

2022

## Book Review: The Hero Handbook

Liz Stillwaggon Swan

University of Colorado, Boulder, [liz.swan@colorado.edu](mailto:liz.swan@colorado.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science>



Part of the [Development Studies Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stillwaggon Swan, Liz (2022) "Book Review: The Hero Handbook," *Heroism Science*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.26736/hs.2022.01.01

Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/vol7/iss1/1>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heroism Science by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

**Heroism Science: An Interdisciplinary Journal** (ISSN 2573-7120)  
<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/>

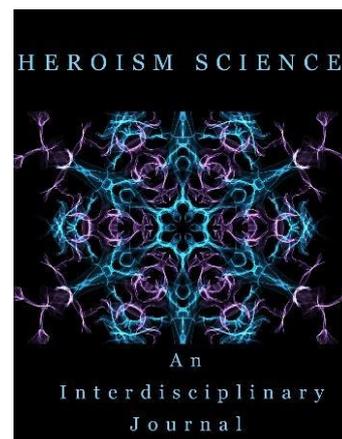
Vol. 7 No. 1 (2022) pp. 1-6

# Book Review: The Hero Handbook

LIZ STILLWAGGON SWAN<sup>1</sup>

University of Colorado, Boulder

[liz.swan@colorado.edu](mailto:liz.swan@colorado.edu)



**ABSTRACT:** The *Hero Handbook*, authored by Matt Langdon, offers an informative and practical guide for heroism for both preadolescent readers and adults. The book includes numerous personal anecdotes from his own hero journey and countless references to children’s literature. Each chapter includes “Check Out the Science!” insets written by psychologist Brian Riches, who explains in simple terms the neuroscience underlying various concepts related to heroism. Topics include the hero’s journey, bullying and anti-bullying, the active bystander, and the science of becoming a hero.

**KEYWORDS:** *hero, banality of heroism, anti-bullying, active bystander, action hero, reaction hero, neuroscience of heroism*

## Article history

*Received: October 5, 2021*

*Received in revised form: November 15, 2021*

*Accepted: November 16, 2021*

*Available online: January 1, 2022*

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright 2021 Heroism Science

DOI 10.26736/hs.2022.01.01

ISSN: 2573-7120 | Licensed under the Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC By-NC-ND)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

---

In this comprehensive yet slim book, author Matt Langdon argues that anyone can be a hero if they're up to the challenge. This book will be impactful for preadolescent readers and the adults in their lives thanks to Langdon's engaging writing style that incorporates personal anecdotes from his own hero journey and countless references to children's literature. Each chapter includes "Check Out the Science!" insets written by psychologist Brian Riches, who explains in simple terms the neuroscience underlying various concepts related to heroism.

## 2 THE HERO'S JOURNEY

---

Langdon begins his analysis of heroes by drawing on Joseph Campbell's seminal book on the subject, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He simplifies Campbell's 40-step hero journey to just 5 steps: 1) mundane world; 2) call to adventure; 3) threshold; 4) path of trials; and 5) master of two worlds. Basically, the hero comes from an ordinary world and is called to a challenge which, if accepted, propels them into a new world where they conquer some challenge and return to their old world with newfound wisdom.

The author explains that heroes can be from stories or real life and are typically identified as idols (for example, famous people); action heroes (for example, Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish environmentalist); or reaction heroes, like the mother who runs into the burning house to save her baby. Langdon reminds us that no one is perfect including heroes, citing, among other examples, Mother Theresa, who fought against women's rights and hid millions of dollars in donations.

### 3 THE BULLY, THE BYSTANDER, AND THE HERO

---

Chapter 3, entitled “Why Aren’t There More Heroes?” addresses a very important problem in our culture today—that of the bystander. The author has a powerful insight into this problem: “The opposite of a hero is not a villain; it’s a bystander” (p. 39). He refers to famous psychology experiments (e.g., the Stanford Prison experiment) to demonstrate how powerful the forces of group think and peer pressure are and, relevant in this context, how they work against individuals being brave enough to stand up and do the right thing. He discusses the Bystander Effect and recounts the horrific story of Kitty Genovese, whose brutal and public death in 1964 highlighted the fact that people are more comfortable standing by than getting involved if they believe there’s a risk to them, whether of personal harm or just embarrassment.

Social and emotional curriculum in K-12 has shifted away from blaming the bully, who might go on being a bully his whole life for reasons largely out of his control, to motivating the bystander to stand up and do the right thing, thus becoming a hero. In discussing his own experience with the bystander effect, Langdon relays a story about a camp he went to in 9<sup>th</sup> grade where the ‘cool kids’ he so desperately wanted to join teased and bullied him so ruthlessly he had to be reassigned to a different cabin and doesn’t remember anything about the rest of the week, likely from the social trauma he suffered that night.

It’s a sad and touching story, so important in a book about hero-making because children often see adults as heroes but don’t see the challenges we endured along the way and so might feel alone in their journey. Stories like this one help young readers connect with the author, this now adult hero who, just like them, suffered harsh treatment and endured challenges on his journey to where and who he is now.

Langdon introduces a concept he calls “real cool” to describe kids who are self-assured and comfortable with who they are. These kids never feel the need to be mean to other kids or

act “cool.” But he notes that peer pressure doesn’t have to be bad; kids who possess “real cool” may influence others in their orbit to be comfortable with themselves and kind to others. Here, he quotes Plato: “Good actions give strength to ourselves and inspire good actions in others” (p. 103).

## 4 THE SCIENCE BEHIND BECOMING A HERO

---

An important theme in the book is that becoming a hero takes practice; one has to get in the habit of doing good things instead of bad things or nothing at all. The “Check Out the Science!” inset in this section refers to the neuroscience underlying habit-making: “It’s efficient for the brain to make decisions automatically—you just need to make sure you’re making choices in line with your moral values, and then those automatic decisions will continue to reflect your values” (p. 47), or, as Aristotle put it: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit” (p. 119).

He references Carol Dweck’s (2006) notion of growth mindset to make the point that all of us can be considered ‘heroes in training’ if we’re open to the notion. He also discusses how resilience relates to the hero’s journey—certain challenging thresholds in life, for instance transitioning from elementary school to middle school, can really test a child’s mettle. As ‘heroes in training’, Langdon suggests that each of us adopt a personal honor code we can live by that helps us do good and, furthermore, helps us choose whom to align ourselves with. He uses creative rhetorical devices like the Hero Round Table to encourage readers to identify the heroes in their own lives, explaining that every hero is flanked by friends, mentors, and trusted confidantes—those who align with one’s personal honor code. The bottom line is that being moral takes practice—quoting Jawaharlal Nehru: “To be in good moral condition requires at least as much training as to be in good physical condition” (p. 111).

Langdon explains why empathy is a necessary ingredient in moral values and ultimately the deciding factor in whether someone will answer the hero's calling. One way to mentally practice empathy is what the author calls 'heroic imagination'—creative brain training where you imagine yourself being the hero in a situation where someone needs saving—a practice that might one day save someone's life!

Heroes get things done. So, Langdon devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 5: What Are Your Goals?) to the process of setting and achieving goals. He gives practical advice like writing down goals and making sure they're "specific, achievable, and measurable" (p. 90). He allows that it's okay for goals to change over time as we get older and circumstances change. The book concludes with a "Leave a Legacy" chapter which encourages readers to think about how they want to be remembered—not necessarily when they die, but even when they leave elementary school and transition to middle school.

The author's use of fictional stories and personal anecdotes should resonate with young readers poised between childhood and maturity—mirroring the bridge between fantasy and reality. I read this book with my 10-year-old son, and it sparked some good discussions around peer pressure, integrity, and heroes. In addition to being a good book to read with the child in your life, this book could be used in a young readers' book club to spark conversations about what heroes look like in their worlds and the challenges they face to becoming one.

## 5 REFERENCES

---

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

Langdon, M. (2021). *The hero handbook*. Washington DC: Magination Press.

## 6 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

---

*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*