropped by 48 per cent, and violent crime by a staggering 56 per cent, compared with areas with low amounts of vegetation.⁵¹ Another study draws parallels between access to green space and the impact of stressful life events, with the results supporting the idea that natural environments seem to act as a buffer against the health impact of stress.⁵² (c)

The evocative experiences:

Q:

The rain has calmed into something between precipitation and a heavy mist. The sky is heavy, intense and low. I head out of the car park and turn south. The film of water between my feet and the concrete on the road slurps and slaps like glue. My weatherproofing rustles. (c)

Q:

When you look at a mountain, what you take from it fills you up. The ticks and sparks of daily life are crushed under the weight of the rock, and I begin to feel the experience of the place as Coleridge may have done. (c)

Q:

But I gasp in the exultant pleasure of the fear of something real. (c)

Q:

I am tired and delirious with an electrochemical joy for which there is no word. (c)

Q:

A couple of weeks pass and I'm driving someplace, and when it begins to rain, the articulate click-clack on the windscreen transports me back to mountaintops like I had been hypnotised and that sound was my prompt. I remember getting back to the pub, drunk on exhaustion with my hair matted to my head like a victorious pearl-diver come up for air. And, I realised that my body had taught me something: that there are

ways out of modern life. ... (c)

Tyler says

The writing itself is good. However, the author goes on and on about each point with out really saying anything new. I think there is probably good information in there but it is buried in so much fluff and just pointless writing I really can not say it is worth reading.

Catherine says

Massively enjoyed this beautifully written account of a blossoming love of running. Quite poetic, obviously heartfelt. It lost its way a little in parts, but was no worse for it.

Ida says

I really enjoyed this book - and it did actually inspire me to get out and run. I liked all the literary references, and I found the author's style relatable and non-preachy. I suppose it makes sense that it would take an asthmatic professor of literature to convince me that running can be pleasant.

Anna Cordova says

Excellent book on running and the human spirit.

Tom Bennett says

This is a bloody brilliant book.

Fantastically well written, thoughtful and clever.

And a good read for runners, walkers and anyone who loves the great outdoors.

Fascinating.

Christian Hamaker says

I signed myself and my daughter up for four runs next year - two 5Ks and two 4-milers. We ran a 4-miler together a couple of years ago, and I was embarrassed to bomb out a mere 2 miles in. My daughter stopped running soon after that run (she beat me by more than a full minute, I'm proud to say). I got back into running last year for a time, but stuck to treadmill runs only. Then those ended, too, as my periods of active

running always do.

I usually need a good running book to inspire me to get back into the sport, and "Footnotes" is one of the better efforts on that score. Cregan-Reid knows how to write a narrative - this isn't just a training book or an 'atta' boy! pick-you-up. There's some science here, but more so anecdotal evidence of the power of running, and specifically of running outdoors.

I'm not sure I'll be doing a lot of outdoor running in the early months of 2018. It's cold, often bitterly so, where I live, and slippery throughout much of winter. But I love the encouragement here not only to get running, but to consider how much more memorable outdoor runs can be than treadmill runs, and how the more unencumbered we are during our runs (by technology, gear, etc.), the more free we are to enjoy the essence of the sport. There's surely something to those ideas, although for now I'm happy to time myself, ponder the best sort of running shoe and think about what things (yes, even an iPod) might improve my experience, if only by keeping boredom at bay.

Cindy Dyson Eitelman says

Seldom have I anticipated a book so much nor been so glad when it was over.

Chapter 1, Footnotes to a Body of Knowledge, was exactly what I was hoping for: an overview of the many adaptations in our species that fit us for running. If you've read *Born to Run*, most of it won't be new, but still very interesting to re-visit. To sum up,

...as a Homo sapiens, you have evolved to be one of the best running animals that the planet has ever witnessed. Running is not what we might do; it is who we are as a species.

I thought the book was going to go on in that pattern, maybe talking about the pre-historical evidence for running, running games in native societies, the 'persistence hunt' legends, competitive running in the Greeks and Romans and maybe even the Oriental societies.... Be forewarned: it doesn't.

The rest of the book relates all of the cool deep thoughts he has during his own running and how they connect to the poetry and prose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If you're a Britophile, or an English major, or really into Thomas Hardy and Leslie Stephens and William Hazlett; and if you even know who those people are, you'll eat this up. But I failed to see what any of them had to say about running. In fact, I frequently failed to see what they had to say, period.

If the soil weren't so wet it would look seared...
It folds and rolls away toward a leaden sky...
The cut wheat like greying stubble
slowly dying on the sagging jaw of a corpse.

And--even more embarrassing--I didn't even get his *modern* allusions--

...feeling like Daniel Craig sprinting up crane arms pursuing the bombmaker, Mollaka, in *Casino Royale*.

Sorry; meant nothing to me. A few near-misses are to be expected; too many, and a book means less than empty words.

The running descriptions are great. The historical bits, like his description of the trials and imprisonment of

Oscar Wilde or of the origin of the workhouse treadmill, are fun (and sad). I didn't see any significance in knowing that treadmill went from a punishment for criminals into a necessity for fitness addicts, but it's interesting to know that it did.

One of his themes is that running outdoors, away from advertisements and TV screens and recorded music, frees the mind from stress:

Not-thinking, huddling down into the body's experience, is a kind of mental repose, a Pilates for the brain.

He may be right--but only for 21st century humans who are uneducated about the green world. For people whose only thoughts are, "Ah, green leaves!" or "Distant clouds; so pretty." or "Silent airplane tracks on the sky!"

I'm not one of those people--my outdoor brain is constantly interrupted by nitpicky thoughts--is that a hawk's screech or a bluejay? What is this grass--wheat or something native? Should I grab a specimen? Oh, no, is that a skunk and is it turning its back to me?!! Primitive man, whose very life depended on constant observation, would have had it worse. I wish Mr. Cregan-Reid had asked a hunter-gatherer what he thinks about when running a trail.

I also think the editor needed to do a math check. While discussing treadmill running, he writes,

As a species we have been running indoors for only 30 of the many millions of years of our history (that's about 0.000015 per cent of our time on earth).

Huh? Last I heard the Homo sapiens species had been around for about 300,000 years. 30 years is .000015% of 300,000,000, which is indeed 'many millions' -- but humans haven't been here that long. Maybe he's thinking mammals, like mice. Mice run indoors--at least in my brother's house.

I'm sorry to be so down on the book. It's a beautiful book and he's a lovely author and he describes many fascinating runs. Read it. It's a book of poetry, deep thought, insight, and great heart. I think you could have replaced the word 'running' with 'walking' on 75% of the pages without any loss of meaning, but I could be wrong. Start with an open mind and see for yourself.

I need running because I want to stay curious. Our curiosity needs to be continually teased out of its shell and into the world. Because it feels like once that goes, everything else follows. Nothing unites us with the world so completely as our curiosity for it.

Emma says

Part running book, part literature review with a bit of science and history. An enjoyable read. Where are my trainers?

Martin Faulkner says

I liked this a lot.

I knew I would from the early passages triggered by the author being asked, in different forms, "what are you running from?". Perhaps it's because I was airborne at the time and suffering from a Wittertainment-textbook

case of AALS, but it really made me take a moment to think about my own relationship with running and recovery since I made important changes to my life five years ago, and almost everything the author touched upon thereafter gave me similar cause to consider matters in terms of my own "journey" (as much as I hesitate to use that word).

There is, as some reviewers have commented, a *lot* of content within those pages. Cregan-Reid clearly found a huge amount to get enthused about during his research, and while some of the more literary aspects in particular are probably something of a matter of taste for yer average runner (whatever that even is - that itself being one of the themes of the book), as someone who isn't especially well-read in terms of British classics I enjoyed being given food for thought and things to investigate in my own time. Especially where some of my favourite places are touched upon (I'm thinking more the Lakes than Lewisham here). Similarly, while the paeans to barefoot running may not be directly relevant to me (yet?), I see them as a necessary and consistent part of the author's running worldview ("Laufanschauung"?) and that's what's being presented here.

It's hard to know exactly to whom I should recommend this - it's probably not for everyone, not even for every runner, but it's evocative and fascinating in equal measure and I'm very glad to have encountered it.
