

# Self-help book for lives in limbo

Fred Inglis searches for insights but ends up bored by personal accounts of the absence of activity



**The Secret World of Doing Nothing**  
By Billy Elin and Orvar Löfgren  
University of California Press  
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It has always been the great strength of Swedish social science to be unafraid of tackling the commonplace and the everyday, and to do so without any concession to those power-mad sociologists who refuse to tolerate any topic without capital letters in front of it. Billy Elin and Orvar Löfgren are no exception to that genial tradition, and with tactful friendliness bring on the time-honoured methods of social survey to discover what is the “something” that people are undoubtedly doing when doing nothing.

The trouble, however, is that the techniques of ethnography will only yield new and surprising truths if the interpreters are

equipped with intrepid powers of intellectual and emotional penetration, and are capable of setting out their speculations and conclusions in prose of a sufficiently poetic force and originality. Their minds and spirits must be, as Wordsworth unforgettably put it, “endued with

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a more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, having a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul than are common among mankind”.

Our authors have great decency and kindness, but they confine

their language to the terribly small change of the therapist, and their conceptual framework to the self-help book. This means that doing nothing, as reported from interviews and diaries, has only cliché content, and the self-descriptions of their interlocutors turn the human subject into a frightful bore.

Thus, doing nothing is, for both social scientist and research subject: an aspect of “time management”; takes place in “limbo” (which was, according to Dante, quite a lively spot); may be subject to “power-games”; is given vitality by “multitasking”; and, in the eventuality of “burnout” when “life gets out of synch”, causes victims to lose their “autopilot” and to sit staring at the wall.

The paucity and vacuousness of these concepts leaves these two obviously intelligent men with nothing to tell us. They seem to sense this, and struggle to enliven extremely dull and droning little extracts with something much more vigorous and illuminatingly introspective from assorted novels, including of course James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (but not, alas, the works of Marcel Proust), as well as pensive and gripping self-criticisms such as the wonderful Jenny Diski’s while en route to the Antarctic and John Steinbeck’s observations when travelling across the highways of the US with his poodle Charley.

Some powerful feeling of social democratic obligation seems somehow to work to prevent Elin and Löfgren from using the high intelligence of the novelists to throw into relief the banality and unreflective blankness of so many of their individual cases. They turn the most trifling devices of the quotidian into a “skill”, and do so in so heavily plonking a manner that the reader has to do something to fill in the nothingness on the page: “This excerpt describes the social construct where composure communicates that the here and now is hopeless and boring”. Sic. Aaaaarrggh!

The best part is the long third section on daydreaming, but even here they heed bores rather than Walter Mitty or the genius of quotidian vacancy, Michael Frayn. They are very well read, but can’t tell us the difference between the good and the desolately awful.

Above all, their biggest subject – one with definite capital letters

attached to it – eludes them, even in their nicely titled “backyards of modernity”. The central predicament of modern urban life for millions is to discover meaningful action and what to feel about it. The most horrible daydreams of our time are filled for innumerable people by the revolting destructiveness of computer war-games and the attendant DVDs. A map of that mutilated and secret inner space would unlock a dark cellar in the many cultures of capitalism, and even suggest something about the imaginative body-building of terror.

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