

IF OUR
BODIES
COULD
TALK

Operating and
Maintaining a Human Body



JAMES HAMBLIN, M.D.

"If you want to understand the strange workings of the human body, and the future of medicine, you must read this illuminating, engaging book." —Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of *The Gene*

If Our Bodies Could Talk: A Guide to Operating and Maintaining a Human Body

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If Our Bodies Could Talk: A Guide to Operating and Maintaining a Human Body Details

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From Reader Review If Our Bodies Could Talk: A Guide to Operating and Maintaining a Human Body for online ebook

Case Chun says

Hamblin takes a personal narrative to address the topics in this book to make it less of a lecture and more of a conversation (much like his previous works and articles). He highlights important social and political implications beyond the science of the topics, prompting an important and much needed discussion on the idea of autonomy, access to healthcare, human rights, etc. That and he further advances the public engagement and awareness of science, which also is important.

Book says

If Our Bodies Could Talk: A Guide to Operating and Maintaining a Human Body by James Hamblin

“If Our Bodies Could Talk” is a fun and educational pop-science book on how our bodies work. Science writer, web personality and senior editor at the Atlantic magazine, James Hamblin, takes readers on an enjoyable journey of the human body. This entertaining 400-page book includes many questions and answers broken out by the following six categories of body use are: 1. Appearing, 2. Perceiving, 3. Eating, 4. Drinking, 5. Relating, and 6. Enduring.

Positives:

1. Enjoyable, inquisitive, well-written science book suited for the masses.
2. The fascinating topic of how our bodies work.
3. The tone of this book is fun. The author makes use of questions and answers in an illustrative, childlike-curiosity manner to drive the narrative.
4. It’s a reason-based book. It defends the best of our current knowledge. “So this book is a practical approach to understanding our bodies, predicated on the idea that memorizing facts is less important than developing insight.”
5. It does a very good of defining terms so it can be used as a quick reference. “Health in a way at once obvious and radical: “A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”
6. The book is full of interesting facts that complement the interesting narrative. “The average person has about six pounds of skin.”
7. The book is accessible to all levels but there are some unintended philosophical gold nuggets. “Max Factor’s approach is a textbook example of the sales tactic that is still so successful in selling body-improving products: convince people that there is a deficit in some concrete way, and then sell the antidote.” Bonus, “We can’t always choose our mirrors, but we can choose the kind of mirrors we will be—a kind of mirror, or a malevolent mirror, or anything in between.”
8. This book is anything but boring, you are bound to find amusing tidbits. “Tattoos are about defiance and individuality, but also resignation.” Bonus, “Blue-eyed women three hundred years ago were considered witches and burned at the stake.”
9. Historical tidbits as well. “Among the dire conditions that led to the 1965 riots was lack of access to health care. It has become a common refrain in public health that a person’s zip code is a better predictor of their health than their genetic code.”
10. The science behind itching. “What we know is itch is not simply neuropathic, it’s not simply

immunologic, and it's not simply in the epithelial barrier, but probably a combination of all these."

11. All those childlike questions, you asked and wondered but never followed up to answer why. "Why do stomachs rumble? The only way they could temporarily silence the borborygmi, they discovered, was by pressing on her left hypochondrium—the upper abdomen just below the ribs (hypo = below, chondrium = cartilage). This, incidentally, is where the term hypochondria comes from, as it was once believed that worry arose in the abdomen."

12. The truth about vitamins. "Unlike smoking less or exercising more, forgoing multivitamins is a health recommendation that involves no effort."

13. An interesting look at gluten. "It happened when we believed that cholera was spread through the air, and when we believed beriberi was caused by a toxin in rice, and it seems to be happening now with gluten."

14. Important topics like conflict of interest as it pertains to our health. "Conflicts of interest exist whenever enormous industries stand to gain by finding evidence in support of their product."

15. Do you need eight glasses of water a day? Find out.

16. Discoveries that have changed the world of medicine. "Crane's discovery of the sodium-glucose transport pump, a tiny gateway into the cells of our guts, revolutionized hydration. A 1978 editorial in *The Lancet* would call this "potentially the most important medical advance this century."

17. Hot-button topics like sex and gender issues. "One percent of the world's population is estimated to be not male or female but intersex."

18. A look at gene therapy.

19. Heart disease. "The solutions to prevent it are before us, but instead we have created a system predicated on treating the condition—shocking and burning people's hearts to temporarily restore normalcy, at great cost and risk, most often without addressing the fundamental causes."

20. Notes and bibliography included.

Negatives:

1. This book is very basic; it's intended for the masses so don't expect scientific depth.
2. I would have included a chapter on fake science, homeopathy, comes to mind.
3. I would have added more tables and graphs to complement the excellent material.

In summary, this book is a treat to read; it educates while piquing our curiosity throughout. Hamblin does a wonderful job of selecting wide and diverse topics regarding our human bodies and provides useful information. It lacks scientific depth and I would have dedicated a chapter on pseudoscience (he does debunk fake science here and there). The book deserves five stars because it is practical and fun to read. I highly recommend it!

Further suggestions: "The Gene: An Intimate History" and "The Emperor of All Maladies" by Siddhartha Mukherjee, "The Universe Within: The Deep History of the Human Body" and "Your Inner Fish..." by Neil Shubin, "The Story of the Human Body" by Daniel Lieberman, "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind" by Yuval Noah Harari, "Endless Forms Most Beautiful" by Sean B. Carroll, "The Wild Life of Our Bodies: Predators, Parasites, and Partners That Shape Who We Are Today" by Rob Dunn, and "In Defense of Food" by Michael Pollan.

Brooke Waite says

This book surprised me. I'm not sure what I was expecting....maybe a question/answer format or a section focusing on different parts of our bodies and their functions. Not so. Not really at all. What I got was more of

a social commentary through a health/healthcare lens. Hamblin explains this in the epilogue that the "stories, are in most cases less straightforward as answers than might seem ideal." I didn't expect to be reading about transgender health care, poverty and the Watts riots in South Central. Also gender roles and the ethics of how to dispose of our bodies when we die. It did make his answers far more interesting though.

Hamblin went through medical school and started a residency only to discover that he had more questions seemingly, than answers. So naturally he ended up becoming a journalist, instead of a doctor.

He poses questions such as, "Why don't tattoos wear off?" or "Can I get a more defined jaw by chewing gum?" He often uses stories to answer his questions and the answers range from a few sentences to a few pages and are often hilarious, in a snarky way. He also addresses certain myths and conundrums in health that we've just come to accept such as carrots giving us better eyesight, sports drinks actually balancing our bodies electrolytes, individual bags of flavored oatmeal being healthy and why the word 'moist' can trigger visceral reactions in many people!

I did get a sense that he's quite skeptical of naturopathic or 'alternative' medicine, gluten 'sensitivity' (the quotes are his) and the vitamin/supplement industry. I could understand that as a classically trained medical physician but then his discussion of our gut microbiome and how it's so adversely affected by our overuse (and downright abuse) of antibiotics in ourselves and in the food we consume that I understood he's simply trying to find answers the same way that we are. He's just trying to frame them in a way that will challenge our ingrained notions on what is and isn't healthy. Thank goodness for journalists. Although it wasn't what I was expecting, (I guess) it was enlightening and enjoyable.

And at least now I know that if I lose a contact lens in my eye, it won't get into my brain!

Canadian Reader says

The title of James Hamblin's book is a little misleading. It isn't an overview of the human body that imagines what key organs would say about their functions and advise you to do in order to keep them healthy (if they could talk). It is a sort of medical miscellany in six sections, each of which answers a series of questions. Some questions are about how parts of our bodies look or work. Other questions are about topical issues (for example, about tattoos & tattoo removal or the emerging specialized field of transgender health.) Still other questions concern more curious medical conditions or procedures--such as rare "orphan" diseases like epidermolysis bullosa or Rasmussen's encephalitis.

A few years ago, Hamblin, a trained M.D., left a radiology residency for a career in medical journalism. He is the editor of the health section of *The Atlantic*'s digital magazine and, as such, he is committed to increasing public health literacy in an age of "alternative facts." Early in his book, Hamblin acknowledges the work of Stanford University professor, Robert Proctor, whose academic interest—believe it or not—is the history of ignorance. According to Proctor, ignorance is actively cultivated through marketing and rumour. Consider the tobacco industry, whose members were well aware (even in the 1960s) of the science linking smoking and cancer, but nonetheless proceeded to make claims to the public that there were "experts on both sides of the debate." Now, powerful agencies have a multiplicity of media vehicles to spread lies, hence the need for encouraging a critical stance.

Hamblin provides brief answers to approximately a dozen questions about the body or medical procedures in each of the sections of his book. Some answers are as short as a couple of sentences; others are a couple of

pages. There are also line drawings and other graphics to assist the reader. Topics range from skin (the average person has six pounds of it), dimples, and phases of eyelash and hair growth, to more serious matters, such as kidney cancer and heart arrhythmias. Hamblin varies his tone with the topic. Sometimes he's matter-of-fact; other times, bemused or sardonic. Apparently aware of fractured attention spans, not only does the author keep his explanations brief, but he also includes some sexy bits to spice things up (e.g. a comparison of male and female genitalia and a bizarre, but increasingly popular kind of plastic surgery: labiaplasty, likely influenced by the prevalence of internet pornography).

All of this is well and good, by turns informative or entertaining. However, Hamblin goes further. He encourages readers to look more critically at the practices they engage in, erroneously believing they're doing something good for themselves--like consuming dietary supplements which have not been submitted to any rigorous testing and are churned out by a largely unregulated industry. He also casts a critical eye on the modern funeral industry, particularly the practice of pumping a dead body full of a known carcinogen, formaldehyde, only to place that body in an expensive padded box, which will then be buried and eventually release dangerous contaminants into the soil and water. Playfully or pointedly, he includes plans and a diagram, supplied to him by a North Carolina handyman, for building a coffin for under 200 dollars.

Hamblin urges his readers to exercise healthy skepticism towards media. He refers to TV hospital dramas, which give viewers misleading ideas about medicine or medical procedures. For example, the hit television show *E.R.* depicted CPR saving lives at about four times the rate it actually does in real life. Furthermore, TV patients who experience the procedure (upon cardiac arrest) seldom walk out of the hospital with any degree of brain damage. In actual fact, however, only 2 to 16 % of people who receive CPR from a stranger will live, and the majority of them will endure some form of neurological impairment.

I believe Hamblin's most important observations, cleverly inserted between the lighter tidbits, concern the state of healthcare in America today. How is it, he asks, that the U.S.A. can spend more money than any other country on healthcare, but rank 43rd in the world for life expectancy? The fact is: there are huge inequalities in access to healthcare (and even to certain procedures by region). Some of them are related to socio-economic status; others, to the amount of melanin (dark pigment) in human skin. Hamblin doesn't shy away from noting the role naked greed plays in healthcare either. He notes that there's no money in preventative medicine. Hospitals, insurance companies, and doctors themselves gain from illness. But patients are part of the problem, too. They prefer a quick fix, a procedure, over taking responsibility for their bodies and their diets.

If Our Bodies Talk is a lively read whose segmented format lends itself to being dipped into at spare moments. I hope it will gain wide readership.

Rating: 3.5

Uninvited says

The title of this book is a bit misleading, in a sense that it suggests it's something like a guide on what to do depending on the signals ("talk") the body provides. It's not. It's rather a book of general, current (and that's key) knowledge about one's body and system. As the author puts it in the epilogue: "...this guide to operating and maintaining a human body is no guide in any prescriptive sense. It's rather about maximizing autonomy, guiding only in a fundamental way: to encourage questioning of the cultural and commercial messages all around us, challenging normalcy, and remaining skeptical of simplistic solutions."

And it was very informative, and, above all, helped put things in perspective and unlearn common knowledge that's either obsolete (the "current" key-word I mentioned earlier) or unsubstantiated. Especially regarding "knowledge" that we acquire from pop culture or commercials - e.g the gluten-craze. Very interesting and fun to read overall (with a couple of strong laugh-out-loud moments), albeit getting slightly boring in a couple of places - or maybe it was just me not being very interested in a particular subject.

Andrea Fluty says

Loved reading this book! Really interesting and informative but funny. It made me want to search his articles in The Atlantic.

Sheri says

Not what I was expecting from the title, but still interesting. Questions and answers relating to health and the human body. All the stuff you wanted to know and maybe a few things you didn't know you wanted to know!

Kate says

It took me ages to read this book, but that's not because I wasn't into it - it just sort of lends itself to being picked up and put down by virtue of its layout. I loved all the little snippets of information and the humour in Hamblin's writing, but also that this book about facts behind human anatomy and function also included the political. Here are two of my favourite quotes from the book, the first about how tobacco companies are evil, and the second on how female sexual health deserves more study and respect.

"The classic example of purposeful ignorance is that created by the tobacco industry. Ever since tobacco was clearly proven to cause lung cancer in the 1960's, the industry has attempted to cultivate doubt in science itself. It cannot refute the facts of cigarettes, so it turned the public opinion against knowledge. Can anything *really* be known? The strategy was brilliant. Proctor calls out 'alternative causation,' or simply, 'experts disagree.' Tobacco companies didn't have to disprove the fact that smoking causes cancer; all they had to do was imply that there are 'experts' on 'both sides' of a 'debate' on the subject. And then righteously say that everyone is entitled to their belief. The tactic was so effective that it bought the industry decades to profit while reasonable people were uncertain if cigarettes caused cancer."

"...Pfizer publicly abandoned the idea of marketing Viagra to women in 2004 because, as the New York Times put it, women 'are a lot more complicated than men.' Filling their organs with blood does not solve the problem of low libido, which is much more common than it is in men. This problem is much more complex than a simple lack of blood flow, and to overlook its causes in favor of simply diverting blood to the genitals would be dangerous. To that end, the truest 'female Viagra' is cultural prioritization of female sexual health, and that won't come in a pill.

Thomas Ray says

Organized around, and spends much ink addressing, ignorant questions.

Holly says

Early in this I thought that I would be reading a series of question-and-answer trivia on assorted health topics, arranged in sidebar-like sections similar to what one would find in a popular-health magazine. It turned out that Hamblin had something more ambitious in mind and before I was midway I was impressed with the scope and depth of his coverage. I appreciated his social agenda and critique of the American medical system and insurance industry. And it was just entertaining, too.

I tore through most of this yesterday and although I wanted to take a breather to absorb it, I could not stop reading (just one more question, okay just one more . . .). I happened to be sitting in a hospital waiting room of all places, accompanying a friend, and perhaps the healthcare setting was involved, and I was a bit of a captive audience - but I was surrounded by other reading options of ubiquitous Rodale Magazine empire variety and I still chose to stick with this.

I can't recall any nonfiction I've read recently more in need of an index than this - because Hamblin's question-headings do little to reveal all his subjects. E.g, how is anyone going to know that (for example) the Watts Riots and institutional racism are discussed under the question of "Can I get taller?" or that transgender health/politics and Johnson's War on Poverty are discussed under the question of "pheromones"?! He rambles into unexpected territory and his transitions are a little strange and almost non sequiturs, but I almost never felt talked down to - with only a few exceptions he didn't seem to be dumbing down beyond what an educated reader who is not a medical professional would be interested in knowing, which I would contrast with *The Telomere Effect* by Blackburn and Epel, which has received praise from many esteemed thinkers but that I thought was padded with patronizing explanations and misplaced self-help advice.

xq says

I already had a giant, mostly-intellectual, crush on James Hamblin going into reading this from following his work in The Atlantic, so my views might be a bit biased, but I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Great conversational explanations of health issues where you learn new things and everything is explained simply, but you're not falling asleep like you would if this were a textbook. The illustrations liven up the book too. Super non-fiction read!

Taras Stadniychuk says

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Jenn says

This fascinating book is basically a collection of questions and answers about human bodies, which could be really dry and encyclopedia-like. But the questions are things like:

If I don't have dimples, could I give them to myself? (Enter bizarre world of elective cosmetic surgery.)

Am I tall enough?

What is itch?

Can I "boost" my immune system?

Colonoscopy: This is the best we can do?

Why do males have nipples?

How dangerous are tight pants?

If I lost my nose could science rebuild one for me?

What happens to my body when I die?

Even the questions that I didn't think sounded all that interesting were totally absorbing.

I'll definitely be following this author and looking forward to more of his writing.

Donna says

This book is nonfiction science. Now I'll admit, I did not excel at science in school, except biology. I had a great teacher for that, so that made a huge difference in liking the subject and doing well at it. But if all science teachers across the nation could be like the author of this book, kids everywhere would love the subject of SCIENCE. He was laugh out loud funny. I was rolling with laughter at work, which is a no-no (all fun is frowned upon at work). What fun.

I enjoyed his approach to the body and its functions. He didn't speak over my head. He told this in a way that all could understand and not once did he come across as a 'know it all'. I really enjoyed it....it spoke to my inner school geek.

Richard Nelson says

If you've ever read James Hamblin's articles for the Atlantic, or watched his delightful video series that shares a name with his new book, you won't be surprised to hear that this is both insightful and a great deal of fun. If you haven't...do! Hamblin explores every facet of the human condition, what we actually know about it, what companies pretend to know to sell us stuff, and how we should think about our bodies and our health. It's a quick but meaningful read, well worth picking up.
