

Frans Corten

EXCEPTIONAL TALENT

A GUIDE FOR THE GIFTED, THE INVENTORS AND
OTHER BIRDS OF A RARE FEATHER

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Dear publisher,

I published this first edition independently so that the world could see it. I'm now looking for a publisher who is willing to distribute a second edition worldwide. If you are interested, or know someone who might be, please get in touch with me.

*Thank you, Frans Corten.
publisher@exceptionaltalent.eu*

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'If you stick a bird in a cage, flying will become a disorder instead of a talent'

INTRODUCTION

BY COLLEAGUE WILLEM KUIPERS

Career coach and counsellor, Ximension

Frans is a cherished colleague of mine, with a distinct style and a profound involvement with the subject matter of this book. With his sharp observation skills and caring nature, he writes about all that he has seen, discovered, learned and applied in his practice and his life during the last twenty years.

He embodies the title of his book: an exceptional talent, a guide, gifted, an inventor and a bird of a rare feather. He knows what he's talking about but does not instruct his readers as to what they should or should not do. They would be too autonomous to accept such directives. He does, however, offer good arguments and a manual with which you acknowledge yourself and take yourself seriously. And to help you put into practice whatever intrigues and inspires you. The stories of five special 'birds' tie in perfectly with the previous chapters.

For me, Frans is the biologist and collector who for years has allowed himself to be amazed by all he came across, beautiful or ugly. Sometimes determinedly searching for something specific, at other times only concerned with peace and space, but always with respect for the environment in which he found himself. Always fully aware that however much you might encourage growth and blossoming, everything will grow and blossom at its own speed. This book, his proverbial vasculum, offers a rich and heterogeneous collection of herbs and invites you to use them as you see fit.

You might start with a selection and come back later for more. You might read it from cover to cover immediately: the choice is yours.

One of his exceptional talents is the ability to make a passing remark that immediately makes visible those implicit convictions of his audience. He enjoys the commotion that follows, all the while simultaneously creating room for awareness and personal growth. In light of this, I recommend you find out for yourself whether you feel that what is in this book is true for you, or why it intrigues you. You, Frans and the book are completely and emphatically worth that.

BY MENTOR RINKE VISSER

Founder of the Instituut voor Biografiek and pioneer in the field of biographics.

This preface is an impression of my reading experience and an expression of my respect for the author, through the many treasured contacts we have been privileged to have, friendly and professional. A guide is someone who knows the paths and the potholes, the panoramas and the unfathomable pits. Frans Corten is one such guide: he is an experience expert, partly due to his own path in life, and partly due to the many conversations he has had with his peers.

Being gifted, just as being individual, is in itself not a problem, as this book shows. It can become problematic due to the context in which you have to find your *raison d'être*. This book is a biographical guide for the gifted and those who have discovered the bird of a rare feather in themselves. Gifted people may be surprised to learn that they need not feel alone in finding it difficult 'being special'. And the book calls on all those who think they are average to realise that the average person does not exist.

Your life is unique, and therefore by definition lonely. Experiencing that loneliness can be just as important as feeling commonality and connectedness. I must confess that I was immediately moved by the attention paid to the Bird of a Rare Feather in this book. What a find, and what a beautiful introduction to a completely different category of potential readers: all those who feel that they have to walk alone!

The awareness of being alone, of uniqueness, can make people impotent, helpless and even desperate. In my forty years as a pedagogue and biographics consultant, conversation partner for students and professors, I have been able to determine that these 'Alone ones' label themselves in a thousand terms, as Birds of a Rare Feather. They had forgotten they could fly. All I had to do was point to their wings. For these people too, Frans wrote this wonderful book, even if that was initially unintentional. Alone. After all, aren't we all alone? All on our way, and Frans offers us a handy guide for the journey, and a hand on our shoulders.

To summarise, I would like to describe the tone of the book as: 'Gifted person, I have recognised you, in you I see myself; I have an invitation for you but I will dictate nothing.' This empathic-critical attitude is the pinnacle of balancing on the cutting edge: simultaneously creating closeness and distance.

You are regarded as being privileged but you see yourself as needing help. You search for yourself and find the other person. Living with paradoxes: the path of the gifted and other birds of a rare feather.

The author put his heart and soul into this book: I wish for him and his readers that they may feel that heart beating.

1 WHY THIS GUIDE?

I have been coaching gifted people and other exceptional talents in their careers for twenty years now. In retrospect, it turns out I am one of the pioneers in that field: I was one of the first to focus explicitly on adults.

I have written this guide to help exceptional talents find their way in their lives and work. The insights are based on the experiences of clients and professional peers, and on the contents of a couple of hundred biographies of exceptional talents: in the form of both books and articles in newspapers and journals. The many conversations conducted in my broad networks of friends, acquaintances, colleagues and former colleagues also served as the basis for this book.

Is this book meant for you? Certainly if you know, or suspect, that you are highly intelligent or gifted. And also if you have noticed that you are often too quick with your ideas and inventions or too far ahead of others. Or if you know that you are talented but have not yet succeeded in capitalising on that talent, because you don't fit well in existing structures. This book is meant for all clever, versatile and sensitive people who would like to get more out of their lives and work. Those who sometimes get horribly bored, or who waste a lot of energy adapting to the demands of society.

Exceptional talents often suffer from alienating feelings. My clients describe it as follows:

- I don't understand much about social processes: why do people interact the way they do?
- Things that are preached often don't happen in practice. Am I the only one who has a problem with that?
- I often miss the clue of an explanation or work method because I believe it could be done much more quickly.
- Why am I often the first to notice dangerous situations, smell toxic substances, to be susceptible to noise nuisance or clothing that irritates the skin?
- I understand complex matters, but I sometimes need help understanding seemingly simple things.

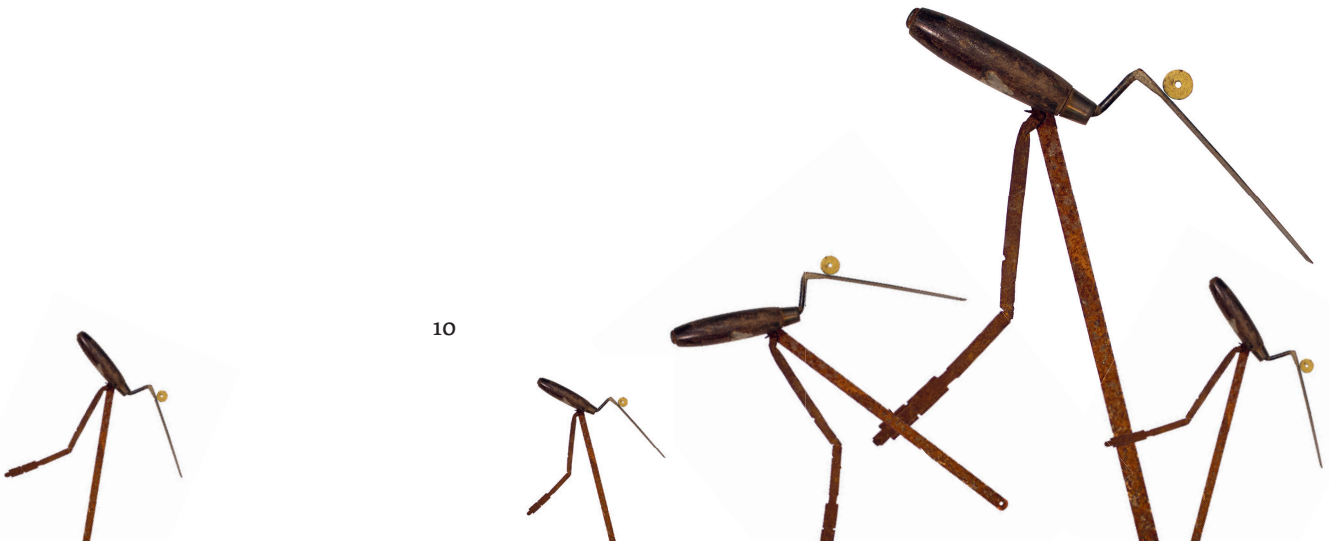
The realisation that you may be gifted, or exceptionally talented, offers new prospects. It shines a more inspiring and hopeful light on your life, because this realisation enables you to better distinguish between what is and is not good for you, and to position yourself better in your career and in your life. This book helps you to make choices which are right for you.

The illustrations in this book are also exceptional talents. They are constructed from forgotten or lost objects which in their original form had little or no appeal or significance. They were brought to life and animated by artists Marije van der Sande and Gérard Schiphorst of TAMTAM Objektentheater. They developed the birds of a rare feather into true personalities.

I hope that many exceptional talents will benefit from this book. I also hope that this book will contribute to a more positive social climate for exceptional talents. In word and deed. Not because they are such special or eminent people, or because we should respect or admire them more than others. No, just because we as a society could benefit greatly from them, and because it's a shame not to use talent. It's simply a waste if the least use is made of the most exceptional talents. All of society will benefit if we learn to interact better with exceptional talents.

MY OWN STORY

I skipped two years of primary school. First year, because I had already taught myself to read, count and write in block letters at kindergarten. The somewhat serious teacher, Miss Heetwinkel, dealt with that very well. She reminded me a little of my grandmother. I skipped the sixth year because I had completed all my 'tasks' at the Jena Plan School and had already spent a couple of months helping the first-year pupils with their word puzzles.



3 WHO ARE THESE EXCEPTIONAL TALENTS?

I can't offer you a scientific definition of an exceptional talent. The essence is that your talent really belongs to the exceptions, leaving you to discover many things for yourself. My company, Werk en Waarde (Worthwhile Work), has focused on these exceptional talents and other birds of a rare feather since I started it.

From a client: I'm very probably not gifted, but I do see myself as a 'bird of a rare feather' and I'm certainly not stupid, so that's why I'm daring to email you now.

I see many common characteristics in the group of clients who approach me, whether they are gifted or not.

It would seem that everyone in that group, as diverse as it is, has had a number of similar experiences. In particular, if they have not yet found their way in work and career. These characteristics are listed in the following table,

WHAT THE WORK ENVIRONMENT SIGNALS	WHAT THE EMPLOYEE THEMSELVES POINTS OUT
1 Many conflicts with management and authorities	I have a strongly developed sense of justice
2 Doesn't listen to others	People don't understand my ideas, but I'm usually right
3 Motives are difficult to fathom - what's behind it?	Apparently, I'm a threat to my colleagues
4 Poor timing, in meetings for example	I'm constantly meeting resistance; it all goes so slowly
5 Strong peaks and troughs in functioning, without a clearly demonstrable cause	I have no idea what I want, I find almost everything interesting
6 Unclear where employee would be best deployed, is involved in a multitude of activities	I receive little appreciation; people don't see what I'm capable of
7 No perseverance or discipline	I'm easily distracted
8 Is not easily approachable, does not socialise	I hate small talk
9 Makes all kinds of demands about work environment factors	I don't understand how everyone else can work in that noise

from the first official article about this subject, published in 2002 and written together with Noks Nauta ³. Giftedness is very often present if six or more of the points in both columns are recognised. Many clients actually recognise them all.

³ Noks Nauta, Frans Corten. *The gifted at work. Magazine for Business and Insurance Administration*, November 2002 (in Dutch, later translated in English, see www.worthwhilework.eu)

We received almost a thousand responses of recognition to that article, over a period of ten years. Many people have discovered by way of this table that they were perhaps gifted, and that finally gave them a logical starting point from which to work on their careers. We compiled this table purely intuitively at the time. It still gets noticed, because it juxtaposes two points of view every time. The large number of positive responses indicates that it hit home. Now, there are countless lists circulating on the Internet, containing points of recognition for gifted adults.

GIFTED, HIGHLY INTELLIGENT OR HIGHLY SENSITIVE

Is being gifted different to being high intelligent? And are all gifted people highly sensitive? I would like to answer this briefly here, so that you know how I use these terms. If you would like more detailed information, a few sources are suggested in the ‘further reading’ part.

One common characteristic of almost all my clients is that they are very highly intelligent: they generally think, associate and formulate faster than other people. They were often very good at learning in primary school. They also notice more and experience events more intensely. They automatically communicate from multiple perspectives and along more lines at the same time. However, other people don’t always respond to this. This is part of the reason why they may come across as being slow or stupid or think of themselves in that way.

High intelligence does not always show up in an IQ test. If you’re tired or tense, you may get a lower score than you should. If you do score high on an IQ test (higher than 98% of the population), you have been proved to be highly intelligent, according to the conventional definition. But people who are not highly intelligent according to an IQ test will also find this book useful. I don’t believe there is a strict boundary for intelligence, it’s more a sliding scale. I estimate that the total group of exceptional talents makes up around 3 to 4 percent of the population.

According to some authors, giftedness also requires that you perform excellently. I believe that in principle, all highly intelligent people are capable of that, in their own way. Upbringing and surroundings, good counselling and opportunities in life play an important part in this. So, I don't see any fundamental difference between highly intelligent and gifted, and I interchange both terms in this book, just as that happens in everyday spoken language.

⁴ See books of Elaine Aron and Elke van Hoof.

High sensitivity or hypersensitivity is a personal characteristic found in between 15 and 20 percent of the population ⁴. Gifted people are almost always also highly sensitive. However, the group of highly sensitive people is considerable larger, something we can see from the many books already written on the subject.

This book has as its ultimate goal: how can you, as an exceptional talent, tested or not for high intelligence, flourish better?

INVENTORS

One group I would like to highlight separately is that of the inventors. My experience is that some of them, with their critical, innovative way of looking at things, come up against similar problems as those faced by other exceptional talents.

Some inventors have invented one successful thing in their lives, because they just happened to be exactly the right person in the right place. In terms of character and background, they could be all kinds of people, which explains the suggestion boxes in many companies. Other inventors have a real inventor's nature. These are people who are constantly driven to look for innovative solutions for problems. This book applies to them too.

One of the characteristics of inventors is that they have both creative side and an analytical side. They look for solutions and possibilities across a broad spectrum and translate things from one professional field to another. They subsequently look to see which of the ideas really work and can be applied in a reliable way. Some inventors also have an aesthetic side and take the design of the invention into consideration. Others leave that to a colleague. These inventors will recognise much in this book, since they are often in the



vanguard and in addition, are inclined to undermine the established order, sometimes without even noticing. They are often highly intelligent. Their inventions are not necessarily always technical in nature; a psychological system or treatment method can also be an invention.

Read inventor Gustave's story in Chapter 8.

TOP TALENTS AND THE BEST CONFORMISTS

Strangely enough, exceptional talents often do not settle well into talent programmes run by large organisations in the Netherlands. Despite their ambitious names, these programmes are not in fact designed for them, but for the 'best conformists'⁵: the most talented of those who can still fit into traditional patterns.

⁵ The term was coined by coach and trainer Willem de Boer.
www.communsense.nl

This is the group which is described in terms of high-flyer, top talent and other such names. They are the employers' favourites: they are able to mould themselves to the existing frameworks and belong to the best within the group. This group is very valuable to society and is usually well able to cope. However, they are not the focus of my book.

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Exceptional talents really are exceptional and that can be seen in various aspects of their life stories:

- Powers of observation: you see crucial, subtle things that most people miss. Whether here and now (atmospheres, moods, details) or in the future: opportunities and problems which could occur.
- Vulnerability: your increased sensitivity to atmospheres and tension means that you must constantly be thinking about staying in balance.
- Combinations of talents: for example, you are empathic, you have profound knowledge and you are an organiser. You can do things which normally require a whole team.
- You are uniquely innovative, you search for solutions far beyond the frameworks. And maybe you don't realise how special that is.
- You think and speak too fast for other people to keep up, often without knowing.

These are characteristics which are very often found in exceptional talents. There are also a few characteristics which I only see in some of my clients. At first sight, they appear to be contraindications, but they can in fact also be indications of exceptional talent:

- You are extremely intelligent but have little affinity with acquiring knowledge. You are a craftsperson or practical in a people-oriented way and want to apply your brainpower too. However, study programmes in that area are often made to suit people with a much lower level of intelligence.
- You function exceptionally well in a certain area (for example, detailed knowledge or calculus) and you're extremely careless in another area (administration or language, for example).
- You've completed a long study pathway, possibly starting at junior general secondary or lower technical vocational school, and gradually working up through senior and higher technical vocational school before finally graduating from university. Although family and friends often believe that people who take this route are not particularly intelligent since they don't learn well from books, a remarkable number of these people are in fact gifted.

4 A LARGE GAP

The essence of being exceptional is that you deviate greatly from the average. Let's say you are two metres tall: the usual size of bed, chair or car won't fit or will not be comfortable and you'll have to buy your clothes from a specialist shop. Because the problem is immediately visible, other people are understanding. Some professions are closed to you, such as airline steward, train conductor or helicopter pilot. Specific health issues may also occur. And of course there are professions for which, conversely, being tall is useful. Understanding the consequences of being this tall already requires more empathy.

If you're very intelligent, similar problems occur. Services designed for everyone don't fit. In this case, not so much the physical amenities, but those on the 'softer' side of society. I'm talking about education, from pre-school through adult, psychological counselling, coaching, choice of study, psychological tests, career pathways. Problems can easily occur in all these areas of life. Often without you or those around you fathoming the cause, since high intelligence is not visible on the outside and certainly not if a person doesn't feel good about themselves.

At primary school, for example, you notice that some of the facts your teacher mentions are incorrect and nobody else seems to care about it. At university, you find fundamental mistakes in simulations which have been used for years, but no-one is pleased that you discovered them. At work, you see that your boss is taking decisions which are diametrically opposed to the organisation's goals. Nobody understands exactly what you mean and your boss feels threatened. When you tell your career coach what you'd really like to do, they don't actually seem to understand. Or they nod in a friendly fashion but you see by their non-verbal communication that you've said something wrong.

If things like this happen to you, it can give you the feeling that there's something badly wrong with you. That you don't belong, that you can't connect with others, that you are the only person who understands nothing of the world out there. You become withdrawn, start doubting things, you are

which do work for this target group. The method was developed from the idea that everyone should fit in the system and recognise themselves in more than 90 percent of the results. If that wasn't the case, the system was differentiated. I'll come back to this in more detail in Chapter 6.

COUNTERPRODUCTIVE STRUCTURES

There are all kinds of structures in society working to make processes manageable. And that's essential, because if you had to start from scratch in every situation, everything would be very inefficient. Sadly, my experience shows that exceptional talents are precisely the people who may be thwarted by these structures. Let me give you a few examples.

The principle of evidence-based

It seems glaringly obvious: only apply things which have been scientifically proven. In practice, it would seem that exceptional talents do not receive the help they need. Science almost always works with statistics and averages, and that goes reasonably well, for much of the time. But it's becoming increasingly obvious that special groups sometimes need special services. Medication works differently on men than it does on women. Dark-skinned people sometimes benefit from a medicine which is not the first choice, according to the norm. Some groups, such as the gifted, are so rare (2 to 3 percent) that they are almost indistinguishable in a random test. The IHBV⁹ (Gifted Adults Foundation in the Netherlands) has found several indications that gifted people respond differently to medicines than other people do. This means that giftedness also has physical consequences. In order to help this group, we must either find alternatives or come up with something new. And innovation doesn't always come readily evidence based.

⁹ *The gifted adults foundation in The Netherlands IHBV, www.ihbv.nl*

Step-by-step plans and descriptions of results

Step-by-step plans and descriptions of results are often applied in subsidy applications to make the process manageable. Those who draw these up determine beforehand roughly what they can expect and subsequently build the assessment system around that. By definition, fundamental innovations don't fit into this and are therefore generally rejected. This is a problem, even in schemes intended for the promotion of innovation. Which criteria can you use to make a substantiated judgement, without this undesirable effect occurring? There's no simple answer.

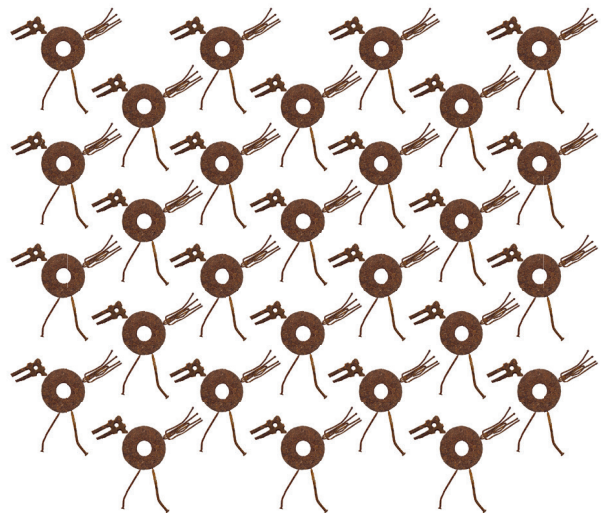
Customer satisfaction and results of scores

Scores for customer satisfaction are often used to help choose a care professional or to award a certificate. That can't be a problem, surely? Unfortunately, it can. If score results are dominant for an organisation's policy, there is a tendency to reject 'difficult customers'. Gifted people are one such example. They need extra guidance and that means extra work. Moreover, they are not easily pleased: they demand the same high standards of their care professional as they do of themselves. If scores play an overly dominant role, care professionals specialising in working with the gifted can no longer do their jobs.

The effects of certification

We see certification becoming a requirement in more and more fields. Demands are made of work methods, organisation and education. However, in practice, this filters out both the lower and the upper ends of the market. In a well-thought-out system, the real cowboys are weeded out. But so are the genuine innovators. Exceptional talents are affected by that on two levels: as innovators and as clients.

We are seeing that, in particular, the gifted and other exceptional talents are the first to encounter the limitations of the above-mentioned structures. Other people often appear to be affected too, but to a lesser degree or not until a later stage. Actually, the gifted act as mine canaries: miners used to



take a caged canary with them down the mine. If the canary passed out, the miner knew it wasn't safe there. A canary will faint sooner than a human in response to contaminated air. Taking seriously the problems experienced by the gifted could help you to create a better work environment for everyone.

THE PAPER REALITY

In response to the increased thirst for control and regulations, many organisations have gradually, and often subconsciously, constructed a parallel world. In this paper reality, everything works together correctly and according to regulations. But the day-to-day work method increasingly deviates from this. Wouter Hart talks of the myth of manageability.

Instead of rebelling against unworkable regulations, the practical route is taken: on paper we follow the regulations but in practice, we often don't. And this is quite understandable. It's become a habit, and everyone has become used to it. Look at how we thoughtlessly click away all sorts of warnings on websites and privacy statements. The gifted are often the first to notice that and question it. If safety is at risk, for example.

I was working as a personnel officer for an environment consulting agency, with rented offices in an eighteenth-century building. Health and safety regulations were just becoming fashionable, and we had a compulsory workplace inspection by a health and safety officer. I accompanied the officer as we went through the building with a fine tooth comb and filling in a really detailed questionnaire. I pointed out the stately wooden staircase, from which two people had already slipped. The treads were so worn from centuries of use that they were no longer safe. I asked the officer to include this defect in the report so that we could convince the landlord to do something about it. The officer barely responded. And there was nothing mentioned about it in the report afterwards. Very probably, it didn't fit into one of the predetermined focus points, even though in my opinion, it was by far the greatest risk in the whole building. Luckily, we were later able to purchase the building, and the staircase was one of the first projects we tackled.

BRIDGING TWO GAPS

If you look at organisations from a distance with your heightened sensitivity and powerful thinking skills, you can often see better solutions for these organisation's goals or for people's wishes. That is where you analyse and create. In practice, however, your meticulous solutions don't always appeal to others and, as it turns out, facts don't always matter that much for them either. This can be very frustrating indeed. But wait! Maybe you took their goals and wishes too literally. Is what they expressed actually what they want? To what extent are they aware of that? Many people would actually prefer everything to remain as it is, or feel that lots of things should indeed change, except their own situation or position. This seems to be a universal human need, which also applies to myself and my clients. Would you cheer when a plan - however wonderful - undermines your whole existence?

THE CAREER LADDER

Society still presumes the existence of some subconscious career ladder. Your career begins with craft work, if you are not so intelligent, or with investigative work if you are more intelligent. As you gain experience, you climb the ladder to management level, with organisational tasks and in the end, possibly, to executive level, with strategy tasks. And you may even start up your own company. Another possible route for more intelligent people is to move from investigative work to a specialism, by way of analytical work. You see this route being taken by consulting agencies and universities.

I see combinations in my clients which do not suit this at all. Some love craft work, but at a high intellectual level. Others want to have a great deal of knowledge, but of all different subjects. And there are others who are well-suited to running their own companies, even though they could not complete a study and failed as managers. In order to find the right place for you, you're sometimes required to take an interim step which doesn't at all suit you.

Exceptional talents sometimes have to choose a pathway in their development which greatly deviates from society's expectations.

REVIEWS

OFFICIAL BIBLION REVIEW

Dutch library services, Dutch version 2019

Frans Corten (1962), who has been coaching exceptional talents in their careers for twenty years now, is a veritable pioneer in the field of giftedness in adults. From his company 'Werk en Waarde', he shows an explicit interest in people who deviate from the average. This book aims to make it easier for them to find their way in life and in work. The handy guide, with its biographical basis, intent on finding a more positive social climate for them, contains many insights and personal findings gained in practice (almost a thousand people told him their life-stories). Five people who landed on their feet talk about their careers, pitfalls and solutions. Frans offers advice while respecting everyone's individuality. This is a pleasantly written, honest, empathic, readable and even moving guide with lots of insights and tips. Practical situations nestle between text and lovely illustrations and there are references to additional websites.

Reviewer: Ben Daeter MA

FIVE OTHER REVIEWS FROM READERS

Dutch version, 2019

“This is a thoughtfully written and beautifully designed book. Frans Corten points out very precisely the phenomena that matter and which many gifted people will recognise. Not as separate personal characteristics, but in conjunction with specific contexts and in a broader sense, with our society. He does this in a clear, accessible manner and he also gives concrete guidance and tips.

In his book, he lays an insightful foundation for what it means to be an exceptional talent. And precisely because he leaves enough scope in that foundation, it can be recognised as being the reader's own.

The fact that he describes matters so clearly may well help to clear up for a broader audience some of the unfamiliarity surrounding giftedness in adults.”

“Frans Corten has entrusted his own exceptional expertise to paper in an accessible and pleasantly readable way. I finished the book in one go. It evokes much recognition and offers practical tips and solutions. Not only for the gifted, inventors and birds of a rare feather themselves, but also for their families and friends and the professionals who meet (highly) gifted people in their practices. The book touched me deeply and made me feel acknowledged and seen.”

“If you are gifted, an inventor or another bird of a rare feather or if you are involved with these colourful people in any way, this book has been written with you in mind. I enjoyed reading it and recognised much in what it says. It exudes love and respect for people and is written in an accessible way. Frans embraces you by showing that he sees you and understands you. He offers great guidance. The book is also extremely suitable for everyone who is involved with gifted people in any capacity. The illustrations are beautiful. Highly recommended.”

“I find this to be a lovely book, written in just the right tone, respectful, friendly, showing expertise and experience. The portraits are encouraging and reassuring: if you take yourself seriously, you can find a way and a place that are right for you.”

“Very nice, readable reading matter for birds of a rare feather with unique talents. In addition to recognition, it offers professional expertise and useful tips for adults who are ‘gifted’ and who do not feel comfortable wearing those words;-) but who are nonetheless searching for their own identity.”