People today can enjoy longer, more productive lives than ever before thanks to new discoveries in medicine and innovations in technology. But it won’t happen automatically. “Only those who learn how to think, act, and behave in certain ways will reap the benefits of the tremendous opportunities afforded to us through the power of these medical revolutions,” writes David Agus in The Lucky Years.

In short, people must assume responsibility for their own health. Genetic testing may indicate whether someone has a predisposition for certain cancers or heart disease, but lifestyle choices, including eating nutritious food and exercising regularly, can determine whether those inherited genetic codes express themselves or not. “In other words, you get to choose—some degree—how your DNA is manifested,” writes Agus, a professor of medicine and engineering at the University of Southern California and head of the university’s Westside Cancer Center and Center for Applied Molecular Medicine. In addition, people must be able to navigate the mountains of hype and bad medical information that are promulgated almost daily.

For perspective, Agus offers a tour of medical advances during the past century, many of which were denigrated during their time. For example, the Russian scientist Élie Metchnikoff was ridiculed in the early 1900s for his beliefs that illness and aging were related to gut microbes and that harmful microbes could be replaced with useful ones. Today, not only are probiotics fashionable, but scientists have discovered that they play a surprisingly large role in the formation of neurotransmitters, including dopamine and serotonin.

Agus explores how technology, big data, and precision or personalized medicine have the power to extend longevity. At the other end of the spectrum, he reveals how simpler interventions, such as sleep or statins, have the power to combat maladies ranging from depression to cancer. He concludes with a two-week challenge for readers to observe and record symptoms of their overall health as a basis for learning which lifestyle changes, combined with advances in medicine, will be most beneficial to their well-being.

“For the first time, we have at our disposal all the information we need to design our own health—and, in turn, the health of the planet,” Agus argues. “Put simply, people living in the twenty-first century are the most fortunate of all previous generations. That’s why these are the Lucky Years.”

—Ted Agres, senior editor

As a former marine biologist who left academia to attend film school at the age of thirty-eight, Randy Olson brings a unique perspective to science communication. His other books, including Don’t Be Such a Scientist and Connection (which he coauthored), have also touched on scientists’ struggle to communicate their interesting (or null) findings to the world.

In Houston, We Have a Narrative, he provides a more specific structure for communicating about science, derived from Hollywood. It’s summed up as the “and, but, therefore” (or ABT) structure and makes for better writing than the “and, and, and” method of providing (and piling on) information. “Every story can be reduced to this single structure,” Olson writes.

Science needs narrative, Olson argues frequently in the book, and the ABT structure may provide a new way to understand what makes a concise and compelling science story. Olson also claims, perhaps loftily, that it could solve some of science’s major problems, including exaggeration in reporting and promoting findings and boring presentations. Such narrative tools must be taught to scientists at the earliest stages of their careers, Olson says, making “narrative intuition” part of a scientist’s DNA.

—Jessica Bylander, senior editor

“A Thousand Naked Strangers: A Paramedic’s Wild Ride to the Edge and Back

By Kevin Hazzard


288 pp., $25.00

“As long as we get there first, outperform the expectations, and do it fast and in the most extreme conditions, nothing else matters. Not every patient is going to live, so why should death bring down the party?”

This is how Kevin Hazzard referred to a “Perfect Call” during his time as an emergency medical technician (EMT) and paramedic in Atlanta, Georgia. Disturbing as his casual attitude toward death may seem, his outlook is a reflection of his love for the adrenaline rush that defines life as a paramedic, in which no day is like the one before it. The high he got from the chaos gave him an enthusiasm for his work that kept him in the profession for ten years.

Following the 9/11 attacks, Hazzard, a graduate of The Citadel and a reporter, decided to embark on a new path to prove to himself that he could “handle the pressure of life-and-death situations.” The gripping A Thousand Naked Strangers is his account of the life of people who respond to emergencies, with each memory a distinct adventure in attempting to stave off death. The world Hazzard describes is loud, fast, and intense, and while it’s also dark, it’s rarely despondent.

Contextualizing his experience are the characters who float in and out of his...
life, from valued partners to renegade EMTs, and the system in which they work. He lives for the thrill but is also keenly aware of workplace injustices, the dark side of Atlanta’s poverty and drug problems, and the strains the job places on his personal life. All of these shape his memories and reveal the difficult, underappreciated, and wild work of paramedics.

—Lucy Larner, editorial assistant