

Writing and reading at the speed of modern life

FASTER

The Acceleration of Just About Everything
By James Gleick. Pantheon.
324 pp. \$24.

By Marcia Bartusiak

Is microwaving too slow for you? Does traveling at 65 miles per hour on the interstate feel like a crawl? Half a century ago, we were content to measure time down to tenths of a second. Today, we have entered the "epoch of the nanosecond," says James Gleick. A billionth of a second is a length of time where "balls, bullets, and droplets are motionless," he writes. So why do we feel as if we can sense each and every one of those infinitesimal increments? Who set the pace of life's marathon on fast forward?

With "Faster," Gleick explores the origins, consequences, and unexpected side effects of a culture shifting into overdrive. He gives voice to that nagging perception held by so many of us that life is going by too fast. Speed dials, remote controls, ATMs, answering machines, shopping, computer chips, sex, government paperwork — nothing escapes his attention.

Maybe it all started when the first wristwatches appeared a century ago, to save the extra seconds required for dipping into a vest pocket to retrieve the time. Or maybe it occurred even earlier, when industrialization, with its trains crossing entire continents, demanded that local times march in lockstep, with telegraph wires "disseminating a rhythm as steady as the drumbeat on a galley ship," as Gleick notes. Perhaps it's just the curse of civilization advancing, a disorientation that has always attended great periods of change. "The gods confound the man who

first found out how to distinguish hours!" wrote the Roman poet Plautus around the third century BC. "Confound him, too, who in this place set up a sundial to cut and hack my days so wretchedly into small portions!" Ah, for the return of the bracing pace of a Roman day.

Both fascinating and disturbing, amusing and informative, "Faster" is an eclectic stew combining history, academic research, and anecdotes drawn from the popular media. Gleick even gleaned information from on-line requests over the Internet. Those who seek a more stately, professorial perusal of this phenomenon will not find it here. This is not like his previous work "Genius," the studied biography of physicist Richard Feynman. Here Gleick writes in a style in synch with his topic. He's loose, he's breezy, he's cruising along on warp drive. Most chapters are no longer than seven or eight pages.

A keen observer and master of metaphor, Gleick shifts from theme to theme as if he were playing a well-honed series of jazz riffs. A chapter on elevator technology — and the challenge of rapid vertical transport in the mega-skyscrapers of the future — swiftly shifts to an examination of the watches that we peer at while we wait impatiently for those elevators to arrive. "A good waiting time is in the neighborhood of fifteen seconds," notes Gleick. "Sometime around forty seconds, people start to get visibly upset." He goes on to confirm a Type A personality's worst suspicion: Building managers often disable the "door-close" button for fear of trapped limbs and lawsuits. And on it goes.

Our love for stimulating drinks may be fueling society's acceleration. That lingering stop for a cup of coffee at the local diner has been reduced to drive-by caffeinations. Is it any coincidence that caffeine-laced Coca-Cola was born at nearly the same time that telephones were enter-

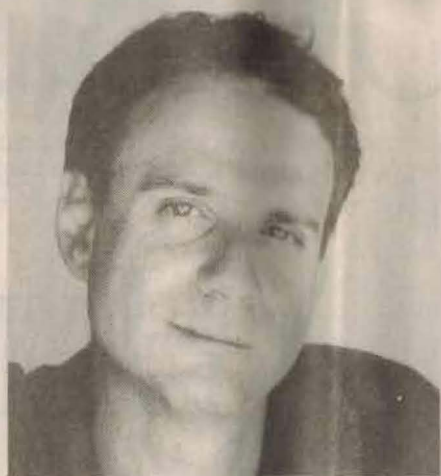


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JAMES GLEICK

ing our lives and establishing a national biorhythm? The half-hour cigar turns into the five-minute cigarette. Blue jeans come pre-faded. TV and movies are edited "like a horse with a methamphetamine rider." Stock traders invest over minutes rather than lifetimes. Basketball, with its fervent tempo, overtakes the more leisurely baseball as a national pastime. Consumers are flummoxed as LPs bow to CDs, which turn into DVDs, all in the seeming blink of an eye.

Interestingly, Gleick contends that research doesn't support our prejudice that work is claiming more of our time in this accelerated era. It's our own fault, writes the author, "for treating time as a mere status symbol. And a negative status symbol at that: the less time, the more prestige. The more time you have on your hands, the less important you must be." I believe the jury is still out on the statistics, but it certainly feels as if work hours have bloomed, perhaps because a society in agitation finds it difficult to relax. Or because, as Gleick points out, we're more adept at multi-tasking, working faster and more intensely on several things at once.

The most fun in this book arrives with the occasional nuggets that Gleick uncovers that are not so well reported. Musicians in training, for example, are finding it difficult to give a prolonged rest — a fermata — its full pause. "A rest with a fermata is the moral opposite of the fast-food restaurant with express lane," writes Gleick. "Modern conservatories find these strangely troubling for some students, who can play the most intricate polyrhythms yet break into a sweat when confronted with [a fermata]. ... They just can't wait long enough."

Federal Express learned early that people will pay for speed. But this opportunity for immediate action, in life as well as in business, now turns everything into crisis mode. Time for reasoned deliberation is sharply reduced. Nowhere is this effect more evident than in the news business. "The more journalists hear, the more they feel able — even obliged — to keep talking and writing," writes Gleick. What results, news commentator Jeff Greenfield tells him, is a "maelstrom of semi-informed, uninformed windbagery." This certainly seemed to have occurred during the media frenzies involving O. J. Simpson, Lady Diana, Monica Lewinsky, and, most recently, John F. Kennedy Jr.

Unfortunately, there may be no turning back. According to Gleick, we're addicted to the adrenaline rush: "We catch the fever. We choose mania over boredom every time." And are we any smarter for learning the skills to deal with these galloping informational orgies? "No one knows for sure," Gleick answers briskly. You'll have time for further reflection, though. "Faster" is a fast read.

Science writer Marcia Bartusiak is the author of "Thursday's Universe" and "Through a Universe Darkly." She is working on "Einstein's Unfinished Symphony," which will be published next year.

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