

Book Review: The Unruly PhD: Doubts, Detours, Departures, and Other Success Stories by Rebecca Peabody

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2014-9-23

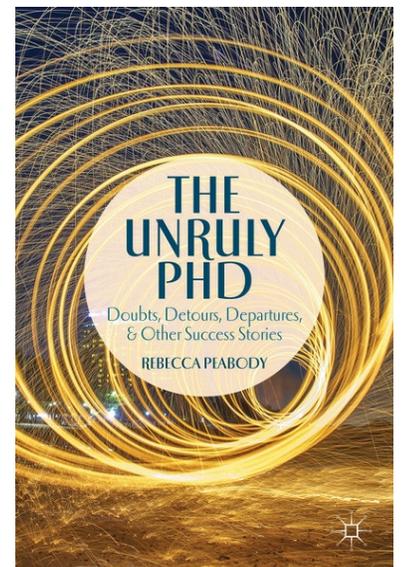
This book is a useful and comforting resource for anyone interested in understanding how individuals get through their PhD journeys and negotiate their career choices. Most importantly, this book reminds us that there is a greater world beyond academia, and that it is OK to pursue alternative paths, writes Sin Yee Koh.



The Unruly PhD: Doubts, Detours, Departures, & Other Success Stories. Rebecca Peabody. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

Find this book: 

In recent years, the increasing numbers of PhD graduates relative to the number of academic jobs available to them have inspired intense debates on the relevance of the PhD programme. In Canada, it is estimated that 'at most one out of every four PhDs will end up in full-time university faculty positions' ('[Faculty jobs are rare, but Canada still needs its PhDs](#)'). On the one hand, questions are raised as to whether the PhD education is 'worth saving' ('[The Future of the PhD](#)'). Efforts are also being made to examine the extent of the academic job crisis, through projects such as the [PhD Placement Project](#) undertaken by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. On the other hand, Twitter hashtags such as [#altac](#) and [#postac](#) have emerged as PhD students and early career researchers find solace with a growing community of PhD holders seeking alternative careers beyond academia. There is also an [open source database of 'Quit Lit'](#), featuring websites and blogs of former academics and PhD students who have left academia, compiled by Vitae, *The Chronicle's* online career hub. What is certain is that the traditional PhD-to-academia route is no longer a default career pathway for PhD holders.



Rebecca Peabody's book, *The Unruly PhD: Doubts, Detours, Departures, & Other Success Stories*, is a fresh addition to this growing genre. The book contains first person accounts by three groups of former PhD students: firstly, those who are pursuing careers in academia (Part I: PhDs in Academia); secondly, those who are in non-academic jobs (Part II: PhDs Beyond Academia); and thirdly, those who discovered a different calling during their PhD training and chose to leave (Part III: PhDs Redirected). Each group contains stories by three individuals. These three stories are further supplemented with one or two interviews with PhD holders who have carved out their own niches and enjoy professional and personal success as actors, writers, directors, and entrepreneurs. Parts I and II also come with a collection of quotes from the author's personal network of PhD graduates on 'What it Took to Get it Done' (pp.55-58) and 'What I Know Now that I Wish I Knew Then' (pp. 123-124). True to the origins of 'Quit Lit' in the blogosphere, the book ends with an invitation to 'join the conversation' (p. 177) online on a dedicated [website](#).

As the author explains, this book aims to deliver four objectives. Firstly, the book is a helpful resource for current PhD students who may be experiencing difficulties and isolation as part of their PhD journey. Secondly, through the juxtaposition of stories, the book highlights that certain challenging aspects of the PhD experience are 'endemic to the structure of the graduate school' (p. xiii). Thirdly, detailed stories about how individuals got to where they are show that there is no one ideal path towards successful academic careers. For example, despite doing 'everything

... that [he] shouldn't have done' (p. 14)—such as completing his PhD from the same institution for his undergraduate degree, adjuncting at an institution where he might apply for a tenure-track position, and turning down a job offer in a tight job market – Derek (Chapter 1) successfully got a tenure job in his preferred city. Finally, the juxtaposition of careers in and beyond academia suggests how success can be understood in broader terms. In sum, this book reveals the divergent ways to get through, survive, and forge beyond the PhD journey.



PhD students graduate at Duke. Credit: [Bryan Frank](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Reading this book as an early career researcher and a mid-career changer during my PhD studies, I found myself connecting to Anika's (Chapter 4) and Jason's (Chapter 8) stories. Both of their stories documented how they worked out that they did not fit graduate school, albeit in different ways. Going to graduate school after her professional work in academic publishing, Anika felt that she was 'involved in conversations that had started years before' without her (p. 64). She constantly felt like a fraud – 'a remedial student, perennially behind and undereducated, and having to hide it all the time' (p.64) – compared to her peers from Ivy League institutions. While Jason was able to excel in graduate school by turning in brilliant papers under pressured deadlines, he struggled with the lack of regular feedback and recognition, and this affected his motivation to complete his PhD. Through a few chance internship and job opportunities, Jason realised that he was better at coaching and managing teams, fundraising, and marketing. However, it took him four years before deciding to quit his PhD programme because 'the stakes are too high' (p. 146). Both Anika and Jason eventually found fulfilling non-academic careers, as a creative non-fiction writer and as a professional in the financial services respectively. Their stories are memorable because they show how the PhD journey is a passage of self-discovery, and that enrolling in a PhD programme does not necessarily mean that one should limit one's career choice to academia.

The Unruly PhD shows, through individual and collective stories, how to negotiate the PhD and post-PhD journey in a time of crisis and change in the traditional academic career path. The book highlights that people who go through PhD programmes also struggle with mundane everyday life concerns – just like everyone else. Their stories remind us that life happens in the process of getting a PhD. They also remind us that when life throws along unpredictable curve balls, all that one can do is to make the best decision under given circumstances. With respect to career decisions, the individuals showcased in this book made their choices by asking questions such as: *How and where do I get a job that best fit my aspirations and circumstances? Who am I, and where am I going to?*

As Karen Kelsky's puts it in her interview (p. 118):

Academia can provide a good job and a fine career ... but understand that the work is hard, and the system—with all of its expectations—is rigid. You're going to have to follow the rules. But you don't have to believe ipso facto that there are no other things of value in the world. You can do something

| *else.*

This book is indeed a useful and comforting resource for anyone interested in understanding how individuals get through their PhD journeys and negotiate their career choices. Most importantly, this book reminds us that there is a greater world beyond academia, and that it is OK to pursue alternative paths.

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