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Economic page turners

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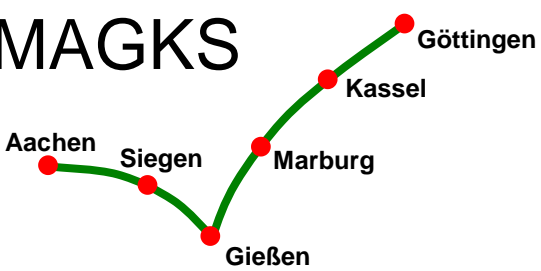
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Björn Frank

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Economic page turners

by Björn Frank[✉]

Abstract

Economic page turners like *Freakonomics* are well written and there is much to be learned from them – not only about economics, but also about writing techniques. Their authors know how to build up suspense, i.e., they make readers want to know what comes. An uncountable number of pages in books and magazines are filled with advice on writing reportages or suspense novels. While many of the tips are specific to the respective genres, some carry over to economic page turners in an instructive way. After introducing some of these writing tools, I discuss whether these and other aspects of good writing lead to a biased presentation of economic theory and practice. I conclude that, whatever the problems with certain economic page turners may be, they are not due to the need to write in an accessible, appealing way.

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1. Introduction

So you have read *Freakonomics*. Did you like it? You didn't like it? If your answer to both questions is yes, then you must be Gregory Mankiw. I am guessing this because he (you?) expressed both his critical concern as well as his admiration for *Freakonomics* in one short blog entry:

"[M]ore young economists today are doing Levitt-style economics and fewer are studying the classic questions of economic policy. That is disconcerting, to a degree. It could be especially problematic twenty years from now, when President Chelsea Clinton looks for an economist to appoint to head the Federal Reserve, and the only thing she can find in the American Economic Association are experts on game shows and sumo wrestling."

Then, after arguing that this will not happen anyway, Mankiw concedes that

"*Freakonomics* has made many laymen appreciate that economics is a broader discipline than they had thought, and it has attracted many students to the field. That is a great service. On the first day of ec 10, I asked the students who had read *Freakonomics*. About a third to a half raised their hands."¹

The latter point is well taken. *Freakonomics* did not steal time from students who would otherwise have read the *General Theory* or the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. *Freakonomics* competes with *How To Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, *Sh*t My Dad Says* by Justin Halpern, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey, among others (suggestions from Amazon's "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought" section). Hence the relevant question is not whether (and if so, how much) harm is done when people read *Freakonomics* instead of serious economic research. Relevant questions are: would we prefer people to read *Freakonomics* instead of wasting their time? I presume, without further argument, that this is so. Then the next question is: would it be possible to write a book that is as readable, and possibly as popular, as *Freakonomics*, but less susceptible to criticism like that by Mankiw quoted above?

As a modest initial step towards answering this question, I will offer a number of storytelling device suggestions, which successful authors apply in order to turn a book on economics into a page turner. I prefer the terms "economics made exciting" or "economic page turners" over "economics-made-fun" (Vromen, 2009), because I will focus on the way these books are written, rather than their subject (such as the grotesque side of certain bits of economic

¹ <http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/2007/04/is-steve-levitt-ruining-economics.html>, posted April 24th, 2007; retrieved on September 12th, 2010.

research featured by some). Freaky subjects alone make a nice contribution to any campus magazine, but not a memorable book. The real difficulty is to write in an enthralling way, making readers want to read on and on. Economic page turner writers are a bit like crime writers, who "have taken a decision that, even though they may feel they have something to say, they will subordinate the saying of it where necessary to the simple task of keeping their readers' noses stuck in the pages" (Keating, 1986, p. 1). In the next section, I will describe some tools that are mastered by successful (fiction and nonfiction) authors, illustrating these general points with examples from various economic page turners. In section 3, I will discuss whether the necessity to apply at least some of these devices leads to biases in the representation of economic research in economic page turners. Section 4 concludes.

And finally: STOP READING NOW if you agree with Robert Louis Stevenson, who began his essay "On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature" with the warning that there "is nothing more disenchanting to man than to be shown the springs and mechanisms of any art."²

2. Storytelling devices

It would be hard to detect an essential difference between economic page turners and other writings on economics as long as you only look at the way the authors put their sentences together. You could take almost any single sentence out of *Freakonomics* and imagine that it is from an AER paper.³ Many (though not all) successful academic authors, whether intuitively or as a result of training, write their sentences according to rules that are also applied by journalists or crime fiction writers (e.g., if they produce too long a sentence, they split it up in two, and they carefully check whether pronouns are really unequivocally referring to the noun that they are intended to replace).

Successful writers, however, do not just follow (and sometimes, when appropriate, intentionally break) rules on writing style. An essential ingredient of economic page turners, and one that is missing in purely academic writing, is a structure that makes the readers want

² In Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Art of Writing", quoted from the Penn State Electronic Classics Series at http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/rlsteven/art_writ.pdf.

³ This implies that there are some sentences in AER papers that one can imagine to be part of *Freakonomics*; here is an instant classic as an example from Akerlof's (1991) discussion of procrastination: "Each morning for over eight months I woke up and decided that the *next* morning would be the day to send the Stiglitz box" (p. 3, italics in original). See also section 2.5 below. Note that Scheiber (2007) is so consequent as to extend his criticism of *Freakonomics* to the fanciness of non-traditional topics in AER and JPE.

to continue reading. Apart from structure, there are specific writing tools that serve the same purpose, but that are not found in academic journals because they do not exactly contribute to informing researchers, who are only interested in scientific content.

In sections 2.1 and 2.2, I sketch writing devices that apply to all genres, and maybe a bit less to economic page turners than to other kinds of fiction and nonfiction. On the other hand, the devices described in sections 2.3 to 2.7 are of particular importance to economic page turners, and some (in particular that described in 2.3) are applied to a lesser extent elsewhere.

2.1. Show, don't tell

"Show, don't tell" is a piece of advice that professional writers often come across (e.g., Stein, 1995, ch. 12), and that you will hardly fail to receive if you take part in a creative writing workshop. The Ghost of Banquo entering (in Macbeth Act III Scene IV) *shows* how horrified Macbeth, who had ordered his killing, is, which is much more impressive than any moral reasoning in a Macbeth monologue could be. Novelists set up a stage, so to say, in the reader's mind, and they also have to show things to their readers, allowing them to get involved and to draw their own conclusions.⁴ The same applies to economic page turners.

However, novelists and academics differ in the way they write when they are not following the "show, don't tell" principle. When novelists and journalists tell, rather than show, they typically do it via adjectives: "he became a *fearful* person." Compare this to "he gave up his large ground floor apartment for a smaller one on the second floor, replaced the wooden entrance door by a steel door and stopped leaving the house after dark."

In academic writing, it is taboo to claim in adjectives what you have not shown. But the information given is reduced to what is relevant for replication. Economists often claim to have "shown" something, but that refers to regression results, not to something lively which they have shown on the stage in the reader's mind.

A simple example for something written with the general reader in mind is this: instead of telling him that tariffs lead to incentives for smuggling, Fisman and Miguel (2006, p. 58) show this point: "Travelers returning to the United States can bring up to \$800 of foreign goods into the country duty-free. (...) Suppose you bought a \$2,000 Gucci handbag in Italy

⁴ "If you show me a scene in which a fourteen-year-old girl gives away her down jacket on a chilly day to a homeless person, you don't have to tell me she's compassionate. Her act exemplifies it" Clark (2007, p.70).

and want to avoid the 10 percent duty (...). You have a couple of options as you nervously shuffle toward the green or red signs at customs."

In fiction, authors no longer have to tell what they have already shown. This is not a rule in nonfiction writing. One might do both, working the "ladder of abstraction" (Clark, 2006 p. 107; 2007) up and down: showing examples and telling what the reader might take home as the general point. Take the well known case study of the day-care center that introduced a fine for parents who picked up their children late, only to find that the fine led to more, rather than less, cases of late pickups (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). It is used by both Levitt and Dubner (2005, ch. 1) and Cowen (2007, pp. 36-37) to *show* something. They also, however, *tell* their readers what they conclude: that motivating people extrinsically does not leave everything else unchanged; that it is often hard to get the incentives right because they might backfire.

A final example: Harford (2008, pp. 33-50) *tells* us that some "poker hustlers", those who play more or less instinctively, are making rational decisions; his argument is that it turned out to be extremely difficult to beat them, even with a computer supported game theoretic preparation. He also *shows* this by describing – in very lively detail – the final of the 2000 World Series between the experienced, more intuitive player T. J. Cloutier, who looked back on many great successes at the poker table, and Chris 'Jesus' Ferguson, an applied game theorist. It was an extremely tense battle; finally Ferguson needed – and did have – a lot of luck when Cloutier went 'all in'. No doubt readers now *see* the point.

2.2 Writing for all senses

Just like "show, don't tell", "writing for all senses" is a creative writing classic. It is stunning how dull pieces of prose come to life as soon as authors revise them and pay attention to describing how people or things not only look, but also smell, taste, sound or feel. It is difficult, often even unnatural, to follow this advice when writing about economics, or about the economy, but if you think that economic page turner authors never write for the senses, then you have not read *SuperFreakonomics* yet, or you would not have forgotten⁵ the description of a pre-automobile metropolis: "The noise from iron wagon wheels and

⁵ There is a reason why using different senses makes texts that are not easily forgotten: "Writing that honors the senses (...) engages not only the logical mind but also our visual, physical, and emotional intelligences. Sensory-rich writing awakens the full spectrum of consciousness and our myriad ways of knowing" Hiestand (2007), p.201.

horseshoes was so disturbing – it purportedly caused widespread nervous disorders – that some cities banned horse traffic on the streets around hospitals and other sensitive areas. (...) In vacant lots, horse manure was piled as high as sixty feet. It lined city streets like banks of snow. In the summertime, it stank to heavens; when the rains came, a soupy stream of horse manure flooded the crosswalks and seeped into people's basements" (Levitt and Dubner, 2009, pp. 9-10).

2.3. Addressing the reader

Novelists can involve the reader through emotional identification with a protagonist, such as *Oliver Twist*. This is not possible for economic page turners. In single economic page turner chapters, the reader might feel empathy for real people whose fate is described, such as Kitty Genovese, whose killing is the prime example of the 'bystander effect', reconsidered in Levitt and Dubner (2009, ch. 3).⁶ I know of only one economic page turner, however, in which the reader accompanies the protagonist through the *whole* book: Russell Roberts' clever novel *The Invisible Heart* (Roberts, 2001).⁷ Instead, economic page turner authors found another way to get the reader involved: they address him directly. This is rarely found in (Post-Victorian⁸) fiction, but Landsburg (2007) does it in every one of his page turner's 16 chapters. To do so is natural in economics, as economics is about choices, including those of the reader. Landsburg (2007) is particularly instructive as he uses a great variety of possibilities to address the reader: as a detective, as a person who knows something (but not quite everything), as a hypothetical example, as a receiver of externalities, as a witness, as a decider in real or hypothetical choice situations. Table 1 gives an example for each of these possibilities.

⁶ Another example is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, a novelist who returned to his home country Kenya after a promising political change, and was then brutally assaulted, most probably in an act of revenge ordered by "Economic Gangsters" (Fisman and Miguel, 2008, pp. 1-3).

⁷ The Marshall Jevons detective stories featuring Harvard professor Henry Spearman (e.g., Jevons, 1993) are entertaining as well, but hardly provide an opportunity for readers to really get emotionally involved. But at least Spearman serves as the reader's proxy.

⁸ I owe this qualification to Lodge (1992), ch.17.

Table 1: Ways of addressing the reader directly

The reader as a...	Example
detective	"Why does the practice of check splitting cause people to spend more at restaurants?" (Frank, 2007, p. 101).
person who knows something (but not quite everything)	"You've read elsewhere about the sin of promiscuity. Let me tell you about the sin of self-restraint" (Landsburg, 2007, p. 9).
hypothetical example	"If you're six feet tall, you probably earn about \$6,000 more per year than the equally qualified 5-foot-6-inch shrimp in the next office" (Landsburg, 2007, p. 53).
receiver of externalities	"[W]hen <i>I</i> decided to have a child, <i>you</i> were a winner" (Landsburg, 2007, p. 33), emphasis in original.
witness	"Come out to my suburban neighborhood on any crisp October Saturday, and I will show you a minor tragedy: on every lawn a man with a blower, blowing his leaves onto the next man's lawn" (Landsburg, 2007, p. 3).
decider in a real choice situation	"When you snack at midnight, you get most of the benefits, but your spouse (who has good reason to care about your health and appearance) shares many of the costs" (Landsburg, 2007, p. 180).
decider in a hypothetical choice situation	"Suppose we were offered the option of surgery, or a pill, to correct our self-deception... All of our beliefs would be brought into line with the facts. Don't take that pill" (Cowen, 2007, p. 120).

Almost every economic page turner author uses this technique, though not as intensely as Landsburg. In two cases listed in table 1, I picked an example not from Landsburg (2007), but from another book. Frank (2007) relies heavily on using questions to which the reader might try to find solutions on his own; I am quoting only one of hundreds of questions he addresses to the reader. Cowen (2007) is interesting in his way of often using "we" (i.e., you and I) instead of "you", which is quite appropriate, as he often discusses human weaknesses.

2.4. Controlling the reader's pace

In Gerard Donovan's highly acclaimed novel *Julius Winsome*, two men, who are definitely no friends, are facing each other; one has a rifle while the other has had to give up his own, and is now trying to save his life by talking. We do not know whether he will survive or not – the one with the rifle is the narrator, and he has shot six other men before. The tense situation is

described in short sentences, about one line each. ("And if he moved he was a dead man in that second.") But then, all of a sudden, the narrator thinks back:

"When I was young I heard a visitor to the farm point to the ducks we kept and say to my father that they were being unnaturally protected against predators, that in the real world they fend for themselves, that the laws of nature favor the strong. The sun was shining that day and the ducks were in the water of the upturned basin lid they had crowded into, corded their necks together and slept." (Donovan, 2007, p. 198)

Two sentences in eight lines, Donovan takes tempo out of the story, and he does it on purpose. Eco (1994) devotes a large part of a book to demonstrating how great authors vary the relation between story time on the one hand (i.e., an hour that passes in *Ulysses*), and discourse time (possibly proxied as the length of the written text) and reading time on the other hand.⁹ Can economic page turner authors learn from that? Often there is no such thing as story time, except in economic history or adventures such as that of Sudhir Venkatesh and the drug dealing gang, retold in *Freakonomics* (and very briefly further below). However, there is always a stream of marginal increases of the reader's knowledge. In academic publishing, referees and editors would object to attempts to insert digressions that serve no other purpose than to comfort the reader. Furthermore, reading time is impossible to control in academic writing anyway, as it very much depends on the single reader's foreknowledge and ambition. Not so with economic page turners. Figure 1 shows how the reading pace varies within chapter 3 of *SuperFreakonomics*, on a scale from -1 to 2¹⁰. Of course my account of possible reading pace, or of the ease with which a subsection can be read, is subjective, but I try to make my procedure transparent in the Appendix. Basically I give a score of 2 for a page devoted to personal anecdotes or personal historical accounts, a score of 1 for a historical account or an easily comprehensible result, and a score of -1 for the introduction of a new concept, hypothesis or method, for the need to keep numbers in working memory, for a sophisticated result and for the introduction of experimental designs (or rules).

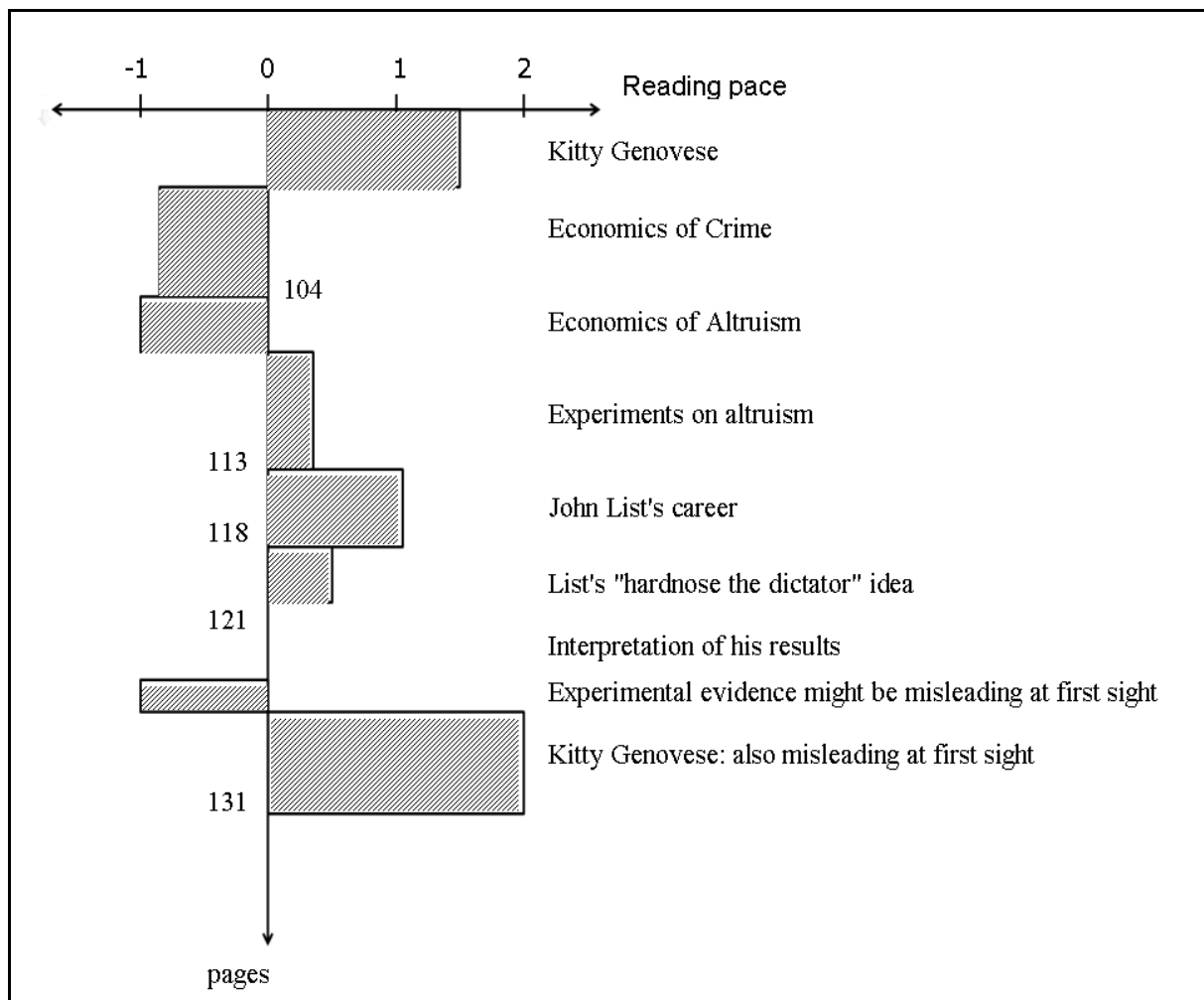
The bars in Figure 1 refer to subsections within chapter 3, where a blank line indicates the end of a subsection and the beginning of a new one. The most noteworthy thing in Figure 1 is that

⁹ Jute (1999, p. 75) doubts that this can consciously be planned, but advises writers to avoid "bad rhythm". See Stein (1995, ch.20) for more ambitious advice on pace variation.

¹⁰ It is unavoidable that some topics reduce the reading pace, hence negative and positive scores are not at all intended to correspond to "bad" and "good" writing, respectively. It is good to *vary* the reading pace, however, and one can learn from most economic page turners how to achieve this.

is shows something happening in the middle of the chapter: The digression on John List's career has absolutely function for the economic argument - it does not matter that he is a truck driver's son, or that the dean of some university thought the budding superstar could be replaced for \$ 63,000. Nevertheless, this subsection helps the readers through the economics. They pick up pace after a discussion of the conventional behavioral economics and altruism, and before the way List challenged these views is introduced. Furthermore, this chapter structure appeals to readers' sense of variety.

Figure 1: Possible reading pace for the subsections of SuperFreakonomics's chapter 3
(see Appendix for details)



2.5 Getting the reader hooked

How can you draw the reader into the paper, so to say, with a stunning beginning of the text, by making it immediately clear that the author is about to answer an interesting and important question? This is no trade secret that only economic page turner writers know; in fact, one finds many good examples in the first paragraphs of leading journals. Compare the first sentence in chapter 1 of *Freakonomics* with the first sentence of the journal paper to which it refers:

Imagine for a moment that you are the manager of a day-care center (Levitt and Dubner, 2005, p. 19).

Suppose you are the manager of a day-care center for young children (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000, p. 1).

Many more good examples for clever ways of opening a text are found in top journals (the following examples are from the JPE and the QJE). An obvious way is a direct question: "Despite an explosion of policy interest in association with recent events, religious intensity appears poorly understood. What causes religious intensity? Does economic distress stimulate religious intensity?" (Chen, 2010, p. 300). Alternatively, one might plainly state an interesting fact that demands an explanation: "In a cross section of countries, government regulation is strongly negatively correlated with trust" (Aghion, Algan, Cahuc and Shleifer, 2010, p. 1015). Even stating a known fact in an original way sometimes does the job: "One of the biggest risks in life is the family one is born into" (Farhi and Werning, 2010, p. 635). All of these papers are less easy to read in later sections: they are written for specialized economists and for no one else. Why do the authors bother to write a nice introduction? I only have one explanation: because this is a way to signal that their research matters, that the maths relates to real life.

I do not suggest that because they manage to get their readers hooked, economic page turner authors deal with highly relevant questions. But at least it is easier to write a convincing first paragraph if the chapter deals with a topic that is indeed relevant, in one way or the other, for the reader. (This is a recurrent theme: whatever the problem might be with some economic page turners, it is not due to the fact that economic page turners need to be well written.)

2.6 Keeping the reader hooked

Closely related to the task of getting the reader on the hook is that of not letting him off the hook. The standard technique used for thrillers, but also for many other novels, is the cliffhanger, so well known that it needs no introduction. Here is an example from Harford's (2006) *Undercover Economist*, where chapter 2 ends as follows: "When PillCorp changed its global pricing policy, it did something that was not only profitable but also both efficient and fair. Can we say anything more generally about when private greed will serve the public interest? For the answers to all these questions, and more... read on" (p. 59). In typical economic page turners, however, there is only a loose connection between the single chapters. Often they could even be placed in a different order without the need to rewrite. This is why the introductions to *Freakonomics* and *SuperFreakonomics* are so long: they serve as a collection of cliffhangers, so to say, for all the chapters in the book.¹¹

2.7 Combining tools

Merely applying well-known principles is maybe not enough. Economic page turner authors combine the writing tools discussed above in a way that is appropriate for these authors' topic (i.e., economics). In fact, the first example given in section 2.5 already demonstrated this, getting the reader hooked by addressing him directly. Frank (2007) appears to be an exception in his way of using exactly one tool: addressing the reader as a detective. The 'solutions' are presented immediately thereafter, and it requires a good deal of self-discipline for a reader not to read on immediately after each question, but to pause and try to work out the economics on his own. For readers of other economic page turners, it is easier to get the satisfaction of independently solving the case, because writing tools like "show, don't tell" and also varying the reading pace make them think for themselves. There is a trade-off involved, however:

¹¹ After subsections on opening a book and on keeping the readers from stopping to read, it seems natural to insert one on ending a book (or a chapter). However, this is a point where writing a journal paper and writing an economic page turner are almost indistinguishable. By training, academic writers are always looking for a powerful, well-founded conclusion to end their paper with. However, there is one trick of the trade that economic page turner writers might have learned from other successful nonfiction writers, and this is the *full circle ending*, according to Hart (2007, p.235) the "most satisfying story ending, it gives the sense that the story has come back to where it began." For example, Landsburg (1993) starts his chapter 16 like this: "They *pay* you to think about things like that? My airline seatmate didn't come right out with the question, but despite his best efforts, his expression revealed all." And then, after 11 pages reflecting on why popcorn pricing in cinemas is only seemingly trivial, he elegantly ends: "It might have been fun to discuss these questions with my neighbor on the airplane. But I decided to let him sleep." Note that Levitt and Dubner (2009) also bring their chapter 3, summarized in Figure 1 above, full circle.

Frank (2007) presents more problems than his book has pages. This is only possible when writing rather straightforwardly.

3. Biases

One thing, and possibly the only thing, that all economic page turners I have referred to above have in common is that they are extremely well written. In section 2 I have discussed various aspects of good writing. Now the critical question is whether the need to write well (i.e., to serve the reader) leads to a biased presentation of economic theory and practice. Three possible biases are: the ratio of "freaky" to "normal" research topics, overrepresentation of certain research methods, and microeconomics versus macroeconomics.

Concerning the freaky subjects, I submit that economic page turners give a fair impression of how popular these subjects are in academic research (note that *Freakonomics* is largely based on first class journal publications). Whether academic research itself is biased (i.e., more freaky than it ought to be) is another question. Concerning the method, it might well be that experimental research is more attractive to economic page turner writers (e.g., Häring and Storbeck, 2007; Ariely, 2008) than the amount of scientific progress generated by experiments would suggest. This is due to "the performativity of experiments and their spectacular nature" (Kübler, 2010), in line with the "show, don't tell" principle. Nevertheless, I submit that this does not blind the readers to the way contemporary economists think and practice; after all, experimental results have long begun to influence research by economists who consider themselves as theorists and who are not doing their own experiments.

The greatest concern, I think, is the micro-macro-bias.

Milton Friedman's famous list of things that realistically describe the wheat market, but that we safely can, and in fact should, leave out of economic models, includes "the personal characteristics of wheat-traders such as the color of each trader's hair and eyes, his antecedents and education, the number of members of his family, their characteristics, antecedents, and education, etc." (Friedman, 1953, p. 32). This is intended to sound absurd, but compare Friedman's list to the information given in *Freakonomics* on the personal characteristics of the researcher who collected data on a drug gang: "Sudhir Venkatesh – his boyhood friends called him Sid, but he has since reverted to Sudhir – was born in India, raised in the suburbs of upstate New York and southern California,... he had just spent three months

following the Grateful Dead around the country" (Levitt and Dubner, 2005, p. 93)¹². Although these bits of information are irrelevant in a narrow sense, there is a justification for including them. It shows the reader (rather than telling him) how different Venkatesh is from the black members of the drug gang he more or less stumbles into. Apart from being enthralling in itself, this story also demonstrates that sometimes research requires a good deal of luck in order to be successful (first, finding the gang, and second, surviving the meeting). And as far as the eyes and hair of Friedman's trader are concerned, they might indeed be irrelevant for the Chicagoan wheat exchange, but they do possibly matter when he negotiates with his neighbours over the price of an acre of land, or with his employer (for an experimental investigation of the effects of beauty in wage negotiations see Mobius and Rosenblat, 2006).

Now, what is the problem with writing like this? One might argue that the likelihood of finding something that can be shown (rather than just told), thus attracting readers, is much more likely for macro than for micro topics. Showing the reader how one subject made his decision is often appropriate for microeconomic topics, yet typically misleading for macroeconomics (take the "paradox of saving" as an example). Furthermore, it is much easier to vary the pace and develop subplots for micro "stories"; trying the same trick in macroeconomics would run a high risk of confusing and losing readers.

Indeed, the micro-to-macro ratio is much higher in economic page turners than in academic research, and also higher than the ratio of micro to macro phenomena that really change people's lives. It would be futile, however, to complain that macroeconomists are facing "unfair" competition in this respect. In fact, macroeconomists have already taken up the challenge and applied some of the writing tools sketched above:

- Kay (2003) compares living standards not just by numbers, but by exemplary people from various countries. Unfortunately, and by no means necessarily, these are stereotyped cardboard cutouts - for example, he writes about Heidi and Hermann, a Swiss couple: she a primary school teacher, he a Zurich bank manager.
- Coyle (2007), surely aware of the difficulty of letting the objects of research come to life in the macroeconomic parts of her book, draws a lively picture of the actors in research, i.e., the economists. For example, she gives a colourful description of the

¹² The Grateful Dead reappear in *SuperFreakonomics* (Levitt and Dubner, 2009, p.69), which suggests that Lodge's (1992, p.168) conjecture "Symmetry (...) matters more to writers of fiction than readers consciously perceive" extends to some cases of nonfiction.

geographical and social background of Angus Maddison (Coyle, 2007, pp. 11-12), reveals what motivated Heckman, Krugman and Stiglitz to become economists (pp. 33-34; p. 147) and starts one chapter with scurrilities from Bentham's life and afterlife (ch. 4).

- Taking up a suggestion by Paul Krugman, Quiggin (2010) personifies macroeconomic and finance theories in a way that creates a sense of thrill - his book is entitled *Zombie Economics. How Dead Ideas Still Walk among Us*, and he uses the Zombie metaphor throughout, e.g.: "The ultimate zombie is one that is completely invulnerable. Neither special bullets nor hammer blows nor even decapitation can finally lay this undead being to rest. (...) Supporters of the Efficient Market Hypothesis have sought a redefinition that would make it invulnerable to refutation." ((p.64).
- Finally, most readers know, however vaguely, how difficult it is to find a fable that is accessible to the general audience, but still useful for demonstrating macroeconomic principles. Consequently, someone who succeeds receives much admiration – like Paul Krugman, who popularized the fable of the baby-sitting co-op (first in Krugman, 1994). In other words, the incentives are high for writing a macroeconomic economic page turner.

Hence macroeconomics is not completely unlikely to be featured in future economic page turners. (I admit that macroeconomics will remain underrepresented, but on the other hand, isn't macroeconomics, compared to modern microeconomics, overrepresented in newspaper reporting?)

4. Conclusion

Every economic page turner needs some of the ingredients described in this paper. The ingredients do not suffice; I own a number of cookbooks, but I cannot cook. And this is not intended to be an economic page turner cookbook anyway. Rather, I inspected the ingredients (i.e., the writing tools) in order to answer the question: is their use responsible for the criticism some economic page turners have received? My answer is no. Good writing, even entertaining writing, and good economics are no enemies.

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Appendix, part 1: Raw data for Figure 1 (concerning chapter 3 in *SuperFreakonomics*)

Page	Av. score for page	Reasons for score (abbreviations explained at the bottom of the table) [with sample explanations examples in brackets]
97	2	p
98	2	p
99	1/2	p, c [bystander effect]
100	0	hist [crimes rates in the US], hyp [deterrence]
101	-1	m [natural experiment]
102	-1	hyp
103	-1	m, k
104	-1	hyp, s.r. [impact of TV exposure of children on their later crime arrests]
105	-1	c [altruism], s.r. [inheritance size and number of visits received in retirement homes]
106	-1	c [homo oeconomicus] or hyp
107	-1	m
108	-1	c [ultimatum game], hyp [game theoretic solution of ug]
109	-1	c [dictator game]
110	1/3	hist [experiments run in indigenous societies], exd, e.r.
111	1	hist [organ transplanted and donation]
112	1	hist [organ transplanted and donation]
113	2	p
114	2	p
115	1/2	p, exd
116	-1	exd, s.r.
117	2	p
118	1/2	p, exd
119	0	exd, e.r.
120	1	e.r.
121	-1	s.r. [subjects' self selection into experiments]
122	1	e.r.
123	0	m, e.r.
124	-1	s.r., k [number of transplants]
125	-1	s.r.
126	2	p
127	2	p
128	2	p
129	2	p
130	2	p
131	2	p

p: personal anecdotes or personal historical accounts (2)

c: introduction of concept

hist: historical account

hyp: hypothesis

m: method

k: need to keep numbers in working memory

s.r.: sophisticated result

e.r.: easily comprehensible result

exd: experimental design (or rules)

Appendix, part 2: Data for Figure 1 (reading pace score, aggregated from Appendix part 1)

pages	length of subsection (in pages)	average score in this section
97-99	3	1.5
100-104	5	-0.8
105-107	2.5	-1
107-113	6	0.2
113-117	5	1.1
118-120	3	0.5
121-123	3	0
124-125	2	-1
126-131	6	2