DANNY LENNON:	Here we are. Welcome back to the podcast, my man. I think this must be number four at least in terms of your appearances on the show and as ever, I'm delighted to have you here.
STEPHAN GUYENET:	Yeah, thanks for having me on, Danny. I'm delighted as well.
DANNY LENNON:	Yeah, so we have quite a bit to talk about and I think since the last time you're on, there's been a new project that you've immersed yourself in that I've been really excited to see. Uh, since you point out to me what you are planning to do and now that there's been enough time where you've been able to start building a backlog of certain reviews and this will make sense for people listening in a moment. So maybe just to kick us off this new project that I've alluded to that you've titled Red Pen Reviews, can you just tell us exactly what that is or how is the best way that you try to explain this concept to people?
STEPHAN GUYENET:	Yeah. So Red Pen Reviews is an organization and a website that publishes the most informative, consistent and unbiased health and nutrition book reviews available. And there are many ways to get book reviews. Frankly, most of them are not very informative, but what makes us unique is the method that we

use. We use a structured semi-quantitative review method, which is administered by experts with a master's degree or higher that scores books on scientific accuracy, reference accuracy and healthfulness. And we can dig in to how the method works later. But the end result is an easy to understand percentage score bars that quickly tell you the information quality of the book and allow you to compare between books on the same scale. So you could go to our website and say, "Hey, I'm interested in low carb diets for example. Which is the low carb book that scored the best?" And you could make an evidence-based decision on that in just a couple of minutes. And that's not really something that's really possible elsewhere to my knowledge.

So Red Pen Reviews is designed to serve a broad spectrum of people from general audience to healthcare workers, to researchers. And one way we do that is by offering different levels of engagement on each review page. So when you land on a review page, the first thing you see is the cover of the book and percentage bars for scoring. So if you want the two second take, you can just take a look at the books overall score. You know, I recognize that most people who visit a webpage are only going to be there for a couple of seconds. And so we wanted to have a way to be able to engage that type of person, which unfortunately represents the majority of people who visit websites.

Um, so we wanted to have different levels of engagement for anyone. So the two second take, you can just look at the book's overall score. There's a color coded, uh, score, percentage score bar with the percentage written on it. And then the 10-second take is to look at all the percentage scores in each category. So there's, again, there's three categories. The two minute take is to read the review summary, which is one paragraph. Then below that, if you want to engage more deeply, we have the full review where you can go as deep as you want into how we score the book,

complete with quotes, page numbers and references to scientific literature. So that's kind of a walkthrough of what we do and what the page looks like.

As far as the organization, we have a team of nine people and we exist to serve the public, not to make a profit. I want everyone to understand that we're currently organized as an LLC Limited Liability Corporation that's registered as a charitable organization, but we're moving toward formal nonprofit status as a 501(C)(3), which, of course, that's specific to the United States. But um, probably most folks in the US will understand that terminology and that, um, step will further enhance transparency and public trust.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. And I think, and I'm sure I'll get your take on this in a moment in terms of why specifically you went with this project and at this time I think from just hearing that overall concept, it's, it takes care of one of the big questions that I think a lot of people get asked of. I'm really interested in learning more about nutrition or I've got this interest in this specific idea. How can I essentially vet if this information is good or not? And I think a lot of times there's a big gap of either having no real clue how to do that and then being kind of succumbed to just persuasive arguments. And then down at the other extreme we could say, well, ideally, someone would have enough scientific proficiency to be able to vet that information directly based on their own knowledge of the field or by looking through certain references. But of course that's extremely unpractical for 99% of people. And so having some sort of a middle ground where we can actually help people is really useful. So let me flip that into a question to hear from your perspective. Why was at this particular time that you felt this particular project was something that you wanted to get into and when exactly did the first idea for this actually come about?

STEPHAN GUYENET:

Yeah. So, basically, you know, there's, there's kind of two things. There's the specifics of how the idea about, and there's the kind of general feelings that led me to feel motivated to pursue this project. So one of the general feelings that I've been feeling for a long time is frustration. So, you know, I've described the popular health and nutrition publishing sphere as an exploding volcano of nonsense, and that was quoted in the Seattle Times article that was written up on Red Pen Reviews. And that's a humorous assessment that's also pretty uncharitable. I think the truth is that information quality in health and nutrition publishing is just very variable. So there's some good stuff; there's some bad stuff, and most people just have a really hard time separating the wheat from the chaff. And I noticed this, you know, obviously, people who don't know much in a specific area are going to have a hard time.

But I noticed that experts fall into these pitfalls too like because the truth is if you're a scientist or an expert in something, generally you have expertise in a very narrow slice of a field. So that's, that's like the part that you know really deeply. So if there's a book that's on that specific slice, then you're going to be able to easily see what, what the bullcrap is. But if it's something that's just a little bit outside of that slice, you might not be that much better than the average person at detecting, you know, low information quality. And furthermore, most experts just like the rest of us, they're busy people and they aren't necessarily going to go chasing down references in a book to see whether the book is accurately representing them, whether it's making good faith arguments, etc. They're just reading through books casually, like the rest of us.

And even, you know, even in book reviews in like newspapers and well-regarded newspapers, you almost never see somebody check a reference. You almost never see them say, "Oh, the book made this claim. We looked

up the reference and this is what it actually said." So that's a step that is really simple and straight forward but is not usually taken even by, you know, knowledgeable, motivated people. And so, um, so yeah, there was that frustration that I had, that all of these health and nutrition books were being published, some of which have low information quality. And yet they were getting, they were being received very well by the public getting really popular and people were taking their advice, uh, most of which is pretty harmless, but some of which was frankly dangerous.

And you know, like for example, I'm not going to name names, but there, there was a book re-reviewed that, uh, suggested that cholesterol levels don't matter. And actually you want to have higher cholesterol and higher LDL to protect your brain as you age, um, and that it's not going to hurt your cardiovascular system. I mean, and you should get off your statins if you're on statins. I mean, that's an, that's a pretty clear example of advice that, uh, frankly could really easily kill people. And so, and, and again, that's, that's an extreme case. I don't want to say that all of the, these books have information like that, but this is an example of something that's out there. Um, it's not that uncommon. So, yeah. So frustration was the first thing. Um, a lack of accountability. Publishers generally do not fact check health and nutrition books. They just don't view it as part of their job, um, to evaluate the information quality of the claims that are being made. And I found that out when I wrote my book.

I mean my publisher had zero interest in fact checking anything in my book. The only reason it got fact-checked is because I sent it out to experts to myself. But their position was you're the expert. You are the one who's responsible for information quality. That doesn't have to, that doesn't have anything to do with us. And so basically whatever someone wants to claim, they can claim and the publisher does not

provide a filter to that claim. Um, so, and then, you know, another aspect that contributed to that frustration is that commonly available book reviews are usually not very helpful. So for example, a lot of people get their reviews on amazon.com and you know, books will be reviewed many times. Uh, the reviews, yeah, they'll be upvoted for reviews that people like the most. And those reviews honestly are almost completely useless. I hate to say it, but it's true.

If you look across books, some of which are known to be high evidence quality, some of which are known to be low evidence quality. Basically any book that you look at that's popular is going to have an Amazon, a star rating of between four and five stars. So those stars really do not reflect information quality at all. Um, and you know, these people who are writing these reviews, they're, they're not digging into the books in depth. They're not looking at, they're not looking up references. They're not experts on the subject. It's just like, hey, does, did the book make a convincing argument? Did I lose some weight? Um, you know, et cetera, et cetera. And that's what goes into those reviews. And so they're not really helpful.

And even reviews that are written in like prominent newspapers like New York Times, other, you know, prominent media sources. Most of the time they're not written by experts. They're written by a journalist and they're idiosyncratic. Like they focus on whatever, you know, stuck out to that particular person at that particular time. They don't generally do scientific literature searches or look up references to evaluate arguments. And so a lot of times you'll get these reviews that are either glowing or just like have some token skepticism to ideas that are really fundamentally super wrong. And I think that makes it hard for people to, um, judge the information quality of books. So I see this all playing out in the public sphere and of course for me, like there are a lot

of books that are coming out that are in areas that I'm not an expert in and I can't evaluate those books. I like just off the top of my head. So I mean, it's frustrating for me too, in the same way that it can be frustrating for, for everyone else.

And so, um, yeah, so that frustration was kind of building over the course of many years of seeing, you know, kind of people getting fleeced and, you know, sometimes myself getting fleeced. And then, and then I came across the reviews, book reviews of a guy named Seth Yoder. He, um, has a master's degree in nutrition and he, um, has a website Science of Nutrition where he would just pick popular books and he would check, systematically go through all the references, look them up and see how accurately they were represented by the author. And I read through some of these reviews and I was blown away by how effective they were at, um, determining the information quality of a book. There was really a lot you could learn just simply by looking up references and seeing how they were represented. And I thought that was really cool and really inspiring.

And so I said, hey to myself. And then later to Seth, um, we sat down over dinner and drinks one night and I was like, hey, we should take this and we should use it as the foundation and build upon it and make something that's more comprehensive, better, more unbiased, more systematic, and we should start, you know, we should get a team together and start making reviews. And I really wanted to update reviews for the 21st century and bring in scientific methods. So it occurred to me that most book reviews today are basically where medicine was in the 18th century. There's no consistent method being applied that increases informativeness and consistency and minimizes bias. And the reason medicine is so effective today in many ways, you know, uh, death in childbirth is way down. Like infant mortality rate is way, way down in affluent

industrialized countries. And you know, our lifespans are way up.

The reason medicine today is so much more effective than it was in the 18th century is that embraced the scientific method. That's the most powerful tool that humans have ever invented. And so I thought, why not apply that to health and nutrition book reviews? And if this is one of those simple ideas that you come up with and you're like, this is so simple, I can't believe no one else is doing it. Um, but it makes a lot of sense. And so basically we took as much as we could from the scientific method and brought it in. So formalized consistent review method that is transparent and available for critique. You know, kind of like the methods, a section of a paper semi-quantitative scoring system. So that is, um, something that I used to use in my research where you're essentially, it's not exactly quantitative where you would take like a specific measurement with a ruler, but you have different categories, different levels that you're, um, scoring the book on and you have numbers assigned to those categories.

So in this case, we have a zero to four scoring system that has specific definitions associated with each number and that allows us to yet so called semi-quantitative measurements, um, that really, um, help with consistency and to reduce bias. And we also use random sampling, which is a really, really important concept in science. So for the reference accuracy section, we randomly select 10 references from a book and it's true random sampling. And then we evaluate those references to get, uh, an unbiased picture or I should say a minimally biased because there's always, there's some subjectivity that remains in our method. It's not really possible to make it completely objective, but we've taken concrete steps to minimize the bias that can occur in, in our review method. And then finally we have peer review. So this is something that occurs in the scientific literature. If you want your work to, uh, progress to a high quality journal, scientific

journal, if you want your work to be funded, that all has to go through peer review where other intelligent people in the scientific community, knowledgeable and intelligent people are vetting it.

So there's a level of accountability there that's built into the system and it's not perfect, but it is better than not having that accountability structure there at all. And so we have peer review as well. We have a primary reviewer who does the review and then we have a peer reviewer who checks their work and, uh, makes suggestion for improvements. And so, um, so those are the inspirations. Basically, the frustration, Seth Yoder's work and he's part of our team. He helped design the method, uh, as well as some other nutrition scientists that we have on the team and then trying to update health and nutrition book reviews for the 21st century by incorporating the scientific method.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah, and I have lots of questions on some of those specifics that I'm sure we'll dive into. And one of those main frustrations that you mentioned right at the start was that when it comes to books on nutrition and health in general, there is this variance in their quality. And so if we were to ask why there's such variance in that quality that there's probably a whole host of various different factors and some of that could come down to, some people are able to get a, let's say a book dealer. Maybe they don't have the right degree of competence in the area. May be some people have pressures to write a certain type of book from publishers. Maybe it's there are people maybe that have some credibility, or at least it seems on the surface, let's say quite commonly someone has the title of a doctor, whether that's from a PhD, MD, so on, but they may be writing a book about a concept that's outside of that initial area of expertise. So with all these different things going on, what do you think is the best way for us to think through this idea of why there is that variance? Is there any sort of distinct categories that you think are most at

play when it comes to at least the books that are of poor quality that seem to be quite popular, at least seem credible to others?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah, so I think the big picture is simply that there's a poor incentive structure in the health and nutrition publishing industry. So we know that poor incentives lead to poor outcomes. For example, if you surround yourself by tempting, unhealthy food all day, uh, you're probably going to eat some of it. If you make elevators prominent and hide the stairs in a building, people are going to take the elevator. So poor incentives lead to poor outcomes. And in health and nutrition publishing, the incentives are quite poor. And the reason is that there's no accountability for exaggerated or incorrect claims. And there's a lot to be gained via exaggerated and and novel claims. So it's not necessarily that the incentive structure is not necessarily favoring incorrect claims per se, but it's favoring novel and exaggerated claims and a really easy way to get novel and exaggerated claims is to make claims that are incorrect.

Um, yeah, basically non evidence-based claims and um, that's the way that you get yourself a platform, an audience, um, that you sell a lot of books, that you sell a lot of products that are associated with your book. I mean, I think that's really where the real money is for a lot of these folks. It's not selling books. It's selling supplements or diet plans or whatever is the accessory that goes along with that book. And so, um, yeah, so to put it into engineering terms, there's basically any negative feedback that allows the system to self regulate. There's nothing pushing back against those exaggerated or I should say there's very little pushing back against the exaggerated or incorrect claims for reasons that we discussed. There's, there's, you know, the book reviews are not really providing great insight into that. Typically, most people aren't very good at judging whether a book's making accurate claims or not.

So there's just not really any accountability that gets people to think twice about the evidence quality that they're putting out there. Um, and of course, you know, some people just by their nature will think about it and will make more evidence-based claims and other people will not. But unfortunately, those non evidence-based claims can offer, can often really capture the public attention in a way that leads to, um, inaccurate understandings of science. It can lead to, um, anger toward the scientific community in a lot of cases because some of these books will kind of really throw stones at the scientific and medical communities and it can lead to bad health information that hurts people. And I would say again, that that's not, that last one isn't necessarily typical, but it does happen sometimes and I think people should be warned about it. So, um, yeah. Essentially, that is the issue.

There's this poor incentive structure in health and nutrition publishing. And so Red Pen Reviews is trying to create a better incentive structure for health and nutrition publishing. We're trying to create a negative feedback loop that allows the system to self regulate, give people the information on information quality of those books, let them um, vote with their wallets and let there be accountability for the authors too. If they make claims that are not evidence based, that will reflect on their credibility and perhaps on their careers. So, um, creating this feedback loop, but also, you know, we're not just here to tear things down. We want to help people write better books from the ground up. You know, we want people to, to see that there's this, now there's this incentive structure in place and say, hey, you know what? I'm going to go check out the Red Pen Reviews website.

I'm going to look at their method, which is published in full detail on our website, completely transparent what we do. And I'm going to say, how can I write a book that's going to score well on this? And there's not

really any way to game our method. The way that you write a book that scores well is you write a book that is evidence based and that doesn't exaggerate claims. And so it's not just about tearing down authors and tearing down their books, it's about supporting authors and supporting books to be as good as they can be from the ground up.

DANNY LENNON: One thing that I think was a really important point is that not only does the current incentive structure not actively penalize people or at least deter people from making claims that are not evidence based, but as you alluded to in many cases there's a significant benefit to be gained from going against that. And I think it's almost a, could be seen as a formula at this point of some of those, um, things that may be publishers are happy to see, but certainly people know are going to get attention. Like you mentioned things that are novel, novel, uh, oftentimes it has to be something that's kind of quite shocking and certainly not blend and, and sensible advice. Um, there does seem to be a particular leaning towards something that's counter convention and that seems to do pretty well. And then when you blend all that into a very emotive narrative that tends to give rise to people who really buy into that book and believe in it and are going to talk about it, which those are kind of things that would typically go against how we would view things through a scientific lens or a critical thinking lens.

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah. And don't, don't forget to blame authority structures too. So the government or doctors or researchers, it always helps to blame somebody.

DANNY LENNON: Right. I wanted to get to some of the specifics around the method that you use and then some of the terms that you've already mentioned. Uh, like you said, you are judging books or assigning a score to scientific accuracy, reference accuracy, healthfulness and then there's also an overall score, which we'll come

to. But in terms of those three different categories of scientific accuracy, reference accuracy, and healthfulness, they're terms I'm sure people understand, but in this specific context, is there a definition that you arrive at of that would give an idea of what you're really looking at with those?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah, absolutely. So the first thing I want to say is that all of our scoring method is published on our website. You just go to the navigation bar and click on our process and then that takes you to the review method. And then there's a button on there that you can click that says full scoring rubric. And that takes you to um, the scoring key basically that, um, shows you exactly how we assign numerical scores to the books that we review. So, essentially, there's three primary components to the score. There's scientific accuracy, there's reference accuracy and there's healthfulness and each of these is scored in a different way. So for scientific accuracy, we have, um, we select three core claims that the book makes and we evaluate those scientifically by consulting the scientific literature, by consulting the references that are cited in the book as well.

And so, um, each of those claims get scored across three different criteria. So the first criterion is how well is the claim supported by current evidence? And that is the one where we would do like a scientific literature search and say, hey, they made claim X. What is, you know, there's some meta analyses on that. What are the meta analyses say how well does that align with what the author is claiming in the book. And so we have a table here with scores from zero to four and each of those numbers is associated with a different level of support. So score of zero is would correspond to the claim being opposed by current evidence. And we have a little bit of a longer definition next to that. But that's the summary definition. And then a score of one is that the evidence relevant to the claim is neutral, non-existent or based on personal observations. So like

anecdotes and then that goes all the way up to four, which is that the claim is strongly supported by current evidence.

So, and again we have longer definitions for those next to them that are more specific, but that, um, I won't just for the sake of time I won't go through those. So that's the first criterion is how well is the claim supported by current evidence. The second one is, are the references cited in the book to support the claim convincing? And similarly, we have a scoring table with zero to four with different levels associated with that. And then the third criterion is how well does the strength of the claim line up with the strength of the evidence. So this is basically whether the author is exaggerating it or not. So you know, you could imagine a scenario, and this happens a lot where there's some small study that's not a very high quality study, but it found some result that seems supportive of the author's claim.

And they, you know, use that study to make a really big deal out of it and make a book out of it. Um, but when you look at the study, it's not very convincing. So that would be a case where that has been substantially exaggerated. And so that's where, that's what our, that's what this score is designed to catch. So how well does the strength of the claim line up with the strength of the evidence? And again, we have score ranging from zero to four in that category from the claim being greatly overstated to the strength of the claim aligning well with the strength of the evidence. And so those three criteria, that's criterion 1.1 1.2 and 1.3 are applied to each of the three claims that we evaluate that are key claims that the book makes. So that's those scores all get averaged together and that goes into our scientific accuracy score and um, that gets displayed.

We calculate it into a percentage score and that's one of the score bars at the top of the page. So the next thing is reference accuracy.

And this one's a little bit simpler. We, um, again we randomly select 10 references from the, from the book, and then we evaluate using one criterion, which is, does the reference support the claim? So for all those 10 references, we just apply this one criterion. Again, it's a zero to four score ranging from zero, which is referenced, undermines the claim all the way to four, reference offers, strong support for the claim. And again, we have longer, more specific definitions associated with each number, but I won't go through those in the interest of time. So then we average together those 10 scores and that yields the reference accuracy score that gets translated into a percentage and that's the second, uh, sub score bar at the top of the page.

Then the third is healthfulness. So here we have three criteria again. Criterion 3.1 is, is the intervention likely to improve the target condition in the target audience relative to typical diet and/or lifestyle patterns in the medium to long term. So if you have a book for example that says, hey, you know, this is a strategy that, you know, this book is about weight loss, here's how you lose weight and then it gives diet and lifestyle advice. We would say that the question here would be does this diet and lifestyle advice, is it likely to actually cause weight loss in the intended target audience relative to what the average person is currently doing? This a pretty low bar. Um, you know, most advice is going to probably be better than what the average person is doing. But again, we score that on a zero to four scale.

Um, the second one, criterion 3.2 is, is the intervention likely to improve general health in the target audience relative to typical diet and/or lifestyle patterns in the medium to long term, which means six plus months. So, you know, this diet and lifestyle strategy, sure it's going to cause weight, but is it going to be healthy for you in terms of general health? And we have a very broad definition of general health that's not just about disease risk, it's

about, you know, performance and reproductive health and as well as disease risk. And then, um, the last one is, does the diet portion of the intervention promote an adequate nutrient intake for general health in the target audience relative to prevailing recommendations in the medium to long-term? So this is really just saying, does this diet promote nutrient adequacy, including, um, essential and nonessential nutrients?

So, for example, maybe a vegan diet, uh, that doesn't provide vitamin B12 supplements might not do that well on this score because it might create a deficiency of an essential nutrient. So those are the three sub-scores and again, we, those are zero to four. We average those together and turn it into a percentage. And then that's the third sub score bar that appears at the top of the page. Then we average together the scientific accuracy, reference accuracy and healthfulness scores into the overall score, which is the one at the very top of the page.

DANNY LENNON: Is the total score, is that an equal weighting for each of those three or how do you calculate that?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah, correct. It's a, it's equal weighted average. Yeah.

DANNY LENNON: Cool.

STEPHAN GUYENET: Okay. So just to clarify that, um, it's a weighted average that the overall score is a weighted average of the sub scores. So the sub scores are, are calculated. Then those are average together. Those three are average together, uh, without waiting for the overall score.

DANNY LENNON: Got it.

STEPHAN GUYENET: Um, and then the, the last thing we do is we assign a difficulty score. And this is something that, um, one of our, one of our reviewers suggested that I thought was a good idea. Um,

and essentially what we do is we try to figure out how hard would this actually be for people to implement, you know, like is this something that people are gonna likely stick to in the long run or is it so hard that yeah, it's beneficial if you do it, but you're not going to do it in the long run because you know, it's super restrictive and it's really expensive and it includes hard to find foods and that sort of thing.

So we rate the difficulty from very difficult to very easy. And there's four different levels and we don't assign numbers here. This is just a qualitative, um, rating, very difficult, fairly difficult, fairly easy or very easy. And that really gets more at the adherence thing, which is not really addressed in the rest of our scoring. So all of that information is summarized at the top of the page. You land on the page. Literally, in like 10 seconds you can absorb the top level information as far as how the scoring went. Um, and then you can get down lower and you can see all the individual scores for every single score that we did. And as you might imagine, this is a very time consuming method. I mean, not counting reading the book, it can easily take 40 hours to apply this to a book. Um, so it's really a lot goes into it and it is, um, and it's, it's challenging to get a sufficient volume of these because we have, you know, busy professionals doing them.

DANNY LENNON:

Right. Yeah. That was what jumped to mind earlier when you said you were surprised that no one else had done a similar idea. My first thought was yeah, because of the amount of work that to do something as diligently as this actually takes that you're actually going through this step-by-step method that you've worked out. And it seems like the, that last piece you mentioned of how difficult it is to apply, that almost seems a very, or it's something that I would find difficult to come up with a replicable system for evaluating or, or how did you guys think through that of what we're actually going to evaluate the difficulty of

a diet given that a lot of different types of diets are difficult for people to follow in general?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah, absolutely. And I think this is really a challenge, um, because it's hard to make it strictly evidence-based and this is why we kept it, you know, there's only four levels. So it's not super specific and we don't assign a number to it. Um, you know, we don't want to imply false precision in our estimate. Um, yeah. So I mean, that's a challenge, but I think, I think you can kind of rank some diets versus others. So, I mean, a diet that involves, let's say, uh, just a straight up low carb diet is going to be easier than a diet that involves low carb plus intermittent fasting or you know, a diet, uh, advice that involves like a diet plus vigorous exercise is going to be harder to sustain than one that is just the same diet without the exercise. Um, so I think, you know, in some, some diets really emphasize like, you need to eat pasture raised meat and the diet is mostly based on meat and you need to, you know, buy all organic and it's like, wow, there's not a lot of people who are really going to be able to follow this advice, uh, and do it sustainably just for cost and convenience alone.

Um, so those are, those are the types of things that we factor in. We get a little bit more specific in our guidance on how we do that. Um, but it's not as, uh, defined of a method as the other scores. So, yeah, I mean, I, I acknowledge certainly all of our scores have a certain amount of, uh, variability or error you could call in that built into them and they have a certain amount of subjectivity too. You know, there's not really any way to be completely objective about what we do. Um, but essentially we've created, you know, it's, you have to compare it to the alternative. So what's the alternative that is not having any method at all, um, and not having anything in place that favors objectivity or consistency. So, um, you know, we don't claim that the method is perfect, but we do claim that we are taking

substantial concrete methods to make it better than the alternatives.

DANNY LENNON:

Right? And, and I think having a system and have it laid out that people can see ahead of time, it's getting to consistency and replicability across scoring these different types. So even if there is some slight variation that people could argue about with specifics on a score as these, a catalog of different reviews mounts, you can get a fairly good idea in terms of ranking or where a book is going to lie on that kind of spectrum of trustworthy to not trustworthy. So I think that's quite useful. Um, one thing that I have really enjoyed reading in the reviews is the section on the most unusual claim, which I thought was a really nice addition and I've certainly got a good laugh from some of them. Do you, do you have a particular favor out of the, the ones that have been reviewed so far?

STEPHAN GUYENET:

Uh, yeah, I do. So here, let me pull it up. Um, I was the primary reviewer on, um, Grain Brain. So this is a book written by David Perlmutter that's extremely popular that claims that carbohydrate and gluten are the primary cause of dementias like, uh, like Alzheimer's disease and that we should, you know, eat a very low carbohydrate diet and avoid gluten to prevent, uh, Alzheimer's disease. So one of the things that I found in this book that was a pretty extreme claim that of course was not referenced, um, is that a century ago, people in affluent countries like the US ate a high fat, low carbohydrate diet and secondly, that our distant hunter gatherer ancestors basically ate a ketogenic diet that was very similar to what Grain Brain recommends.

And it goes so far as to actually show a graph of what our ancestors used to eat a pie chart suggesting that the ancestor, a hunter gatherer diet was 75% fat, 5% carbohydrate and 20% protein. So it wasn't just the [VA 00:43:11] claim. It was actually associated with the pie chart with specific numbers and there was no

reference. So, um, yeah. And so I having read a fair amount of anthropology and specifically nutritional anthropology that definitely set off some, some red flags for me. So, uh, I looked it up and, and yeah, I mean it's just not, it's not true according to evidence that we currently have, which comes from a variety of different sources. But you know, we have, we have evidence from tooth plaque of Neanderthals and Paleolithic humans living in Europe that is full of like grains and beans and, and tubers and other sources of carbohydrate. It doesn't tell us how much of them they were eating, but they were obviously eating some amount of them.

And then from anthropological accounts of living hunter gatherers that have been quantified, we know that, yes, there were some groups that ate very low carbohydrate diets, but that was by no means typical. Typical, um, was that they were getting about 22 to 40% of their carbohydrate, of their calories from carbohydrate and about 28 to 58% from fat. And, and by the way, let me just specify that that's based on evidence that is, that has a lot of uncertainty associated with it. So I don't want to get people to attach to those specific numbers. Um, however it is. Those are evidence-based numbers. They're not based on nothing. Um, and it's very clear and obvious from the descriptions of various hunter gatherer groups that most of them were in fact eating, uh, you know, meaningful amounts of carbohydrate in the diet. They were not eating ketogenic levels of fat, um, except in, in a minority of cases. And those are generally located in the Arctic. So like Intuit peoples for example. And the truth is that those people are not the ancestors of most of the people that are going to be reading Grain Brain. So, um, I'm sure there's some people descended from Intuit who read Grain Brain, but probably most folks who are reading it are not descended from Arctic peoples. And so anyway, so yeah, that was, that was kind of one of these uh, humorous ones.

DANNY LENNON: Hmm. It, it, it strikes me as a, a lovely coincidence how those numbers and that pie chart just map on exactly to conventional recommendations for a ketogenic diet as well.

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah, very, very convenient.

DANNY LENNON: Worked out well. Um, how do you guys decide which books that you're going to review?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah. So we don't really decide that as an organization. Um, you know, for me one of the things that I really focus on and that's a real challenge for us is, uh, creating an incentive structure that favors the production of reviews. So basically, how can we get people to actually do these because they're so time consuming. Um, and part of that I'll just mention, we do try to, this is not something we've implemented yet because we're not in a financial place where we can do this, but I do want to pay reviewers a modest some for their time as part of the incentive structure. Um, and I think that'll, that'll help. But um, part of it is I just want people to review books that interest them.

So I don't tell people what to review. We don't decide that as an organization. What we do is we have a list of potential books to review and then people on our team just choose whatever interests them. But I do, you know, our goal is to select books that are impactful. So we generally want to steer clear of books that are, that not a lot of people are buying that are not having a large impact on public thought about health and nutrition. So really, you know, because we have a very limited capacity, in an ideal world, I would love to review every book no matter how popular, but we have a very limited capacity. And so we're trying to use that capacity in a way that's maximizing our impact. And so for now, we're trying to focus on impactful books. And some of those books are, you know, popular books that have fairly low information quality. Some of them are, uh, books that vary in popularity but might be

from, uh, people who have particular importance such as prominent academics or authors who are just very well known in the public sphere. Um, but really what we're after the fundamental property is that we're going after is impact.

DANNY LENNON: Sure. So once someone has selected a book and done that review from that point on, is it just a secondary review as it would, uh, would typically happen in a peer review publication, uh, for example, that it's handed over to another member of the team and they're going to go through that and, and peer review that review that's been done?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah. Correct. So, essentially, the peer reviewer is responsible for, um, improving the quality of that review in every way that you can imagine. So we don't have an editor for example. So part of the job of the peer reviewer is to make suggestions to improve, you know, spelling and grammar and language clarity and just basic stuff like that. Um, and, but their main goal is to make sure that, uh, you know, the book has been accurately represented. Are the quotes accurate, um, and taken in context? Are the references that are being cited the best ones available? Is the logic good? Are they, you know, selecting claims to be evaluated in a way that is reasonable and unbiased or, you know, minimally biased? Um, you know, just everything associated with the information quality of the review. That's the primary job of the peer reviewer. And essentially, what they do is they make suggestions in the review document that the, sorry, peer reviewer, that's the job of the peer reviewer. So they make suggestions to the primary reviewer in the review document. And the primary reviewer is expected to accept all of those suggestions except ones that they might disagree with. And then if they disagree, then there's a process for resolving that disagreement. If it's not resolvable, then there's a, then you include a dissenting statement from the peer reviewer in the review.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. So at this time, I think it was about seven or eight reviews, is that correct?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yup. Seven right now.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. Um, and so, uh, and I think the range was somewhere in like the low forties of an overall score all the way up to the high eighties. So there's quite a variance as you've outlined. And I liked the selection of books that were picked in there, particularly ones that I'm sure a lot of people have asked questions about or have certainly heard about. So I definitely think it's a, a great start in terms of the selection of those. Um, one thing that I did want to ask before we start wrapping up was in terms of your hopes for Red Pen Reviews going forward, what is the next couple of key things you think are important to continue to push things in the direction that you want? And then beyond that, where's the ideal place that you would like to get this to go?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah. So in the short term, I think what we need to do is simply grow our library. I think that's going to drive most of the things that we want to accomplish. So the more books we have, the more traffic we're going to get, the more we're going to be viewed as a credible resource. Um, and the more, you know, just the more useful we're going to be to the public, the more of an incentive structure for the publishing industry and for authors we're going to create. So that's really our short term goal is just to keep publishing reviews. Um, and in the longer term, what I would like to do is I would love, first of all, I want to see Red Pen Reviews become the default resource for assessing the information quality of popular health and nutrition books.

So I want everybody in this country and a lot of, you know, people in many other countries to say, hey, I'm wondering about this book. I'm thinking about buying it. It looks interesting. Let's check Red Pen Reviews and see, uh, how

evidence-based that book is. That's what I would love to do. I, that's where I want us to be eventually. Um, and I think we can get there.

And the other, um, thing I would like to do, I would love to expand into other topic areas. So right now we're in health and nutrition. I would love to be able to do medicine. I would love to be able to do fitness science. I would love to, uh, be able to do other topics like that and recruit experts in those areas. I would also love to expand into other media areas. So instead of books, maybe we could do popular newspaper articles, blog posts, you know, Twitter threads, whatever is getting attention at the time. We could, you know, post quick, uh, reviews using again, a formalized method to, to score those. So, um, that's another thing I would love to do. And then, eventually, I think it'd be really cool to have branches in other countries where we're focusing on books that are prominent in other locations in other languages instead of having it be focused predominantly on English speaking, uh, you know, predominantly on English language books and predominantly those published in the US. So that's another, another place where I would love to expand.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. And you mentioned right at the start that the primary goal for the company is not a profit driven one and not a profit motive. You also mentioned that time intensity that it takes for reviewers who all have other obligations professionally to be doing. So beyond checking out Red Pen Reviews and sharing word of that about are there other ways that people can get involved and support what you're doing, uh, given all those things?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah. Yeah. So there's three ways basically that people can support with what we're doing. The first way is to just spread the word, like you said, and that really is useful. So you know, to the extent people can do that, that is really helpful. The second thing people can do is to donate because it's, um, it's frankly, it's been really a challenge for us to meet the

organization's financial needs. Um, our fundraising hasn't lived up to my hopes, uh, for it and I'm super grateful for the people who have donated and there are even the most useful thing, there are some people who have a monthly small donation going to Red Pen Reviews. So special thanks to those people that's, um, really helpful. But there are some things that we want to do. The most important thing is to pay reviewers a modest amount of money for each review to, um, enhance the incentive structure for them to be able to get a higher volume of reviews, um, out of our team.

So I think that is a really important goal for us. And there are other things that we need money for as well, such as, um, are, you know, costs associated with transitioning to a nonprofit, um, you know, website improvements, uh, various business related costs, legal fees. So there's, there's a lot of stuff that goes into running an organization like this. Um, and you know, right now, just to, just to be clear, like right now, I am about $6,000 in the hole on this project. Um, that's money that I have invested in, have not, um, recouped yet. So, you know, eventually, and, and I'm not taking any money from, from this project. I have not taken a dime personally. So it's, it's really about, um, serving the public. But eventually, you know, if this continue, this is, this is a volunteer thing that I do pro bono, but eventually, if this is taking up more and more of my time and it's, um, and it's growing and growing, I'm going to need to draw some kind of income from it to make it sustainable for me. So that's another aspect of, um, eventually what, what donations would be doing, but that's a long-term thing.

The third way that people can support us is if they have a master's degree or higher in a relevant field of expertise, whether that is nutrition or obesity or diabetes research or something related to the books that we review, so master's degree equivalent or greater, um, and they want to be a reviewer, please send us an email@contactatredpenreviews.org. We'll

send you an application and we can see if you're going to be a good fit. But that's also going to be really important for us is to expand the number of reviewers that we have so that we can, um, increase the volume of reviews that we're publishing. And part of the incentive structure that we have is that people who write these reviews, you know, your picture and your bio is on our website. You're going to get credibility from that. Um, that's gonna be a tremendous source of credibility. It's going to be a public service. Um, that's going to help a lot of people. It's going to be something you can put on your CV. Um, and then we also eventually hope to bring in that relatively modest financial incentive too, but that could still be, you know, important for some people. So that's, that's the third way and that's also a really important way that certain people could support Red Pen Reviews.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. And just to confirm for people who want to check any of the out or check the site out, the URL is RedPenReviews.org, correct?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Correct.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. And so before that you go, uh, Stefan, I know I've probably asked you this before, um, but seeing as, I think it's a question that all of us change our mind on fairly regularly, I'm going to throw at you again before you go. And if you could advise people to do one thing each day that would have a positive benefit on any area of their life, what would that one thing be?

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah. So I think I gave a, uh, I'll, I'll give an answer different from what I think I've said in the past. Um, I think getting, getting physical activity, building physical activity into your daily routine, like having an active commute I think is one of the best things that people can do.

DANNY LENNON: Awesome. Um, I love, uh, and I, I thank you so much for this conversation, for giving up your

time, but also for the work that you've been doing on this new project. It's, it's something that I think is going to be an extremely valuable resource to a lot of people. I've certainly enjoyed reading through the reviews that are on the site and like we've mentioned a few times, it is no easy task that you've given yourself and the rest of the team has given themselves in doing these reviews. So, uh, I want to thank you for that, but also for coming and talking to me today.

STEPHAN GUYENET: Yeah, thanks for having me on, Danny.

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