

Title: *Deep Survival*  
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Author: Laurence Gonzales  
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Review: Paul Hayward

This book staggered me. I've read a lot of good books and this has to be in the top 5. I devoutly wish that every person responsible for policy or legislation on sports or wilderness activity could read and absorb it.

It will change how you think – and how you think about how you think.

Half the time it takes concepts that you always suspected you knew about 'adventure' activity and brilliantly & convincingly explains them – and half the time it sends your preconceptions whimpering into the corner as they are illuminated and blasted by flashes of lightning.

Gonzales writes very well. He intrigues and satisfies you with his material rather than choking you and you can see that he's given 35 years of good thought to this topic. He weaves together anecdotes from his wide experience, with factual reports from coroners & investigators, and adds current research from neuroscience. His own experience in risky fun includes competition acrobatic flying, mountaineering, skiing, diving & bush-bashing. He debriefs victims and top SAR personnel from many incidents and with each he ties in modern lab models of brain function. It is a three-legged approach and one that stands up strongly.

What clearly emerges is that survival has far, far less to do with equipment and skills than you might think – and far more to do with attitude. Being strong, well-kitted-out and gung-ho is not the answer. As an Air Force officer puts it: 'Rambo's die first!' The truly vital survival tools are in the mind and it's exciting to see how to identify & strengthen these attitudes and abilities – coolness, a steely determination, humility towards the huge forces of nature and a wide & accepting awareness of your constantly-changing surroundings. That these are helpful is obvious, what is not obvious is how easily and quickly stress masks them.

He tells many gripping stories of high-risk events in sports, wilderness, military training & combat. All the stories, whether they are about big-surf surfers, super-bike racers, astronauts or night-landings on carriers are there to lead you into how a mind works in stressful circumstances.

Training can help or hinder, but if you absorb Gonzales' map of how the human mind struggles and fights for life under stress, you will gain some invaluable assets for survival when in really deep trouble, as well as improving your chances of avoiding trouble altogether.

Without being tedious, he uses quotes from the wise & expert to build our confidence in his arguments. From Clausewitz & Aurelius to papers presented at NASA, SAR & NOLS conferences – we become familiar with brain areas & functions, terms used to describe human weaknesses ('bending the map') and real-world conditions ('Sand Pile Effect' & 'Woods Shock') that most people have never heard of or thought about. Doing just that: thinking about it under the fluent guidance of Gonzales, is a pleasure and a revelation.

This is a compulsively readable book and the author didn't skimp – it is supported with both a 6-page bibliography and a 14-page index. My one grumble is that I did wish for an occasional footnoted reference.

If your local library doesn't have it, spend the \$11 at Amazon or \$19 at Fishpond. You'll never buy better kayaking insurance, or enjoy it more.

