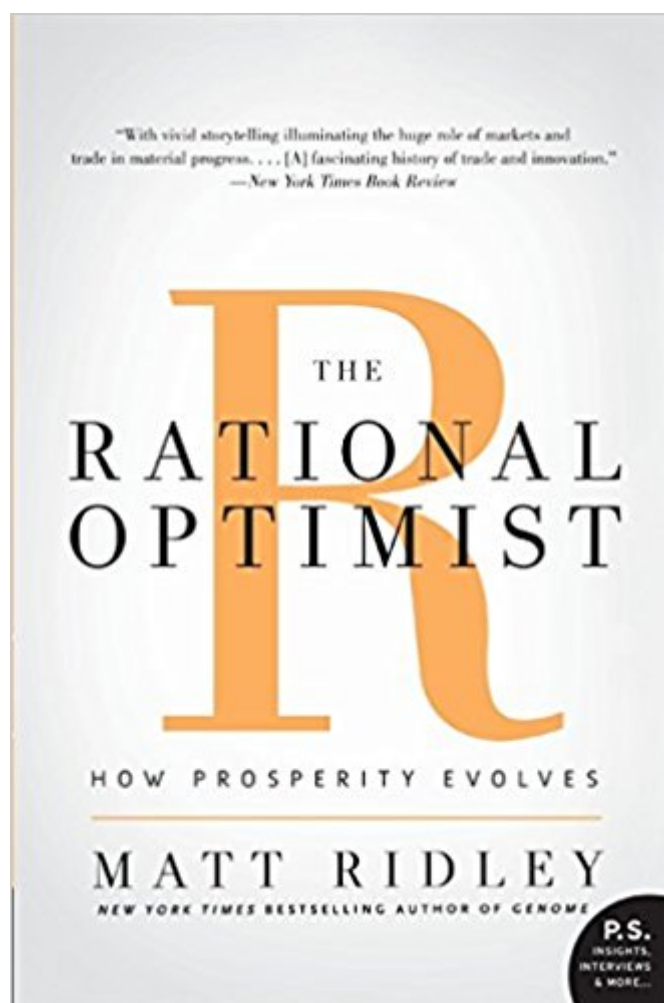


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# The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves (P.S.)



## Synopsis

“Ridley writes with panache, wit, and humor and displays remarkable ingenuity in finding ways to present complicated materials for the lay reader.” • Los Angeles Times In a bold and provocative interpretation of economic history, Matt Ridley, the New York Times bestselling author of *Genome* and *The Red Queen*, makes the case for an economics of hope, arguing that the benefits of commerce, technology, innovation, and change—what Ridley calls cultural evolution—will inevitably increase human prosperity. Fans of the works of Jared Diamond (*Guns, Germs, and Steel*), Niall Ferguson (*The Ascent of Money*), and Thomas Friedman (*The World Is Flat*) will find much to ponder and enjoy in *The Rational Optimist*.

## Book Information

Series: P.S.

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Harper Perennial; Reprint edition (June 7, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0061452068

ISBN-13: 978-0061452062

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 1.1 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 385 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #12,953 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #27 in Books > Business & Money > Biography & History > Economic History #46 in Books > History > World > Civilization & Culture #92 in Books > Science & Math > Technology

## Customer Reviews

Ridley comes to praise innovation's ability to forestall any number of doom and gloom scenarios, everything from climate change to economic catastrophe. While sounding strikingly similar to narrator Anthony Heald, L.J. Ganser keeps a steady reading pace of Ridley's prose that keeps listeners engaged through the more challenging quantified material (statistics, data, lists) and the more nuanced conceptual material. His escalation, speed, deliberation, and pauses faithfully guide listeners through the text and at times improves upon the dry prose. However, Ganser is prone to over-project, and his forceful overemphasis can wear on the listener's attention. A Harper hardcover (Reviews, Apr. 12). (June) (c) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Science journalist Ridley believes there is a reason to be optimistic about the human race, and he defies the unprecedented economic pessimism he observes. His book is about the rapid and continuous change that human society experiences, unlike any other animal group. Ideas needed to meet and mate for culture to turn cumulative, and “there was a point in human pre-history when big-brained, cultural, learning people for the first time began to exchange things with each other and that once they started doing so, culture suddenly became cumulative, and the great headlong experiment of human economic progress began.” Participants in the exchanges improved their lives by trading food and tools. Ridley believes it is probable that humanity will be better off in the next century than it is today, and so will the ecology of our planet. He dares the human race to embrace change, be rationally optimistic, and strive for an improved life for all people. --Mary Whaley --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

A very iconoclastic friend recommended this and I read it with great interest. Glad I did. I've had some of these thoughts myself but not in any organized or well supported way. So it was a pleasure basically to see many of my intellectual optimisms reflected here. But much more than that. A relief. I just hope, as I have often said to myself, that his optimism is right. And I do wonder about some of his blithe pronouncements. I love them, but just wonder, for example, whether his chemistry is correct (hope it is). After all he himself is not a chemist of any degree I think. And many very intelligent (and surely not all with bad faith) others are not nearly so optimistic.

Touching on anthropology, sociology, economics, and politics, Ridley explains how we got here, why we got here, and gives a convincing rationale for why we should believe that society as a whole will continue to improve. Filled with thought-provoking detail and example, it gives a massive cornucopia of knowledge and wisdom not only as raw fact but in the context of greater things.

This book is a beautifully reasoned explanation of what makes the human race different from the animals, how this leads to continuous innovation, and how, (if we don't foul it up, which we surely still can), it can lead to a vastly more prosperous world for all of us (particularly the parts that are now poor) in the coming century. Here, briefly, are a few of his central ideas, which are all supported by the evidence he presents. These work together to support his central thesis. Specialization is good. Trade is good (and we are the only species that trades). Together, specialization and trade enable us to efficiently use our talents in the best way to get the best of what others

produce. Self-sufficiency leads to poverty, because no one can master all of the skills and have all the tools necessary for anything above a subsistence living. Cross-fertilization of ideas is necessary. Rarely if ever does one invent something entirely on his own. Inventions come from putting together ideas others have had in novel and unique ways. (As a patent holder, I can attest to this.) Use of energy from other than human beings is what allowed the effective end of slavery (Yes, it still exists, but is criminal nearly everywhere). The more compact the form of energy, the better for the environment. The higher the real per-capita income, the longer and better people live. In the next century, real growth will allow us to deal with any ill effects from global climate change, and lift Africa out of poverty, if we but act reasonably intelligently. I don't have the book in front of me just now, so I may have left something out. But I assure you, Matt Ridley did not. Get it, read it, and be sure to look at the graph at the beginning of each chapter.

Many years ago, I turned away from my liberal ideology by 180 degrees. Having learned of the social and economic failures of the Russian and Chinese socialist regimes, I started digging up critiques of socialism and social democracy that later I discovered were offspring of Adam Smith and the early classical liberals. After 50 years of blindly accepting that the only way humankind progressed was through the big lever policies of centrally planned governments, I found evidence that the market system which underpins the capitalist environment was the real engine of prosperity that drove upward mobility providing needed and wanted goods and services to billions of people willing to participate in its intertwining processes. For people looking for support of this view to carry them forward into the next century, Ridley's *Rational Optimist* provides a solid presentation of theory and fact. He has written a book that spans the trade routes and traders of millenia ago and tied them into the exchange of ideas and information which electronically courses through our daily lives and demonstrates how each in similar ways catapults humankind to a new level. Doomsayers will probably downplay all of Ridley's analyses, but if you want an antidote to all the popular deniers of human capacity to generate self actualization, then get this book, read it and keep it close.

Really great book about learning how far humanity has come. Sometimes it feels like things are going to crap but in the long run things get better

Optimism can be just a disposition, a quirk of personality. Even the kind of Panglossian foolishness which Voltaire mocked in *Candide*. And, it may be that Mr. Ridley is a sunny, upbeat sort of chap. But that's not the point of the book. What Mr. Ridley offers is a connected argument to the effect that,

broadly speaking, the world is much better place than it used to be, and that this improvement is powered by deep forces explained by both evolutionary biology and economics. Not surprisingly, this point of view will be repellent to many who, wedded to various political and philosophical views, would rather hear that mankind is spiraling into chaos and misery. Mr. Ridley is a credentialed scientist with a doctorate in zoology from Oxford, and an experienced popular-science writer with brisk, smooth style. Well worth reading, even for pessimists. Especially for pessimists.

In the modern era, when new cycles are driven by "if it bleeds, it leads" and naysayers continue to insist that things are getting worse, it is easy to lose heart and think we are living a world descending into violence, stagnation, bigotry, and [insert your choice of social ill]. Too often, pessimistic voices and sensationalism drown out sober thinking. But a careful review of facts shows that public perception is often out of sync with reality, particularly when long-term trends are taken into account. Matt Ridley's excellent book tells the uplifting side of the story. In his remarkable synthesis of history, evolutionary biology, anthropology, and economics, Ridley presents a very strong case that life is getting better, at an accelerating rate, for all peoples across the world.

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