

*Faster*, by James Gleick

Reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

Only a generation ago the settled opinion was that work would soon occupy fewer and fewer of our waking hours. We were bracing ourselves for the challenge of how to spend our increased leisure time. But it hasn't worked out that way. Instead, cellphones, laptops and PDAs tether us ever more firmly to the workplace.

People who wish there were more hours in the day and who are ever on the lookout for better time-management methods will find some solace in reading *Faster*. This is a thoughtful, inquisitive and at times funny (though the joke's always on us) take on how we have come to be so restlessly preoccupied with time and its uses. (It is also--could it be otherwise?--a fast-paced book of more than 35 succinct chapters.)

One expects that computers and technology will be the target of the author's critique. However, James Gleick (who has written a well-received biography of Richard Feynman and has worked in publishing and as a writer for the *New York Times*) wisely opts for a much broader view. This permits him to consider subtler, long-established cultural phenomena--such as elevators, wristwatches, standard time and opinion-polling--as contributing to a milieu in which time is something there is never enough of, something which we never quite succeed at mastering. Our culture, in other words, has been deeply attached to assumptions and values which more recent computer use/dependency/perpetual-upgrading have only accelerated and intensified.

Good research and energetic thinking mark *Faster*. The book also thoughtfully considers such time-related social topics as leisure, ennui and sex. What emerges is the conviction that, for us, time has become the ultimate commodity. It doesn't matter whether we are among those who carry a Daytimer or are trying to integrate our routines with the capabilities of a Palmpilot. Even those of us who are not obsessed with time-use have had our attention spans thoroughly "commodified" by the advertising industry.

Gleick's agile survey is energized by his whimsical and gentle curiosity. Yet while the book excels descriptively, it falls short analytically and prescriptively. Here is one of

those rare cases in which I wish a book read more like a good sermon, offering more of "why it matters, what it means." I'm uneasy with the direction in which, according to the book, we are headed, but the book offers few alternative visions. We need more and better reflection (now there's a low-productivity concept) on time as a gift, rather than a commodity; as something to be treasured, rather than exploited; as something of which there is enough.

A quote from Sebastian de Grazia conveys what may be the book's most suggestive and hopeful thoughts: "Perhaps you can judge the inner health of a land by the capacity of its people to do nothing--to lie abed musing, to amble about aimlessly, to sit having a coffee--because whoever can do nothing, letting his thoughts go where they may, must be at peace with himself."