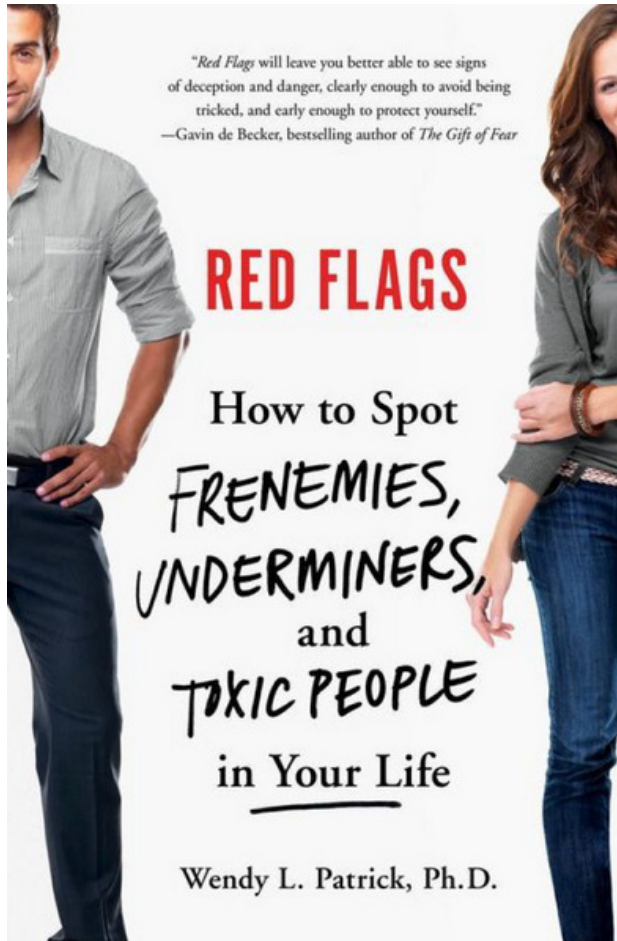


'Red Flags' insightful

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"Red Flags: How to Spot Frenemies, Underminers and Toxic People in Your Life," by Wendy L. Patrick. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015. 320 pages, \$26.99.



“I have prosecuted scores of educated, credentialed members of society who deceived, defrauded, manipulated and exploited friends, family members and employers for financial gain – using their status as a shield to deflect suspicion of wrongdoing,” Wendy L. Patrick explains in “Perceiving is Believing: The Comfort of Credibility,” the third chapter in “Red Flags: How to Spot Frenemies, Underminers and Toxic People in Your Life,” her primer on how to identify and avoid people who do not have your best interests at heart. “I have also prosecuted intrafamilial crimes such as incest and spousal rape – crimes that are already hard to prove due to the lack of independent witnesses – that are made even more challenging when the perpetrator holds a position of prestige in the community.”

I ran across this book at Barnes & Noble Booksellers when I ventured there with my youngest son to spend a little quality time a few weeks ago. Keaton’s initial reaction to my choice of reading material was, “Why that book?” The more I thought about it, the more I realized he had posed a very legitimate question – and one capable of generating a great deal of thoughtful reflection and discussion.

For starters, the subject matter is something to which we can all relate. Who among us has not been betrayed by someone we thought was a friend? In many instances, the damage done is only temporary and passes rather quickly. In other situations, the harm inflicted is more enduring and can cause us heartache and anguish for decades. Indeed, the author has tapped into something universal to the human experience with this insightful and eye-opening volume.

A deputy district attorney and team leader in the sex crimes and stalking division of San Diego’s District Attorney’s Office, Patrick is also co-chair of the Statewide California District Attorneys Association Sexually Violent Predator Committee and the Human Trafficking Committee. She has a baccalaureate degree in psychology from UCLA, a master of divinity degree from Bethel Seminary San Diego, a J.D. from California Western School of Law and a Ph.D. from the University of Wales

Trinity Saint David. Her previous books include the revised and updated “Reading People: How to Understand People and Predict Their Behavior” and “Using the Psychology of Attraction in Christian Outreach: Lessons from the Dark Side.”

Patrick draws extensively from her background in the criminal justice system. The examples and case studies she provides run the full gamut from the mildly amusing to the deeply troubling. A central theme running through the book is the notion that looks can be and often are deceiving. Witness the following excerpt from “Reading Red Flags: Four Ways to Separate the Dangerous from the Desirable,” the second chapter: “The first love letter I received from a criminal defendant was from a man who had killed and dismembered several victims. I did not suspect this caliber of criminal because his flowery letter read like Shakespearean poetry. The most brutal murder I ever prosecuted – committed by smashing the victim’s head off with a rock, was perpetrated by a quiet man, slight of build, who never even peeked at the jury during the trial.”

As you may have surmised, the writing style leans toward the explicit, so this one is not for the faint of heart. These kinds of anecdotes and vignettes saturate this helpful handbook for spotting manipulation and keeping clear of those who have the potential to hurt others on a number of levels. Patrick obviously kept meticulous notes on all the court cases she has been involved with over the years; the level of detail she provides in describing the various ways “bad” people use their innate knowledge and skills to abuse and take advantage of those around them is astonishing.

“Red Flags” is extensively researched, with 33 pages of end notes and a 17-page bibliography at the conclusion of the 14 chapters that comprise the main text. The writing style is a perfectly-balanced combination of description, analysis and interpretation. Patrick drills down to the core motivations of the wide assortment of characters that populate her treatise on how to stay secure in a world where too many people see others as fair game in their unscrupulous quest for self-gratification.

The good news is that the book is not just about warning signs and how to avoid the pitfalls that lie in wait for all of us as we navigate our homes, workplaces, shopping centers, restaurants, gyms and other places where interactions are inevitable. The feature I found most redeeming about “Red Flags” was the categorical strategies for recognizing when someone has targeted us for mistreatment and the concrete and sophisticated responses recommended during these times.

Reflect on the following admonition from the eighth chapter, “Craving Excitement: The Call of the Wild,” to be wary of those who seem to have a penchant for living on the edge: “While there are plenty of wholesome, safe sensation seekers in the world, sensation seeking is not always a positive trait. It is linked with risk taking and dangerous activities, ranging from extreme sports to unsafe sexual practices, engaged in in order to achieve the desired level of stimulation. The highest amount of sensation seeking is found in people with anti-social personalities.”

“Sensation seeking is also linked to impulsivity, which can be manifest through focus of attention,” she writes. “People in an impulsive state are influenced by information that attracts their attention and are often unable to resist temptation, which can lead to risky behavior.”

I’ll bet everyone reading this review can name at least one person for whom this book would be an ideal gift. And based on the life trajectories of some individuals I know, I’m going to recommend that a few people memorize it cover to cover. I recommend this one highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.