# Book Reviews

ELIZABETH ZWICKY, WITH RIK FARROW AND SAM STOVER

Lately, I have actually been asked the same questions repeatedly, so it seems like a good moment to provide a few answers; you could call this a "FAQ" list if the term hadn't been co-opted by most Web sites to mean "questions we were hoping you might ask frequently, or at least would read the answers to if we put them near a title implying you would definitely be interested in them."

How do I read so many books? I'm afraid the answers are boring and not very useful; first, I read faster than most people, and I always have, and second, I don't own a television.

Why an iPad? Sadly, this answer is probably just as useless for most people, because it isn't a decision based on research on eBook readers in general. I like the size, and the user interface is familiar to me. I don't expect it to be a whole computer, but I like having more than just books available to me (when sick, playing silly games is almost as soothing as reading fiction, which explains my score at Heroes of Kalevala). My child is passionately fond of it, which is both an advantage and a downside. It will also read pretty near every eBook format ever, definitely an advantage.

Does this eBook stuff really work? It works for me. I'm certainly helped out by the big screen, which means that books in PDF format show up almost exactly as they would on paper, but it's still striking how fast you get used to paging electronically. You don't get the same cues about where you are in the book, which makes it harder to find things again. Different readers and different formats will have very different effects, of course.

I tried one of this month's books both in PDF and in ePub. There are two big differences between the formats. PDF is a familiar problem for publishers, and almost guaranteed to be very close to the printed book, probably being produced in the regular publishing flow. ePub is really only used for eBooks, and the production process will be a separate one, which often results in new errors (for instance, the book I read was named "epub" in ePub format, but was correctly titled in both the PDF readers I use). But ePub is reformattable, which means that if you have a small screen, the text can reflow, so that it's a reasonable print size and still fits on the screen. PDF doesn't do that; it's pictures of pages. For books that are all text, this is perfect. It gets a little trickier with pictures inserted; unless the book is actually redone for ePub, they're going to end up where they got put in the now irrelevant page layout. It's livable, and aside from the title, the book I read appeared to be accurate.

### Being Geek

Michael Lopp

O'Reilly, 2010. 309 pp.
ISBN 978-0-596-15540-7

This is the best book on career skills for high-tech people that I've come across. Its prototypical reader would be a developer on about his second job, but there's plenty here for people earlier and later in their careers, and it doesn't require much translation for people in support and/or operations. (And yes, I did say "his" on purpose, but it's actually reasonably unbiased; the author is a man writing about a male-dominated world, but he doesn't omit women or treat them as a different species.) It covers a wide range of topics, from interviewing to deciding when to leave a job, and it includes managing both up and down, and giving presentations.

This is a lot of area to cover. As a result, it's a speedy and opinionated ride. It's in short pieces, not closely tied to each other and easy to read separately. Most technical people will find it both enjoyable and informative; some of the advice won't suit you, but that's true of all advice books.

### Glitch

Jeff Papows

Pearson Education, 2010. 198 pp.
ISBN 978-0-13-216063-6

This is a book for IT managers. It has a lot of good stories, some good insight into trends, and some good advice, surprisingly loosely linked together, and is totally centered on what IT management can do to improve life. I find some of the

takes on things odd. I believe the assertion that there is a lot of COBOL code still in production, but ever fewer people able to maintain it. I am dubious that the problem to be solved here is a shortage of COBOL programmers rather than an oversupply of COBOL code, and even more skeptical about the prospects for bribing people to learn COBOL by also letting them learn something new and flashy.

If there's an IT manager in your life who needs to be scared straight, this is the book to do it, full of moral tales about past failures, suggestions about upcoming disasters, and virtuous advice. It doesn't have a lot of interest for a more general audience.

### Data Analysis with Open Source Tools

Philipp K. Janert

O'Reilly, 2010. 498 pp.
ISBN 978-0-596-80235-6

I love this book a lot. Practical data analysis is not at all the same thing as theoretical data analysis, and there are almost no resources to help you with it. Even people who can do it effectively are rare, most people being either unfamiliar with the tools or far too enamored of sophisticated methods when knife-fighting is called for. And this is a whole book that devotes itself to truly practical data analysis, the sort of book that will tell you how to figure out that it's not worth optimizing a process, and then turn around and point out to you that often nobody wants to hear that.

It includes a short introduction to various tools, including R, and a number of Python packages for scientific programming. It assumes that you're capable of programming in any old programming language (and provides appropriate help with R, which is not any old programming language). It also has a lovely annotated bibliography at the end of each chapter with suggestions of other resources, one of my favorite features.

My first warning is that the introduction says you need to be "not math-phobic." In general, when books say this, they mean they have numbers in them. In this case, it means that calculus comes up every few pages, and there is an excursion into eigenvalues (which you can skip). There is an appendix which explains calculus, but an appendix is not going to help that much if you didn't have any calculus to begin with, which, I have to admit, I don't. Nonetheless, I managed to get a great deal of use out of this book.

My second warning is that if you're not already doing data analysis, you may be unable to figure out why I'm so enthusiastic. First, you've got to get the data into an analyzable state, which it doesn't help much with, and then you have to figure out what questions to ask. There's some help with that, but most of it is aimed at particular sorts of situations; apparently the data analysis I mostly do (which can generally be summarized as "something is wrong, here's a pile of data") is relatively rare, because it's not much like the situations most discussed. I don't blame the book for these omissions, which are big complicated areas in their own right, but nonetheless, there are going to be plenty of people who are still bewildered.

### Building the Perfect PC, 3d Edition

Robert Bruce Thompson and Barbara Fritchman Thompson

O'Reilly, 2010. 342 pp.
ISBN 978-1-449-38824-9

I like to build my own systems, so when O'Reilly announced this book, I asked for a copy immediately.

Confession first: unlike Elizabeth, I don't read that quickly and so I only read the first two chapters (up to page 87), and then skimmed later chapters. Having written that, I found the Thompsons' book the best I've read when it comes to building PCs. They cover components in detail, offer recommendations (that I agree with no less) for best vendors, and explain many things that I often wondered about. For example, how big a power supply do you really need? I've generally gone for the smallest power supply that seemed to cover the requirements of my components, but they explain that a power supply that is rated at 400 watts will often have a maximum efficiency at 200 watts. I had thought I would be wasting power with an "oversized" power supply, but I was doing just the opposite: I was wasting power by operating my power supply outside of its efficiency envelope. They also point out that running a power supply near its maximum will result in it failing sooner—sometimes much sooner.

The authors offer great advice about picking CPUs, with explanations of different classes of CPUs, why paying a premium for 10% performance will not be satisfactory for most builders, recommendations for sockets with an upgrade path, and matching CPUs to the tasks you expect from them. They cover all components in detail, and although they didn't get into the nitty-gritty details of memory (just one mention of CAS), they don't really need to, as your only option is to buy memory that is supported by your motherboard. I've been bitten by this, also by buying a CPU that would fit the motherboard socket but not be supported by the motherboard's BIOS (grrrr), so this is important advice.

The Thompsons provides specs for building six types of systems: budget PC, mainstream system, extreme system, media center, appliance/nettop, and home server. They include rationales for all of the component decisions, and all

the information you might need to assemble these systems properly. On top of all of this, they use Linux (Ubuntu), so if your plan is to install Linux instead of Windows 7, you know you are working with people who have the same notion that you do about operating systems. This includes recommendations for Linux media center software.

I plan to continue reading this book, as I build a system almost every year. Last year it was an Atom appliance (that I could buy a motherboard with a processor, video, sound, and SATA support for $64 just astounded me), and this year it will likely be a better desktop system. Robert's bio says he has built or repaired hundreds of PCs, and I believe him. The details make this book worth the price of avoiding the many problems you can run into when building your own PC. Oh, and building your own PC will not cost you any more, and you will usually wind up with better components than if you bought a vendor-built system.

*—Rik Farrow*

### Practical Lock Picking: A Physical Penetration Tester's Training Guide

Deviant Ollam

Syngress, 2010. 236 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-59749-611-7

Finally. No, I mean *finally*, a great lockpicking book. I had high expectations when I ordered it, and it overdelivered. If you want to learn how locks work, how to pick locks, and how to actually get good at it, this is the book for you. Even if you don't have any interest or need to learn about physical penetration testing, picking locks is a challenging hobby.

For the longest time, the resources available to aspiring lockpickers were somewhat limited. There are a couple of older books, and some trade schools offer distance-learning locksmith courses, but a lot of the "juicy" info just wasn't available to the general public. In fact, in some states, possession of a lockpick set can be a crime, if you aren't a licensed locksmith. That said, owning this book isn't going to get you into trouble, but practicing on locks that aren't yours certainly could, which is why I was glad to see an opening section dealing with "Ethical Considerations."

Chapter 1 discusses the how pin tumbler and wafer locks work, and Chapter 2 explains the weaknesses inherent in the locks which allow for picking. You have to love Chapter 3, which is titled "Beginner training: How to get very good, very fast" and delivers on that promise. The most common type of lock is the pin tumbler, and most (decent) locks have four or more stacks of pins. This chapter shows you how to set up a practice lock with only one stack to start, then progress to four (and beyond), with suggestions on how to make the picking easier or harder as you practice, practice, practice.

Chapter 4 goes one step further into advanced training and more complex locks and tools. Chapter 5 discusses "Quick-entry tricks" like shimming and bumping—and even shows you how to make your own shims. Chapter 6 takes a look at some other types of locks, such as tubular (the kind you see in a soda machine), as well as two locks not seen much in North America: Cruciform and Dimple locks.

The Appendix contains 20 pages of pictures and descriptions of tools and tool sets. There is even a DVD with 1.5G of animations, figures, and videos. All of the figures in the book are given in color, and the videos are from various presentations and examples (e.g., shmoocon). All in all, a fantastic resource. The book is fairly short, as the important topics are presented efficiently and with a dash of humor. As mentioned before, the only real way to get better is to practice, and there is a lot of attention given to providing ideas and methods for everything from getting started all the way to designing almost impossible scenarios. Unlike the "white and orange" Syngress books of the past, the new "black and yellow" design seems to indicate a new trend in quality. This book was extremely well written and edited. 10 out of 10.

*—Sam Stover*