Books

4 Self-Improvement Authors We’re Reading While the World Implodes

By
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From left: Evy Poumpouras, Peter Kozodoy, Maria Konnikova, and Susanne Althoff. (Photo of Konnikova by Landon Speers; photo of Althoff by Joel Benjamin).

For better or for worse, social distancing has left plenty of time for self-examination, and with it, new opportunities for personal growth. Whether you’re looking to up your game at work, improve your relationships, or just build a little more confidence, these four Columbia alumni authors want to help.

Evy Poumpouras

Becoming Bulletproof: Protect Yourself, Read People, Influence Situations, and Live Fearlessly

As a special agent for the United States Secret Service, Evy Poumpouras ’18JRN protected Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama ’83CC. She served as a criminal investigator and as a special interrogator trained in the art of lie detection, and she won an award for valor for her role as a first responder on 9/11. But Poumpouras says that her most powerful weapon is something that everyone has in his or her arsenal — words. In her new book, she shows readers how to use effective communication to conquer fears, diffuse stressful situations, read people, and ultimately influence others to get what you want. Poumpouras says that controlling panic, preparing for any outcome, and careful listening are the keys to handling most problems — at the office, in a relationship, and even in a true crisis.

Quick take: “The best way to manage fear is preparation. It isn’t hiding from the things we’re afraid of — it’s facing them head-on, taking responsibility for our own safety, and giving ourselves the tools and knowledge we need to manage any situation that might come our way. It’s about confidence, personal strength, and self-sufficiency.”

Peter Kozodoy

Honest to Greatness: How Today's Greatest Leaders Use Brutal Honesty to Achieve Massive Success

Peter Kozodoy ’19BUS graduated from college in 2008, in the midst of a devastating worldwide recession. Improbably, he was able to build a thriving marketing firm, which now boasts a client list packed with Fortune 500 companies. The secret to his success? Kozodoy says it was his brutal, unrelenting honesty — and not just in how he dealt with his clients. Honesty, he writes, can take many forms, but perhaps what’s most important in business is learning to be honest with yourself — even if that means facing the fact that you might need to change your business model to keep up with a changing market, or with competition that is doing better. Now also a

TEDx speaker and business coach, Kozodoy uses his first book to offer advice to companies looking to attract a new generation of consumers, and to his peers, who are looking to become leaders in another uncertain economy. In an era dominated by “fake news” and social-media cancel culture, Kozodoy preaches that transparency, facts, and a commitment to openness are more important than ever.

Quick take: “It turns out that all the MBAs, cash flow analyses, marketing tactics, and complex consulting strategies in the world can’t save an organization that is fundamentally dishonest in the first place.”

Maria Konnikova

The Biggest Bluff: How I Learned to Pay Attention, Master Myself, and Win

Most poker champions start playing because they want quick money. But for Maria Konnikova ’13GSAS, a best-selling author with a PhD in psychology, poker is a way to understand human behavior. Konnikova started out studying poker legend Erik Seidel as research for a book but ended up becoming interested in playing herself — and found that she was good at it. Now a full-time professional poker player with over $200,000 in winnings to her name, Konnikova shares some of what she’s learned along the way — lessons that she says are applicable beyond the casino. Konnikova, who studied game theory at Columbia along with psychology, is fascinated by the “ineffable balance between skill and chance” that governs both poker and life in general. She found that while anyone can be either lucky or unlucky in a single hand of poker, “luck is a short-term friend or foe,” and those players who learn from their experiences end up being successful overall.

Quick take: “Poker teaches you how and when you can take true control — and how you can deal with the elements of pure luck — in a way no other environment I’ve encountered has quite been able to do. What’s more, in an age of omnipresent distraction, poker reminds us just how critical close observation and presence are to achievement and success.”

Susanne Althoff

Launching While Female: Smashing the System That Holds Women Entrepreneurs Back

The startup economy is still hot, but women entrepreneurs receive only 3 percent of venture-capital investments. Plus, many women entrepreneurs are pigeonholed into industries serving stereotypically female occupations — like pregnancy and parenting. For her new book, journalist Susanne Althoff ’93JRN interviewed more than one hundred female and nonbinary entrepreneurs. She outlines some of the particular challenges they face, such as a lack of mentorship, an inability to be taken seriously by investors, sexual harassment, and impossibly high standards for their leadership (what would happen, Althoff asks, if a female CEO behaved like Elon Musk?). But Althoff is optimistic about the future and offers practical solutions for women looking to get ahead in the business world.

Quick take: “Women are missing from the entrepreneurial space. They own fewer companies than men, and those businesses have access to significantly less start-up capital, make significantly less revenue, and employ far fewer people. An entrepreneurial gender gap exists, and it leaves us with fewer jobs, a weaker economy, and less innovation. Building a start-up world that’s open and inclusive would benefit us all.”

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