

David Brooks, How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen (Random House, 2023)

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Volume 4, numéro 1, printemps 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111645ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111645ar>

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Éditeur(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Farrell, T. (2024). Compte rendu de [David Brooks, How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen (Random House, 2023)]. *New Explorations*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111645ar>

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Review: David Brooks, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* (Random House, 2023).

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The American journalist and op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* David Brooks (born in 1961 in Toronto; B. A., University of Chicago, 1983) once mentioned my favorite scholar the American Jesuit Walter J. Ong's most widely read, and most widely translated, 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* in a column of his titled "When Trolls and Crybullies Rule the Earth: How technology reshapes consciousness" (dated May 30, 2019) in the *New York Times*. In it, David Brooks says, "In 1982 the scholar Walter Ong described the way, centuries ago, a shift from an oral to a printed culture transformed human consciousness. Once storytelling was a shared experience, with emphasis on proverb, parable and myth. With the onset of the printing press, it became a more private experience, the content of that storytelling more realistic and linear."

But David Brooks does not give the title of Ong's 1982 book in his 2019 discussion of it.

In any event, Ong's pioneering study of what David Brooks here refers to as "a printed culture," meaning the culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s, is his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*. What David Brooks here refers to as "a shift from an oral to a printed culture" is partly consonant with what Ong refers to in his massively researched 1958 book as the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history, which shift Ong sees as going back to ancient Greeks and their development of vowelized phonetic alphabetic literacy (for specific pages references in Ong's massively researched 1958 book *RMDD* to the aural-to-visual shift, see the "Index" [p. 396]). Put differently, according to Ong's massively researched 1958 book, the

aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history was well underway in ancient and medieval Western culture – and thus in what Ong refers to as the Art of Discourse in ancient and medieval rhetoric and logic – long before the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s, contributing to the development of what Ong refers to as the Art of Reason in Peter Ramus’ transformation of the verbal arts of logic and rhetoric (in what is known as the trivium in Western cultural history) – and subsequently in the Age of Reason. At times, Ong himself refers to the accentuation of the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s as hypervisualism – to differentiate this pronounced tendency with the more moderate visualist tendency in ancient and medieval Western culture in the history of logic and philosophy. However, even though I see these distinctions as crucial to understanding Ong’s thought about our Western cultural history, I do not think that David Brooks should have tried to make them in his relatively short account of Ong’s thought in his 2019 column in the *New York Times* of Ong’s thought.

Ah, but apart from David Brooks’ short account of Ong’s thought in his 2019 column in the *New York Times*, would he have understood Ong’s account of the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history in his massively researched 1958 book *RMDD* well enough to write about it elsewhere – say, in his accessible new 2023 book? Your guess about that is as good as mine. My guess is that it would depend on what David Brooks had previously read about the French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr Peter Ramus (1515-1572). For example, if David Brooks has read about Ramus in Perry Miller’s massively researched 1939 book *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (for specific page references to Ramus, see the “Index” [p. 528]), then he

might understand Ong's more carefully granular account of Ramus' thought.

Now, Ong's books were never reviewed in the daily *New York Times* or in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*. But when Ong died in 2003, the *New York Times* published an obituary by Wolfgang Saxon titled "Walter J. Ong, 90, Jesuit, Teacher and Scholar of Language" (dated August 25, 2003).

I survey Ong's life and eleven of his books and selected articles in my introductory-level book *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, 2nd ed. (2015; 1st ed., 2000).

In it, because Ong never tired of touting I-thou communication, I draw on the self-help book *The Art of Intimacy* (1987) by the father-son team of psychiatrists Thomas Patrick Malone, Ph.D., M.D. (1919-2000) and Patrick Thomas Malone, M.D. (1944-2016) of Atlanta (at the time) to help explicate the psychodynamics of I-thou communication (pp. 5, 8, 32, 87, 93, 103, 118, 119, 120, 186, 191, 207n.13, and 224n.10).

In addition, I discuss Erik H. Erikson's account of the eight stages of personal psychological development in my ambitious essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the book *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991, pp. 194-209).

Conveniently enough for my purposes here, Erik H. Erikson (1902-1994) summed up his account of the eight stages of personal psychological development in the book *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (1982 – the year in which Erikson turned eighty) – with a handy chart, with nine columns (pp. 32-33). The far-left column includes the names of the eight stages of life, but without any actual age ranges: (I) Infancy; (II) Early Childhood; (III) Play Age; (IV)

School Age; (V) Adolescence; (VI) Young Adulthood; (VII) Adulthood; and (VIII) Old Age. The third column lists the corresponding Psychosocial Crises. For the stage (VI) Young Adulthood, the psychosocial crisis involves Intimacy vs. Isolation.

Well, it is quite clear in the Malones' 1987 book *The Art of Intimacy* are beyond the age range that we would call young adulthood – and are in the age range that we would call adulthood. Thus, from the examples in the Malones' 1987 book, we might conclude that intimacy is not an art that is readily or easily mastered by all young adults – perhaps not even by those young adults who manage to avoid the worst kind of isolation.

Now, I briefly profile myself as an author in my recent *OEN* article “Thomas J. Farrell on Thomas J. Farrell” (dated November 17, 2023).

For a profile of David Brooks, see the *Wikipedia* entry about him. In all honesty, I was surprised by the length and thoroughness of the *Wikipedia* entry about David Brooks – it has 102 numbered footnotes – because I had not thought of him as somebody who was worth discussing in such granular detail. In any event, the entry does contain a subsection of the so-called Sidney Awards that David Brooks awards in December in his columns in the *New York Times* to “honor the best political and cultural journalism of the year” (as the *Wikipedia* entry puts it).

Now, just as I categorized the Malones' 1987 book as a self-help book, I would also categorize David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* (Random House – his fourth book with Random House) as a self-help book -- inasmuch as it is designed to prompt self-reflection and be instructive. For

understandable reasons, it also contains a certain amount of autobiographical information about David Brooks' life – but not so much that it is intrusive or distracting. Above and beyond the personal autobiographical details about his life, the book as a whole is a record and report of his own personal journey to learn about *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* – as the title succinctly announces. If you believe in truth in advertising, then you should admire the book's title for succinctly advertising what it is about. But the book is also only an interim report, in the sense that David Brooks' life is still a work in progress, and so I assume that he is still learning about the matters announced succinctly in the title.

Now, perhaps the most efficient way for me to provide you with an overview of David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book is to give you its table of contents. The book is divided into three major parts, covering seventeen chapters.

Part 1: "I See You"

Chapter 1: "The Power of Being Seen" (pp. 3-17);

Chapter 2: "How Not to See a Person" (pp. 18-27);

Chapter 3: "Illumination" (pp. 28-42);

Chapter 4: "Accompaniment" (pp. 43-54);

Chapter 5: "What Is a Person?" (pp. 55-70);

Chapter 6: "Good Talks" (pp. 71-81);

Chapter 7: "The Right Questions" (pp. 82-93);

Part 2: "I See You in Your Struggles"

Chapter 8: "The Epidemic of Blindness" (pp. 97-106);

Chapter 9: "Hard Conversations" (pp. 107-121);

Chapter 10: "How Do You Serve a Friend Who Is in Despair?" (pp. 122-133);

Chapter 11: “The Art of Empathy” (pp. 134-159);

Chapter 12: “How Were You Shaped by Your Sufferings?” (pp. 160-172);

Part 3: “I See You with Your Strengths”

Chapter 13: “Personality: What Energy Do You Bring into the Room?” (pp. 175-189);

Chapter 14: “Life Tasks” (pp. 190-211);

Chapter 15: “Life Stories” (pp. 212-227);

Chapter 16: “How Do Your Ancestors Show Up in Your Life?” (pp. 228-245);

Chapter 17: “What Is Wisdom?” (pp. 246-271);

“Acknowledgments” (pp. 273-275);

“Notes” (pp. 277-291);

“Index” (pp. 293-306).

Clearly this is a carefully organized presentation. David Brooks dedicates the book to his late friend Peter Marks – who is the central person in Chapter 10: “How Do You Serve a Friend Who Is in Despair?”

In any event, Ong’s most widely cited essay is “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction” in *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association* (January 1975): pp. 9-22. Ong reprinted it in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 53-81). It is also reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 405-427).

So who is David Brooks’ fictional audience in his accessible new 2023 book? On p. 14, he says, “I probably don’t know you personally, but I can make the following statements with a

high degree of confidence: You're not as good as you think you are. We all go through our days awash in social ignorance." More charitably, David Brooks' fictional audience would include everybody in the world who might like to learn more about *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* – as the title announces – or at least everybody in the world who might like to learn more about what David Brooks learned over the four years or so of his own personal journey to learn more about the topics advertised in the book's title.

Now, because Ong never tired of touting I-thou communication, and because Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, has exhorted people, not just practicing Catholics, to engage in encounter and dialogue, I should note here that the lengthy Jesuit formation that both Ong and Pope Francis went through requires aspiring Jesuits to devote an enormous amount of time engaged in one-to-one encounter and dialogue with various spiritual directors.

More to the point that David Brooks makes when he says, "You're not as good as you think you are," aspiring Jesuits devote an enormous amount of time engaging in self-reflection as they make retreats of various lengths following the *Spiritual Exercises* of the Spanish Renaissance mystic St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order. Those bouts of self-reflection and careful scrutiny typically help aspiring Jesuits stop thinking that they are as good as they had previously thought they were. (Disclosure: I was in the Jesuit order for a time [1979-1987].)

Now, in David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book, he does not refer to Pope Francis' repeated emphasis on encounter and dialogue. But I should call attention the pope's emphasis here because David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book would be instructive reading for those who

want to respond to the first Jesuit pope's call for encounter and dialogue.

For incisive discussions of the related concepts of encounter and dialogue, see the essay on each concept in the helpful book *A Pope Francis Lexicon*, edited by Joshua J. McElwee and Cindy Wooden (2018; "Encounter," pp. 61-64; "Dialogue," pp. 40-43).

I have profiled the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis in my *OEN* article "Pope Francis on Evil and Satan" (dated March 24, 2019).

Even though Pope Francis is decidedly doctrinally conservative, certain conservative American Catholics have inveighed against him vociferously, as the Italian philosopher and papal biographer Massimo Borghesi notes in his book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock (2021).

Now, in the text of the main body of David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book, there are no superscript numerals to signal an endnote. In the "Notes," there are no discussion notes; all are bibliographic notes. Each note begins with a page number and then a brief quotation of the statement being noted. However, on p. 54, David Brooks quotes David Whyte at length, but there is no corresponding bibliographic note on p. 279.

In the "Index," the main entries that have sub-entries under them show the central recurring themes in the book – for example, accompaniment (p. 293), communication (p. 295), conversations (pp. 295-296), Culture(s) (p. 296), Depression (p. 296), emotions (p. 297), empathy (p. 297), grief (p. 298), human beings (pp. 298-299), Illuminators/Illuminationism (p. 299), intimacy (p. 300), life tasks (pp. 300-301), listening (p. 301), morality (p. 301), Personal

narratives (p. 302), questions (p. 303), reality(ies) (p. 303), recognition (p. 303), relationships (p. 304), social disconnection/isolation (p. 304), subjective consciousness (p. 305), and unconscious mind (p. 306). Some of themes David Brooks has discussed in his various columns in the *New York Times*. However, the presentation of these themes in David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book is far more coherent and well-developed than the same themes would be in a collection of his relevant columns.

In David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book, he discusses Erikson's account of the eight stages of personal psychological development (pp. 191-192, 193, 195, 198, 204, and 207), mentioned above.

Now, because David Brooks is known as a political commentator, I should note that his accessible new 2023 book is free of political commentary – which should be welcome news for liberal and progressive readers. However, he occasionally refers to well-known political figures to illustrate something that he is discussing. For example, he refers to Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin to illustrate what he refers to as “men who experienced an imperial consciousness in childhood, and then never moved beyond it” (p. 194).

For a perceptive discussion of Trump's psychodynamics, see the American psychiatrist Justin A. Frank's book *Trump on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President* (2018).

But also see my *OEN* review of it titled “His Majesty, Baby Donald!” (dated October 1, 2018).

Now, David Brooks also refers to John F. Kennedy to illustrate a person “high in openness” (p. 186) and to Franklin D. Roosevelt to illustrate someone “who sees into the core of another” as he credits Roosevelt with doing in the 1930s when he hosted “a twenty-eight-year-old

congressman named Lyndon Baines Johnson in the White House” and afterward told Harold Ickes, “that kid Lyndon Johnson could well be the first southern President” (p. 247).

According to David Brooks, the characteristic of openness that John F. Kennedy illustrated is one of five core personality traits known as the Big Five (pp. 178-186): extroversion [pp. 179-181], conscientious [pp. 181-182], neuroticism [pp. 182-183], agreeableness [pp. 183-185], and openness [pp. 185-186].

Now, because Ong never tired of touting Martin Buber’s classic book *I and Thou*, I would be remiss if I did not mention that David Brooks also refers to Buber’s classic book in his accessible new 2023 book (pp. 134-135 and 283).

Because I mentioned the Malones’ 1987 book *The Art of Intimacy* above in connection with I-thou communication, I should also note here that David Brooks discusses intimacy in his accessible new 2023 book (pp. 49, 138, 194, 200, and 269).

Now, David Brooks’ discussion of recognition in his accessible new 2023 book (pp. 9-10, 25, 100, 102, and 134) reminds me of Warwick Wadlington’s discussion of acknowledgment and recognition in his book *Reading Faulknerian Tragedy* (1987; for specific page references, see the entry on Acknowledgment in the “Index” [p. 253]).

I discuss Faulkner, and Wadlington’s 1987 book, in my essay “Faulkner and Male Agonism” in the book *Time, Memory, and the Verbal Arts: Essays on the Thought of Walter Ong*, edited by Dennis L. Weeks and Jane Hoogestraat (1998, pp. 203-221).

Speaking of recognition and acknowledgment, in David Brooks’ accessible new 2023 book, he

says, “The psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk’s book *The Body Keeps the Score* is one of the bestselling books of our era. It’s about trauma – and healing from trauma – and has sold millions of copies. As Van der Kolk writes, ‘Knowing that we are seen and heard by the important people in our lives [acknowledged and recognized] can make us calm and safe, and . . . being ignored or dismissed can precipitate rage reactions or mental collapse” (pp. 99-100; ellipsis in David Brooks’ text). See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014, p. 80) – a copy of which I owned long before I read David Brooks’ new 2023 book.

In the same chapter, David Brooks also says, “According to research by Ryan Streeter of the American Enterprise Institute, lonely people are seven times more likely than non-lonely people to say they are active in politics. For people who feel disrespected and unseen, politics is a seductive form of social therapy. Politics seems to offer a comprehensible moral landscape. *We, the children of light, are facing against them, the children of darkness.* Politics seems to offer a sense of belonging. *I am on the barricade with other members of my tribe.* Politics seems to offer an arena of moral action. *To be moral in this world, you don’t have to feed the hungry or sit with the widow. You just have to be liberal or conservative, you just have to feel properly enraged at the people you find contemptible”* (p. 101; italics in David Brooks’ text). On p. 282, David Brooks gives the following reference: Ryan Streeter and David Wilde, “The Lonely (Political) Crowd,” American Enterprise Institute website:

<https://www.aei.org/articles/the-lonely-political-crowd/>

Now, if we were to accept Wadlington’s operational definition and explanation of Faulknerian tragedy in terms of acknowledgment and recognition, then we would have to generalize a bit from David Brooks’ discussion of recognition, and of his discussion of the lack of adequate

recognition in American culture today, and say that he is, in effect, portraying American culture today as tragic by the standards of Faulknerian tragedy. However, Faulknerian tragedy itself shows that the seeds of this American tragedy today were present in American culture in Faulkner's day.

In conclusion, in the spirit of exhortation that is so pronounced in him, Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, has urged people, not just practicing Catholics, to engage in encounter and dialogue. Those people who respond to his urging them to engage in encounter and dialogue might find David Brooks' accessible new 2023 book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen* informative and instructive and encouraging.

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