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Genius explained, with help from Mozart



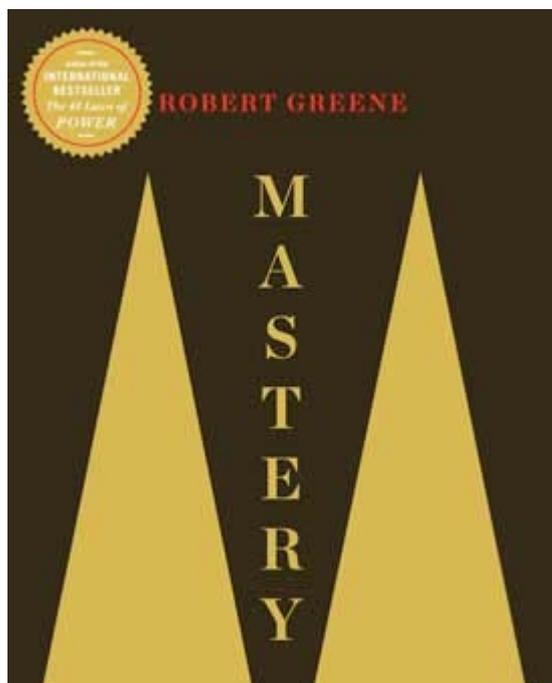
By Lucy Kellaway

We're all geniuses now. At least, we all could be geniuses if only we buckled down and spent an awfully long time working at it.

That, roughly, is the thesis of *Mastery*, latest door stopper from Robert Greene, whose "international bestsellers" include *The 48 Laws of Power* and *The 50th Law*, a management book co-authored with rapper 50 Cent.

Keen readers may spot that his new thesis is the same as that put forward in Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, only Greene has improved it in three ways. First, he has doubled the number of hours that must be put in to master anything from Gladwell's 10,000. Second, he has enlisted Goethe, Mozart, Sergey Brin, Wagner, Rembrandt, John Coltrane, Marcel Proust and a couple of dozen other great masters to show how it can be done. And finally he has come up with a step-by-step guide, which includes finding something that is more vocation than job, working like crazy at it, getting a top mentor and using social networks.

To produce *Mastery*, Greene has taken his own advice to heart. According to the publicity material, he put in 20,000 hours thinking, researching and writing the book; the only trouble is that the dense 360-page result, with its vast quantities of research and effort much in evidence, makes one long for something snappier and less laboured.



And yet, for anyone who can be bothered to master *Mastery* there are some rewards. First, Greene does a bracing line in disapproval and admonishment. "The passive ironic attitude is not cool or romantic, but pathetic and destructive," he writes. This sentiment is a good one, and as someone who earns a living by being both passive and ironic, I stand duly corrected.

Better still are the stories about geniuses with which the book is crammed. Open it at random and you find John Keats forcing himself to write the interminable "Endymion", through which he learnt the importance of brevity.

Open it again and there is Goethe paying a visit to his



friend Friedrich Schiller to find the philosopher had gone out. Goethe sits down at his desk and is sickened by a smell coming out of the drawer, which he opens to discover a stash of rotten apples. On inquiry, he learns that Stiller's wife puts them there deliberately as the stench helps her husband concentrate.

Even though the stories are good, some are spoilt by how Greene tells them. There is something vaguely blasphemous about the idea of Leonardo da Vinci "sharing" memories on his deathbed. He also presumes to tell us what the great man might have been thinking in the last hours of his life, the sheer gall of which made me want to hurl the book at the wall.

However, the greatest weakness of *Mastery* is that it peddles a fiction. In true life, we can't all be geniuses. As if to prove otherwise, he keeps telling us that Charles Darwin was no good at school – but from that it doesn't mean that the modern louts leaving school with no GCSEs today will go on to write an *On the Origin of Species*.

Most of us will never get anywhere near mastery at anything because we are either too stupid, too lazy, too unimaginative, too happy, too poorly educated, too encumbered by children and elderly parents or too unlucky. And no book will alter that.

I'm also suspicious of some of Greene's tips. He tells us that to find the right field in which to work we should revisit what we loved as children. This worked for Marie Curie, who used to wander into her father's lab and be fascinated by the instruments. Alas it works less well for me. What I loved was playing hairdressers in the caravan in my friend's garden. Vidal Sassoon should be glad I didn't read this book decades ago.

The final difficulty with *Mastery* is the pretence that all masters followed a similar path when they surely did nothing of the sort. They shared one thing only: they did what they did – whether it was writing "Ode to a Nightingale" or building the world's first functioning aeroplane – without recourse to a book telling them how to do it.

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