

500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Reinke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Reinke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Reinke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now) that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not

ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Reinke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the “gossip” prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Reinke for causing people like me to see this issue for the first time.

500 + 63 Words or Less **Reviews: The Deathly Hallows**

It took me almost a year, but I have finally finished my first reading of the 7-book Harry Potter series and it has been

quite the ride, one of the best literary adventures of my life. Over the course of my journey I have met wizards, witches, goblins, ghouls, werewolves, house elves, talking portraits, merpeople, centaurs, giants, dragons, and dementors. And this is only a portion of the beings Harry Potter has introduced me to.

While I still consider *The Half Blood Prince* the best book in the series for a variety of reasons, the *Deathly Hallows* is not far behind. It came across to me as the most realistic of the entire lot with its depiction of what a storybook "adventure" would probably be like. There would likely be a lot of wandering about and being unsure as to what to do. People would get irritated with each other, they would get bored with all the wandering around looking for something, and everyone involved would get disillusioned with the whole shebang in varying degrees and forms. Much like the adventure of life itself.

It was also a much different animal in that most of it did not take place in Hogwarts but on the aforementioned climactic adventure. In my opinion, the personal drama that goes on between the three adventurers while the adventure slowly got going is not remotely detracting. In fact, this personal drama made up some of the best parts of the book. There was a heaping helping of meaty characterization to be had there by all three of them.

And there is the other big character of the book who wasn't even around for the vast majority of it. Although he died in *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore's presence is huge in the *Deathly Hallows*. In much of the book it is as though he were symbolic of the God of Scripture with Harry constantly questioning him and why he didn't explain this or that while he was alive. Whether or not Rowling really meant for this to be the case when she wrote it, I don't know, but the likeness is strong.

We also learn a lot about Dumbledore's personal backstory and that he wasn't perfect after all. Like everyone else, he had baggage, baggage that for him directed the course of the rest of his life. It is brilliant characterization of a character that had already left the world of our story.

The Deathly Hallows is a fitting culmination of all the preceding acts. And we take many a sad farewell (for the present) of Hermione, Ron, the other Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, Mad Dog Moody, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, McGonagall, and many other unforgettable characters that have left on us a lasting impact. Oddly, though, the departure the most emotional to me, was the farewell of the Dursleys. Those Muggliest of all Muggles who treated Harry like so much trash for so long somehow managed to worm their way into my heart. I'll miss them.

That is the end of my 500WoL. Here is my personal ranking of the seven books:

1. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
 2. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
 3. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
 4. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
 5. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
 6. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
 7. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
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500 Words or Less Reviews:

Hammock – Mysterium

I have long loved the music of *Hammock*, the band comprised of guitarists and sound-scapers, Marc Byrd and Andrew Thompson. Perhaps one day I will write a detailed exploration of their entire discography. For now, I will say this: I love the mood and energy they create with their particular brand of post-rock ambient music. They craft sound and emotion by using guitars, pedals, piano, cello, and various other tools. For the uninitiated, their music floats and sinks; built around droning guitars. You will not hear them on your local radio station. I do not know enough about what goes into making an album like this, I just know that whatever they do, they do it better than most.

Mysterium, their eighth full-length album, continues *Hammock's* mastery of their chosen art form. In some ways, it is their biggest album to date – with choral and orchestra components used to complement the already stunning melodies they play with guitar and piano. In other ways, it is their most personal and vulnerable album. They composed and dedicated the album to Clark Kern, Marc Byrd's nephew, who died in 2016 after fighting with a rare disease for his entire life. This creates an album full of arresting melodies tenderly worked into subdued and serene numbers.

Music, at its very core, is supposed to make us feel. When we listen to a song, we should sense what the artists felt when they sculpted it from air. If an artist can do that well, they will capture our imaginations and our deepest emotions. *Hammock* does that and does it in remarkable fashion. *Mysterium* is built on converging layers of grief, sadness, and hope. These mostly wordless songs speak volumes about life, death, and the struggle each of us face when we experience a profound loss. *Hammock* is so gifted at writing emotionally resonant music they rarely need words to communicate, and on this album, they take that a step further by using silence to

capture the full weight of grief and reverence.

The songs are ethereal, poignant, and sacred. At times as I listened, it felt as if the sadness of a particular song would completely overwhelm me. Then the song would introduce a new melody and the entire mood would change. What had been a grief so deep it ached became a hope so powerful it soared. I have loved *Hammock's* music from the first note I heard, mostly because their music speaks to both parts of my life – the here and now and the yet to come. *Hammock* has one hand digging deep into the soil of the human condition while the other is reaching, grasping, straining for the heavens above.

If these descriptions do not explain what their music sounds like, I am truly sorry. I do not have the skills as a writer to explain my reaction to their music. I just know I long for spiritual nourishment of this kind and *Mysterium* is a veritable feast for my soul.

Listen to the album below or click this link to buy it – [Mysterium](#).

[500 Words or Less Reviews: Look What Taylor Swift Made Me Do](#)

I am not a fan of Taylor Swift. Never have been. Her only album I have been able to tolerate is *1989*. I feel that disclaimer is necessary from the outset.

Unless you live under a rock, you probably noticed that Taylor released a new song a few days ago. It is titled, “Look What

You Made Me Do.” The song is awful – filled with all the poorest elements of modern pop music. However, looking beyond the melody and the beat, the song is emblematic of the very worst of our society. It is the quintessential anthem of our narcissistic and victim culture. If there was any doubt before, we can now crown Taylor Swift as the Queen Victim of our age.

The song is a list of the times Taylor feels she has been slighted, wronged, offended, judged, criticized, and blamed. It is whiny and screechy and so inwardly focused that it is difficult to take any of it seriously. There isn't a whiff of self-awareness. No trace of self-reflection. She even sees herself as a Christ figure in the music video – arms outstretched with a crucifix behind her. In Taylor's fantasy world, there are many who have lied about her and stabbed her in the back, so hers is a righteous anger. It's hard to hear all this self-pity coming from a 27-year-old woman who is worth nearly \$300 million. The end result of the song is to declare that due to all the horrible, unfair, mean stuff that has been said about or done to her, that the old Taylor Swift is dead and she has become someone else – someone angry and vengeful. The problem with that declaration is that Taylor Swift has been a “mean girl” for a long time. You only have to listen to her older albums to see the spitefulness with which she has always operated. But in her warped view, she is the put-upon victim, the innocent, the martyr. In her mind, her enemies forced her to create and release this song and now that she has taken all she can, she is ready to get down in the mud with all those “liars and dirty, dirty cheats of the world.” So, we have that to look forward to...

We are a society of self-aggrandizers, self-promoters, and self-congratulators who in our minds can do no wrong, bear no responsibility for any of our actions, and are in a constant state of victimization. Everyone is out to get us. So if no one is on our side, then we have to do everything we can to

get ours. We are “me monsters” of the highest order. And society will praise us for that. Society will champion us until it has no more use for us and then it will destroy us. That is the end that is awaiting Taylor Swift. And based on the reception to her new single, it is an end that could be here sooner than she expects.

500 Words or Less Reviews: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

It has been almost three weeks since I have finished [*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*](#). I have actually been nervous about this one and wanted to approach it with a respectable amount of honor as the most literarily well-rounded of the lot.

[*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*](#) clocks in at 652 pages, immediately setting the stage for the plot of the rest of the book during a cryptic meeting between Severus Snape and the Black sisters. It is during this encounter that Snape makes an unbreakable vow with Narcissa Malfoy in which he will be obligated to help her son, young Draco Malfoy, with a Voldemort-ordained task. The plot of the rest of the work flows from this Malfoy/Snape mission.

In essence, the book is really about Snape himself. This fact makes the mysterious naming of the book itself especially ingenious. If you have read this far into the article, you are passionate enough about the franchise to already be familiar with the story. Assuming that is the case, it is in no way a SPOILER to say that Malfoy and Snape accomplish their mission,

with Snape ending Dumbledore's life in the lightning-struck tower.

One of the very best and most fascinating characterizations in the entire franchise has been embodied in the person of the relatively rarely seen Dumbledore. But Rowling makes up for that rarity here and with much magnificence. There are too many amazing Dumbledore scenes to name. And then he goes out in high style with one of the best funerals of all time with even the merpeople and the centaurs showing up to pay him homage.

The central theme of this work was very clear and extremely well exemplified: love. Love is everywhere: Tonks and Lupin, Bill and Fleur, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny, and, um, Ron's passing "thing" with Lavender Brown. Ron also has an unfortunate encounter with some love potion. To cap it all off, Dumbledore talks more deeply in *Half-Blood Prince* than in previous books concerning Voldemort's one true weakness, which is his inability to love, a "fault" that would be his undoing.

Although they have been present in every book, I have found that Rowling is getting better at the long stretches of "information relation." At this point, they feel like very natural points of the dialogue instead of contrived and stilted manifestos. It worked better than ever in *HBP*. In fact, I would say that the dialogue as a whole was one of the book's most winning points. The humor was especially strong. I don't think Rowling has given me as many belly laughs in any previous work. Although the examples are legion, the best humor, in my opinion, probably came by way of the person of Luna Lovegood.

The dialogue, the honed prose, the final glories of Dumbledore, the humor, the love, etc., etc., etc, and so forth. For these reasons, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* has taken first place in the HP house of my heart.

500WoL: Spider-Man: Homecoming

Spider-Man is back on the big screen. It seems like just yesterday that Andrew Garfield donned the red and blue Spidey suit in two Spider-Man films. And only a short time before that Tobey Maguire filled the role for his own trilogy. Surely there haven't been three different iterations of this character in the last 16 years?

Let's get the bad stuff out of the way first. Yes, Spider-Man has been booted, rebooted, and re-rebooted too many times. Sony knows how popular the character is and they desperately made the *Amazing Spider-Man* films in an effort to not lose the rights. (This is all technical and boring, but they would have lost the rights for the character had they not made the Garfield film.) So, we have seen too many origin stories. We have seen too many versions of the character: the middle-aged barely out of high school, mopey, Maguire version. The too cool for school, overly complicated Garfield version. And now we have the Tom Holland, first seen in *Captain America: Civil War*, version. You would think audiences would be tired of Spidey, Peter Parker, and all the rest. You would think filmmakers would have run out of good ideas for the character.

You would be wrong. While *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is not a perfect film, it is fun, exciting, and smart. It is tonally the most consistent and appropriate Spider-Man film yet. Peter Parker is a high school student. He is a nerd. Things just never go exactly right for him and this film captures all of those things perfectly. Tom Holland is the first actor to get both Parker and Spidey right. Both Maguire and Garfield got certain things right but were both off on other aspects of the

character. Holland plays both the excitement and energy of a 15 year old Spider-Man as well as the awkwardness and insecurities of a high school aged Peter Parker.

The film does suffer from some good but not great set pieces, and the music is mostly forgettable. The action sequences are good but lack enough clarity and overall vision to really make them excel.

While there are shortcomings, the film earns its keep with the characters, the relationships, and the humor. The supporting cast is given plenty of great material to work with and everyone makes the most of it. The villain is well rounded and given enough personality and motivation to work. And including Tony Stark and Happy Hogan at strategic moments serves the film well and adds a much needed dimension to the story.

The end result is a good film. A fun film. The groundwork is there for a great film and hopefully the team that made this will tighten the few areas that need work and hone those areas where they already impressed. We are in good hands with the character moving forward. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is a worthy addition to the Marvel roster and well worth your time.

Stay through all the credits. You can thank me later

[500WoL: The Immortal Irishman](#) [by Timothy Egan](#)

Timothy Egan's *The Immortal Irishman*, a 2016 biography of Thomas Meagher, is a gripping narrative that reads more like a novel than traditional history or biography. It's clear that Egan did meticulous research, but unlike many historians, he

is able to convey his findings in a way that compels his readers to keep turning pages. If you are looking to read up on Irish, Australian and American history, you can do it all by reading this book.

Who was Thomas Francis Meagher? That depends in what part of the world the question is asked.

In Ireland, he was a leader of the failed Rising of 1848 and creator of their tricolor flag. When thousands of Irish were starving during the time of the potato famine and British indifference, the Young Ireland movement sought freedom from British oppression. The patriot-poet Meagher was a key voice for home rule.

In Australia, Meagher was a convict, but so was nearly everyone else. Arrested by the British for his involvement in the uprising of 1848, Meagher was banished from his beloved homeland, a sentence worse than death. After his adventures in the British penal colony, Meagher dramatically escaped to a new life in America.

In America, Meagher was an immigrant. Instantly, he was a leader of the maligned Irish-catholic immigrants of New York City. They came over to escape starvation. These huddled masses overwhelmed the bottom rung of the social ladder. Through speeches in lyrical Gallic and elevated English (with sprinkles of Latin or Greek) Meagher's poetic prose spoke to the soul of his exiled compatriots.

But for what cause? Would Ireland ever be free? What about the cause of freedom in their newly adopted land? Meagher's opportunity for historic greatness (a calling he always put above wealth) came in the American Civil War. Meagher became the Brigadier General of the Union's Irish Brigade, a group recruited by Meagher from the tenements of New York. They fought bravely in such well-known battles as Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In so doing, they liberated

African-American Slaves and preserved the integrity of the nation they could now call theirs.

Meagher's life ended in the Wild West, as the appointed governor of the Montana Territory. Here he clashed with vigilantes and Natives alike. Here he died, according to Egan, murdered by a political enemy. While he was indeed flawed, he was, more importantly, a man of high ideals. He squandered his health and wealth for the cause of freedom and the pursuit of greatness, goals which he certainly achieved.

Egan's ability to tell this story, to connect the dots of a life over three continents, is a marvelous feat. While Egan struggles at times to capture the personality of his subject, he masterfully connects Meagher's life experiences to the larger historical situations. In so doing, the reader not only learns about the life of a man, but the times that continue to shape our time. Only 320 pages long, *The Immortal Irishman*, should be at the top of your summer reading list.

500WoL: Wonder Woman

I am convinced that if *Wonder Woman* had been released ten years ago, it would have been rejected by most critics and the majority of audiences. The template had been set: heroes needed to be flawed and conflicted. They needed to have their own personal demons to fight, because that would humanize them. *Wonder Woman* is not that film and most certainly not that kind of hero.

Sometimes, a film is delivered to the world at the perfect time. We live in an era of extremes. Our politics are divisive and partisan. Our cultural conversations are loaded with hostility and vitriol. 2017 is cynical and angry. I believe

people are grasping for hope and inspiration; something to help make sense of the world around them. An ideal worth celebrating.

Enter *Wonder Woman*.

Rejecting every modern convention on how to present a hero to the world, *Wonder Woman* opts for something more inspired. Diana, Princess of Themyscira, is not the hero our society deserves, but she is definitely the hero we need. She is brave, kind, selfless, noble, loving, and strong. The film never calls her Wonder Woman, but anyone that sees her in action could not conceive of a more appropriate name. The film wonderfully eschews the need for the hero to grow and overcome internal flaws. Diana sees a need – the slaughter of innocents at the hands of World War I – and she does everything she can to make matters right. All this said, she is not a static character. She still has room to grow and evolve as the story is told. As events unfold, her driving motivation changes, going from a sense of duty to a more profound impetus to help.

The two leads, Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman and Chris Pine as Steve Trevor, have fantastic chemistry and elevate the movie in every way. The supporting cast does fine work, adding color and humor. The music is epic and moving. The cinematography is excellent throughout. The action sequences are well staged with a fantastic sense of pacing and speed. There are many “hero shots” in the film, and virtually all of them add a true sense of spectacle and awe.

I have enjoyed the DC films up to this point, outside of the completely inane *Suicide Squad*. I am a big fan of *Man of Steel*. I appreciate and even love sections of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. I realize that might cloud your opinion of this review, since those films are not loved by most. *Wonder Woman* is better than all of them. It is a film soaked in light, with none of the angst and darkness. It is worth your time and money if you love movies about heroes that

are truly heroic. I recommend it as highly as I can.

(The film is rated PG-13 due to violence and frightening imagery. There are also a few scenes that discuss sexuality, but do so in a way that is incredibly tactful and mild.)

[500WoL: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix](#)

Are you tired of these *Harry Potter* reviews yet? Are you as fed up as the poor Sirius relegated to spending his days in a dilapidated old house that he loathes? Are you as fed up as Harry was for pretty much this whole book? Well, humor me for three more journey's into the magical world of Hogwarts, will you? I'll be upfront with you about something. While I thoroughly enjoyed most of *The Order of the Phoenix*, I do consider it the least among the five *Harry Potter* books I have now read. And I think it is a lesser work for three reasons.

First, it's too long. In my review for [The Goblet of Fire](#), I said that while I think smaller literary works are usually better because the author has honed it and taken out all or most of the fat, I do concede that long works can be great and also well-honed. The long *Goblet of Fire* is an example of this. With very few rough spots and fatty tissue, Rowling honed it to a sharp edge from beginning to end. *The Order of the Phoenix*, not so much. It was too long and too full of fat and fluff. Thus, it was a bit duller of edge. I think *Order of the Phoenix* would have been just fine and dandy with 100 to 150 less pages.

There are a couple of other lesser reasons I place this in a decided last place of these first five. Second, there is much

less imaginative detail than in the preceding books. There is some, I know, but less. Loved the imaginative description of their cleaning the worn down 12 Grimmauld Place, the inherited home of Sirius Black. But there weren't as many imaginative details after this. Way too little of the ghosts, too little candy and Quidditch and magic and wonder and the fat lady. The third reason was Harry's almost continual bad attitude throughout the book. It is totally realistic for a boy of his age and in his very problematic situation in life to experience such angst, I suppose. But it doesn't add to the enjoyment when a book's main protagonist is so unlikable most of the time.

Despite these bad things and despite my putting it at the bottom of the list, I absolutely do not consider this a bad work or that I have wasted my time. Thoroughly enjoyed it and you will too. Saying it is the worst doesn't seem right. Instead, lets say it is the least of the best. Plus, it contains several very key elements of the overall story and centaurs, giants, lots of intriguing side plots, and the sadistic Professor Umbridge. Not to mention the string of very authentically moving moments after about page 500. I consider these most touching moments in the series so far. But be warned: Here you're going to face dangers more ominous than O.W.L exams. So gird your minds, boys and girls, gird your minds. That is all.

500 Words or Less Reviews:
Harry Potter and The Goblet

of Fire

The Harry Potter books have been climbing in page length ever since *The Sorcerer's Stone*. The biggest gulf is between *The Prisoner of Azkaban* and the present book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Like the massive fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (which I will review at a later date), the 734-page *The Goblet of Fire* is a veritable Monster Book of Monsters. I freely admit that I am a very slow reader and that it would normally take me six months to read a book this size. It says a heaping helping about it that I finished it in just over a month.

I'll go ahead and say it: The first 145 pages are a masterpiece, with the Weasley's reigning supreme. I could have spent the entire book with that family—especially Mr. Weasley. His encounter with the Dursley's in the fourth chapter (“Back to the Burrow”) is one of the funniest incidences...ever. But this is not the only reason these pages are awesome. There is a nearly seamless flow and flawless writing from section to section: The dark opening with Voldemort and Pettigrew; the Dursley and Weasley encounter; the International Quidditch Cup; and the debacle with and introduction to the Death Eaters. Yeah, for this bit Rowling surely summoned the superhuman writing powers.

But like Superman, Rowling has her kryptonite: tedious information relation. What makes it especially ridiculous in *Goblet of Fire* is that it is done this time by Lord Voldemort, making him come across like the stereotypical villain who has to reveal his whole long story so the hero has time to foil his plans. That is pretty much exactly what happens here. While I loved the scene, it was kind of ruined with Voldemort makes his tedious rant: “First I blah, blah, blah” then I “blah, blah, blah” then “This really long thing happened” and “blah, blah, blah, etc., Mwahahahaha!” All of this leaving Harry ample time to formulate and carries out his escape plan.

I more often go in for the view that with works of writing less is more. The writers of smaller works have successfully honed their craft, cutting out all fat of any kind. This certainly does not mean that a longer work *can't* be great. *The Goblet of Fire* is a perfect example of this happening. Rowling is one of those authors who absolutely needs room to spread her creative wings and shows that more can really be more. The abundance of space here not only allows her to completely flesh out the central Triwizard Tournament plot but also to flesh out more amazing side plots than you can shake a stick (or wand) at.

But like all of the preceding books, the fault I mentioned was still far, far outweighed by the greatness. In part because of the first 145 pages, but also *almost* every single paragraph, character, and plotline of the following 589 following pages, this is definitely my favorite of these first four classics.