

## ***Unplugged* - My Own Book Review**

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Danny MILLER (2017) : Review of *The Icarus Paradox*  
by its Nostalgic Author

Publisher: New York  
HarperCollins (1990)  
Language: English  
ISBN:0-88730-453-2

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The “unplugged” section seeks to experience new forms of book reviews. We regularly grant a wild card to a world-class scholar to review his/her own Classic. In “My own book review”, authors will tell us the story of “what I was trying to do” with sometimes some auto-ethnographic considerations. By recounting the building process of one seminal research with a contemporary lens, they may give some insights for the current craft of research and also share with us renunciations, doubts and joys in their intimate writing experience.

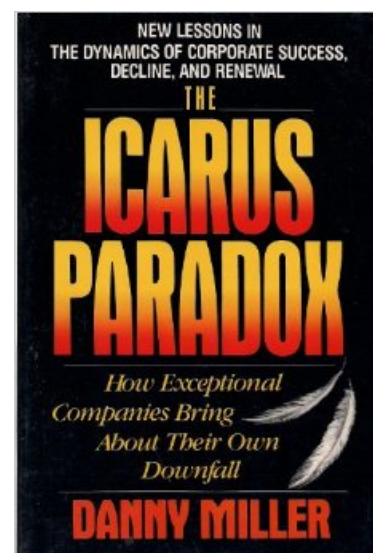
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It’s a strange undertaking to review one’s own book; but in a style reminiscent of gonzo journalism here goes.

### **ORIGINS OF THE BOOK**

What an easy birth this was. I was sitting, first in an office at NYU and a few hours later at LaGuardia Airport, thinking that there was a thread that might connect much of my work on change and configuration, most of which I had done over the previous 15 years. But things were fuzzy until suddenly it hit me: I had it! I began to smile and scribble furiously and no doubt those waiting for the plane with me thought “let’s try not to sit too close to that guy”.

In any event, here was the idea: we had done work on archetypes (I now call them configurations) of successful and unsuccessful strategies in context – and also on organizational momentum and revolutionary change (Miller & Friesen, 1984). Now I saw, quite concretely, that the unsuccessful types were in many ways the “evil twins” of the successful ones. For each successful type (very different from one another) there was a thematically similar unsuccessful one. Except that the latter were extreme caricatures of the former. So, via four common evolutionary trajectories, the star innovator became reckless, the cost leader became stingy, the marketer became a huckster, and the builder over-expanded. Change therefore was mostly of the momentum variety and the failure types were what the ending points looked like. And for managers, to undo the mess would take something of a revolution. Nice.



I plotted the trajectories on a piece of paper and wrote down the names of some possible companies that had followed the trajectories (I was an avid reader of cases and business periodicals at the time).

When I got home I started writing the book, one trajectory chapter per week, using many *Fortune* and other cases and business biographies to plug in the details. That was easy and quick. What was a bit harder were the introduction and theory chapters, and very much harder to write were the chapters on turnarounds and remedies. I had to try to explain why success was so seductive and why the trajectories were so hard to combat. In essence, this was because veridical learning which was functional, became superstitious learning, as initially profitable strategic refinement became a headlong dash towards hyper-simplicity. It was hard for managers to tell just when refining and extending a core competency in strategy, which had produced great results, caused an organization to become too narrow in focus and intolerant. I had to develop recommendations for how to avoid this trap but was never too happy with this last part of the book as there is no easy way to convince a star manager to abandon or reverse what had once been a terrific formula for success.

## STYLE

In writing the book I read many articles written by popular business journalists and also some novels and these really helped me throw off the academic style and made my stuff more legible. It was liberating.

*Icarus* has a nice pace to it. It is breezy and contains some interesting stories. It also has a kind of harmony and balance – its elements fit nicely together. It's rare for me to be able to make that happen that in a book or article, but this time it seemed to work (although the reviewer at the *Financial Times* found its scheme too simple and perhaps too "American"; I took that as a compliment).

## AUDIENCE

Although the thesis of the book was based on synthesizing some of my early academic work, I intended the book for a "business" audience – managers. I thought at the time and believe even more strongly now that we are at least in part a practical discipline, a little like engineering. However, too much academic work, including some of mine, is not pertinent to practitioners, and that omission not only robs us of relevance as a field, but condemns us to pursuing parochial projects aimed at a tiny cadre of like minded individuals.

## PUBLISHING

I sent my book proposal with some chapters to a few trade publishers (no agent for me in those days). Several were interested right away and one was very enthusiastic (and paid a nice advance). Virginia Smith at Harper Business was a great editor – a smart Harvard grad who had edited *Good to Great* and really believed in the message of my book. We had some great discussions, which I also had with publisher Mark Greenberg, a philosophy major with whom I enjoyed some wonderful three hour lunches.

The problem was that the book came out as a trade publication where the maxim is “gone today, here tomorrow”. In other words if the book, on consignment, doesn’t flow off the bookstore shelves within a month or two, it gets returned to the publisher. So there were returns and ultimately, I was able to buy many remainder copies at a steep discount and sell them to colleagues teaching executive education.

## AFTERMATH AND RECEPTION

**Academic:** OK, aftermath is a bit dramatic. The book was far more integrated, broader in scope, and at the same time more fine-grained than my earlier studies. So I wanted to test its ideas: specifically, Icarus suggested that managers at successful firms engaged in a kind of superstitious learning: they believed they understood why the firm did so well, and proceeded to pursue a given strategy to dangerous extremes (see above). I formalized and tested where, why and how that happened in subsequent academic work, most notably, conceptually in “The Architecture of Simplicity” (1993) and empirically, with Ming-Jer Chen, in “The Simplicity of Competitive Repertoires” (1996).

**Professional:** In interaction with people in the business and consulting world, it was clear that many really liked the book, and they did use it to get discussion going in their practices; it was also used diagnostically to determine if businesses were on any of the dangerous Icarus trajectories.

On a very personal note, it was gratifying to receive some lovely comments on Icarus from accomplished practitioners who I came to work with and to deeply respect. These kinds of compliments are rarer in academic circles.

## WHAT I WOULD CHANGE

Two people (one of whom is a really good writer) told me: “If the book were 20% shorter, it would have been a best-seller”. Maybe. But I did take their point. The academic in me kept wanting to “prove my case” with additional examples. Their argument was “no manager cares” – they just want the ideas.

What I didn’t like much about the book was the title. I had wanted to call it “The Perils of Excellence” as that is pretty much what Icarus was about. But the editor and publisher said the book was “too original” (nice ploy!) to refer to the word “excellence”, which had become hackneyed after all of the Peters & Waterman clones. So Icarus it became, and I did sometimes find the book in the Greek mythology section at a bookstore (not sure whether that was a subtle criticism of an opaque writing style or the book’s credibility!).

## LEGACY INFLUENCE ON MY RECENT STUFF

The business of configurations and their evolutionary tendencies, which I think Icarus captured well, was reincarnated in my book on family business strategy with Isabelle Le Breton-Miller, *Managing for the Long Run*. Again, different strategic configurations formed the basis for the book, and trajectories were used once again to describe pathologies among enduringly successful family firms (a breed that had been ignored by the management literature). And again, the four strategic themes from Icarus reappeared in slightly different form in Long Run. But the latter book

is more complex and detailed, and in writing it I kept thinking, "if only this one flowed as easily as Icarus". It did not.

*Long Run* also was harder to get published as family firms were considered to be stodgy and uninteresting by publishers (this, despite their being the most prevalent and enduring type of business in the world and with far less executive opportunism). But the book did well in the international market with many translations and it has been designated one of three family business classics of the last 25 years. Nonetheless, and Isabelle – rightly -- fumes when I say this, I just wish it had been as pretty as its "step-mother".

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