

**Newsweek**

## 'The Secret': Does Self-Help Book Really Help?

Oprah lives by it. Millions are reading it. The latest self-help sensation claims we can change our lives by thinking. But this 'new thought' may just be new marketing.

By Jerry Adler

**Newsweek**

March 5, 2007 issue - If you're a woman trying to lose weight, you had your choice of two pieces of advice last week. One, from the American Heart Association, was to eat more vegetables and exercise an hour a day. The other was from a woman named Rhonda Byrne, a former television producer who has written what could be the fastest-selling book of its kind in the history of publishing with 1.75 million copies projected to be in print by March 2, just over three months since it came out, plus 1.5 million DVDs sold. Byrne's recommendation was to avoid looking at fat people. Based on what she calls the "law of attraction"—that thoughts, good or bad, "attract" more of whatever they're about—she writes: "If you see people who are overweight, do not observe them, but immediately switch your mind to the picture of you in your perfect body and feel it." So if you're having trouble giving up ice cream, maybe you could just cut back on "The Sopranos" instead.

You'd think the last thing Americans need is more excuses for self-absorption and acquisitiveness. But our inexhaustible appetite for "affirmation" and "inspiration" and "motivation" has finally outstripped the combined efforts of Wayne Dyer, Anthony Robbins, Dr. Phil and Mitch Albom. We have actually begun importing self-help—and from Australia, of all places, that citadel of tough-minded individualism, where just a couple of years ago Byrne was a divorced mother in her 50s who had hit a rocky patch in her business and personal lives. It was in that moment of despair, when she "wept and wept and wept" (as she recounted to Oprah on the first of two broadcasts devoted to her work), that she discovered a long-neglected book dating from 1910 called "The Science of Getting Rich." In it she found how to let your thoughts and feelings get you everything you want, and determined to share it with the world. She called it "The Secret."

And it was that stroke of marketing genius that turned what might have been a blip on the Times's "Advice, How-To, Miscellaneous" best-seller list into a publishing phenomenon that Sara Nelson, editor of Publishers Weekly, says "could become this decade's 'Tuesdays With Morrie.'" "Nobody," she adds, "ever went broke overestimating the desperate unhappiness of the American public." Self-help books roll off the presses with the regularity of politicians' biographies, and sell much better; Wayne Dyer all by himself has written 29 of them with sales estimated at 50 million. But Byrne had something else going for her. "It was an incredibly savvy move to call it 'The Secret,'" says Donavin Bennes, a buyer who specializes in metaphysics for Borders Books. "We all want to be in on a secret. But to present it as *the* secret, that was brilliant."

To a tired genre full of earnest bullet points and windy exhortations, "The Secret" brings breathless pizzazz and a market-proven gimmick, an evocation of ancient wisdom and hidden conspiracies that calls to mind "The Da Vinci Code." Torchlights flicker on the 90-minute DVD and the soundtrack throbs portentously before it gets down to giving you the secret for getting your hands on that new BMW. The book is a miracle of cover art, a jacket suggestive of a medieval manuscript punctuated by a crimson seal. "It evokes the film, with the secret scrolls and all," says Judith Curr, executive vice president of Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster that brought out the book in partnership with Portland, Ore.-based Beyond Words Publishing. Its very size, small enough to hide, adds to its aura. "It feels special, like it contains really important information."

What it doesn't contain, though, is a secret. That should be self-evident to anyone who has ever been in an airport bookstore. The film and book are built around 24 "teachers," mostly motivational speakers and writers (dressed up by Byrne with titles like "philosopher" or "visionary") who have been selling the same message for years. Jack

Canfield is probably the best-known of them. Is it really true that a cabal of elites has conspired to keep the rabble from getting their hands on "Chicken Soup for the Soul"?

The "secret" is the law of attraction, which holds that you create your own reality through your thoughts. You can, if you wish, take this figuratively, to mean that by changing your thoughts you can feel better about your situation in life. Or you can view it as a source of inspiration—that by believing you will succeed, you will perform better in the race or the test or your relationships.

But that's not what "The Secret" is saying. Its explicit claim is that you can manipulate objective physical reality—the numbers in a lottery drawing, the actions of other people who may not even know you exist—through your thoughts and feelings. In the words of "author and personal empowerment advocate" Lisa Nichols: "When you think of the things you want, and you focus on them with all of your intention, then the law of attraction will give you exactly what you want, every time." Every time! Byrne emphasizes that this is a law inherent in "the universe," an inexhaustible storehouse of goodies from which you can command whatever you desire from the comfort of your own living room by following three simple steps: Ask, Believe, Receive.

In a dramatized interlude in the film, a young woman ogles a necklace in a window, and the next thing you know, it's around her neck. A child imagines himself with a new bike, and it appears outside his door. No need to do a lot of boring chores or get a newspaper route: the universe provides. Contrariwise, a worrywart who obsessively checks the locks on his bicycle returns to find it stolen; the law of attraction has called down on him just the predicament he hoped to avoid. A financial consultant reliably finds parking, just by visualizing an empty spot—which implies, by another law of the universe, the one about two objects occupying the same space, that he believes his thoughts can induce someone else to leave. Is this someone you'd trust with your investments?

Perhaps this proposition has not been analyzed closely enough by fans of "The Secret," including Oprah, who exuberantly told her audience that she'd been living her whole life according to the law of attraction, without even knowing it.

On an ethical level, "The Secret" appears deplorable. It concerns itself almost entirely with a narrow range of middle-class concerns—houses, cars and vacations, followed by health and relationships, with the rest of humanity a very distant sixth. Even some of the major figures in the film confess to uneasiness with its relentless materialism. "I love 'The Secret' but I also think it's missing a couple things," says "metaphysician" Joe Vitale. "If I were producing it, I would have added something more about serving others." Vitale defends the dream homes and sports cars as baubles to draw people in, in hopes they will employ the law of attraction for higher purposes. Not that the law has any bias toward higher purposes. On the contrary, Byrne writes, it is totally impersonal and "it does not see good things or bad things." In the film, the Rev. Michael Bernard Beckwith compares it to the law of gravity: "If you fall off a building it doesn't matter if you're a good person or a bad person, you're going to hit the ground."

Which is equally true if someone pushes you off a building—or, let's say, beats your brains in with a club during a bout of ethnic cleansing. The law of attraction implies that you brought that fate down on yourself as well. "The law of attraction is that each one of us is determining the frequency that we're on by what we're thinking and feeling," Byrne said in a telephone interview, in response to a question about the massacre in Rwanda. "If we are in fear, if we're feeling in our lives that we're victims and feeling powerless, then we are on a frequency of attracting those things to us ... totally unconsciously, totally innocently, totally all of those words that are so important."

She has seen evidence of this in her own life, she says, where "many tough things" happened to her. "The Secret" devotes several pages to the weight she gained after her pregnancies. Unaware of the law of attraction, she mistakenly believed that eating made her fat. She now recognizes her error: "Food is not responsible for putting on

weight. It is your *thought* that food is responsible for putting on weight that actually has food put on weight."

And today, she maintains an ideal weight of 116 while eating anything she wants. A woman in the film claims to cure her breast cancer in three months, without chemotherapy or radiation, by visualizing herself well and watching funny movies on television. Whatever you think of that as medical advice—Byrne insists she's not telling people to avoid doctors—it makes psychologist John Norcross, a professor at the University of Scranton who is an authority on self-help books, wonder: what about the people whose cancers don't get cured? "It's pseudoscientific, psychospiritual babble," says Norcross. "We find about 10 percent of self-help books are rated by mental-health professionals as damaging. This is probably one of them. The problem is the propensity for self-blame when it doesn't work."

On a scientific level, the law of attraction is preposterous. Two of the "teachers" in the film are identified as quantum physicists, which they are, although on the fringes of mainstream science. One, Fred Alan Wolf, is mostly an author of science books with a quasi-mystical bent, and the other, John Hagelin (who has run for president on the Natural Law ticket), is affiliated with Maharishi University of Management, in Fairfield, Iowa, which does research on transcendental meditation. Both of them, contacted by NEWSWEEK, distanced themselves from the idea of a physical law that attracts necklaces to people who wish for them. "I don't think it works that way," says Wolf dryly. "It hasn't worked that way in my life." Hagelin acknowledges the larger point, that "the coherence and effectiveness of our thinking is crucial to our success in life." But, he adds, "this is not, principally, the result of magic."

Wolf said he used his time in front of the camera to talk about the relationship between quantum mechanics and consciousness, but all that evidently wound up on the cutting-room floor. What he might have said is something like this: modern physics says that atomic particles influence one another in ways that violate our ordinary understanding of space and time, a phenomenon called "quantum entanglement." The question is whether quantum signals can be perceived on the scale of something like a neuron, a brain or a human being. Overwhelmingly, physicists dismiss this idea. A minority, very much out of the mainstream, think it's worth investigating, and a few claim to have experimental evidence that thoughts can influence physical objects, such as the circuitry in a random-number generator. But the effects are tiny, on the order of a few hundredths of 1 percent. And there's no evidence you can use it to move a BMW into your driveway.

But modern physics has reinvigorated a long tradition in American philosophy, one in which "The Secret" stands squarely. "I can show you books written 100 years ago that say the exact same thing," says Beryl Satter, a professor of history at Rutgers. Long before there was a "New Age," Satter says, there was "New Thought"—a self-help movement that drew on 19th-century Americans' suspicion of elites and on the Protestant tradition of looking for the "inner light." You don't need doctors to heal you, priests to save you or professors to instruct you: the secrets to health, success and salvation are within you. A best seller in 1869 called "The Mental Cure" unleashed a flood of imitators, which increasingly evoked "science" in their titles, hoping to capitalize on the fascination with inventions like the telephone. "It was a short leap from 'You can use the telephone to send messages' to 'You can use your mind'," Satter says.

It was one of those books, "The Science of Getting Rich," by the long-forgotten Wallace D. Wattles, that Byrne's daughter handed her one day in 2004, when she was struggling with her various setbacks—the recent death of her father and a budget overrun on a series, "Sensing Murder," she was producing for Australian television. (She was a longtime producer on an Australian version of "The Tonight Show," and her company was behind a reality series about marriage proposals called "Marry Me.") Wattles's book struck such a chord with Byrne that she plunged into a crash course in Western, Eastern, ancient and modern thought, devouring "hundreds" of books and articles in just two and a half weeks. "That was in December," she told NEWSWEEK. "In January I told my team we were going to make the greatest film in history to date. They thought I'd gone mad." Inspired, she flew to the States in July 2005 and began lining up people to interview; the film was finished six months later and she began trying to

find an Australian network to air it. The top-rated Nine Network was intrigued by her proposal, but the finished film struck Len Downs, the program manager, as just "a whole range of talking heads giving their basis of the secret of life." (It eventually ran in Australia just a few weeks ago, and, says Downs, it didn't do all that well.)

But armed with the law of attraction, Byrne was confident things would work out. A Web company just blocks from her office in Melbourne had a technology for distributing streaming video over the Internet. Last March, her site (<http://thesecret.tv>) began selling downloads and DVDs, one of which found its way to Cynthia Black, president of the New Age-oriented publishing house Beyond Words. Black, who had recently entered into a relationship with Atria, saw its potential; by late November the book was in the stores and soon after got its first break when Ellen DeGeneres featured it on her show. By the time Oprah ran her first segment on it, on Feb. 8, it was already a huge success.

Byrne herself seems nonplused by her success, and remains a somewhat elusive figure; she is sparing with interviews and didn't even appear on the second of the two hours Oprah devoted to "The Secret." Her family in Australia said they were told by Rhonda not to talk to reporters, although her mother, Irene Izon, did offer this assessment to NEWSWEEK: "The thing is that Rhonda just wants to bring happiness to everybody. That's the reason it all began. She just wants everybody to be happy."

And to give her her due, she might actually be achieving some of that. There is nothing, in principle, wrong with thinking about what makes you happy. Here is someone she did make happy: Cheryl Cornell-Powers, 59, a Chicago training consultant, who saw Byrne on "Oprah" and then watched the film. She discounted the idea of curing one's own cancer, but liked the segments that emphasize gratitude over resentment. "We look at our money and say, 'What fun it would be to go out to dinner to places that are on our budget,' not, 'We can't do this because we're on a budget.'" Even a serious academic like Harvard psychologist Carol Kauffman is willing to credit the idea that you can change your life by consciously directing your thoughts in a positive direction. "Basically, it's chaos theory," she says. "I don't think you can actually attract things to you. But if you're profoundly open to opportunity, then when ambiguous events occur, you notice them. I think what positive thinking does is raise your consciousness to possibilities so they can snag your attention. We're starting to see some empirical studies on that now."

Of course, that's a long way from the simple model of Ask-Believe-Receive. In most people's lives, positive thought leads to success only through the transforming medium of action. For obvious reasons, this is a much less popular message. "The Secret" dubiously appropriates a number of historical figures to illustrate the law of attraction. Beethoven was probably bipolar; Newton ruminated obsessively over personal salvation; Einstein derided quantum entanglement as "spooky action at a distance." Martin Luther King Jr. is enlisted as author of an epigram about taking a staircase one step at a time. King certainly could visualize. But he also knew better than to sit back and wait for the law of attraction to send down justice; he went out and worked for it. And there's no secret to that.

*With Matthew Philips in New York, Mary Carmichael in Boston, Karen Springen in Chicago and Kendall Hill in Sydney*

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