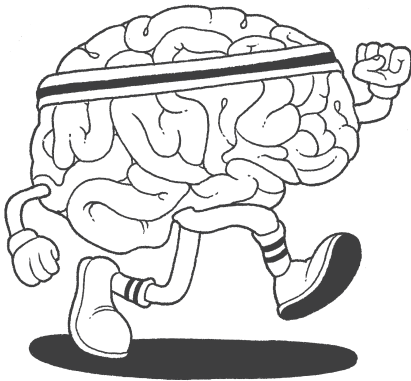


YOU ARE AWESOME

Matthew Syed



ILLUSTRATED BY

Toby Triumph

wren
& rook

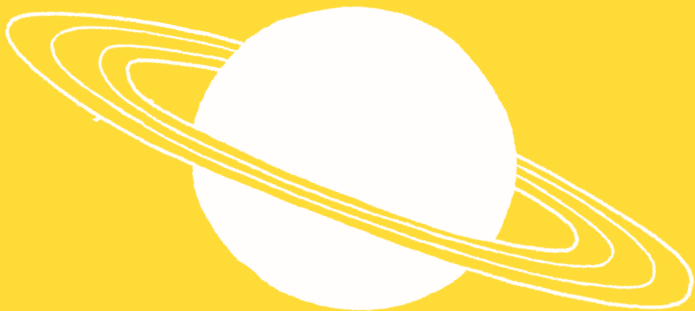




ALL



ABOUT



AWWE
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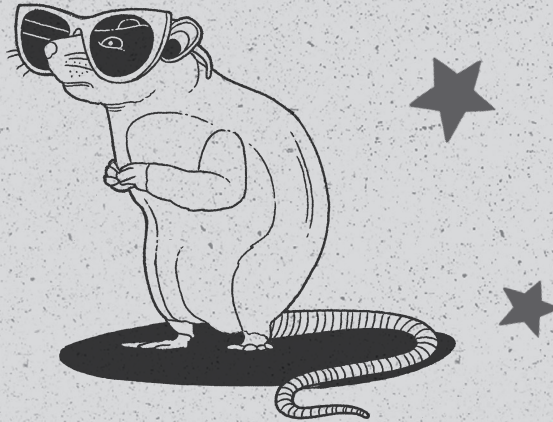


Getting good at stuff is not as hard as you might think. In fact, anyone can get (much) better at almost anything

**BUT YOU'RE
BUSY, RIGHT?**

Tell me about it. There's so much to do – homework, sports, time with friends, keeping up with Instagram ... Finding the time to **do** everything can be a challenge. Trying to be **good** at everything can be even harder.

That's where this book comes in. It's going to let you into the secret to being awesome, and tell you things that people at the top of their game know about success. If you've got a friend who seems to ace exams with no effort, or a brother who is annoyingly better than you at tennis, or even if you just feel like you're not quite sure what you're best at – then this book is for you.



What's involved? Well, we're going to get up close and personal with success, delve inside our brains to understand how we learn new skills, and equip you with strategies to build your confidence and fulfil your potential. We'll bust some myths along the way about what it takes to stand out from the crowd, share some stories of how super-successful people made it to the top, and provide all the support and advice you need to achieve your personal awesomeness.

So, if you're up for the challenge then let's get started ... We haven't got any time to waste if you want to be an awesome vlogger, pianist, physicist, tennis ace, chess grandmaster, deep sea diver, heart surgeon, prime minister, computer hacker, MI6 agent, footballer, mathematician, archaeologist, teacher, plumber, barrister, barista, chef, travel writer, dog groomer, TV presenter, basketball player, rock star, astronaut or cheese sprayer (no, me neither on that last one, but apparently it is a thing, and if you're going to be one, you might as well be awesome at it).

Oh, and by the way, that perfect selfie, that great maths result, or the amazing piano performance ...? They were lying if they said they didn't practise.



FROM

KID

AVERAGE

TO

KID

AWESOME



7

*Imagine a very ordinary kid. Living in a completely ordinary street. On the outskirts of a totally ordinary town. You can probably see where we're going with this already. This kid (let's call him **Kid A**) probably spends his weekends hanging out in the ordinary shopping centre, and then goes home to eat an ordinary dinner in his ordinary house. Yep, you've got it. It's all fairly, um, ordinary ...*

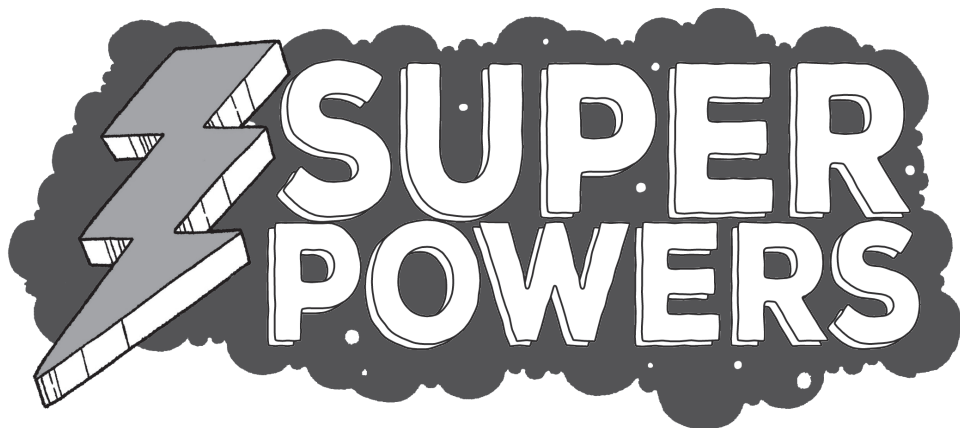


As for the town's famous sons and daughters – you know, people born in the area who went on to do great things and change the world – well, there really aren't many. Apart from a TV weatherman and a guy who might – no one is quite sure – have invented a crucial bit of the tumble dryer in the 1980s. But that's it. Honestly, this place is duller than a dull day in **Dullsville**.

So, I hear you asking, why are we beginning this book here? What's the point of zoning in on **Kid A**, in his ordinary bunk-bed in his ordinary bedroom? Well, that's exactly the point, **Kid A** IS ordinary. Just like any other kid. Perhaps just like you? But something amazing is about to happen.

**KID A'S LIFE IS ABOUT
TO CHANGE. FOREVER.**

Now, he isn't going to be bitten by a radioactive spider or struck by a thunderbolt that gives him ...



Instead, returning from school one day, **Kid A**'s mum and dad are outside the house waiting for him.

They are up to something. **Kid A** is sure of it. His mum is hopping backwards and forwards like an over-excited frog and his dad is smiling. Yes, smiling. And **Kid A** knows that this can only mean one thing. They've got some kind of surprise in store.

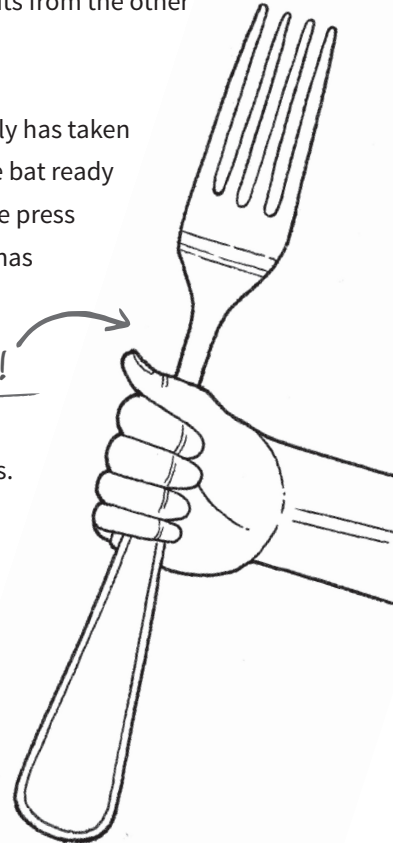
◦ 'Close your eyes', squeals his mum mid-leap.
◦ **Kid A** complies, but inside is seriously hoping this doesn't
◦ turn out to be anything like the last 'surprise' they pulled.
◦ The one with the trampoline, which ended with an
◦ embarrassing call-out to the fire brigade ...
◦ With great excitement, Dad hauls open the garage door.
◦ 'Right, you can look now!'
◦ For a moment, **Kid A** thinks he's missing something. His
◦

◦ parents stand beside him, beaming with pride.
◦ 'Um, it's a table', says **Kid A**, sounding puzzled.
◦ 'I know it looks like an old table!' said his dad springing
◦ forward, but SEE, it's a table tennis table!
◦ Before **Kid A** can respond, his mum thrusts a table tennis
◦ bat and ball into his hand, and before he can say 'ping pong
◦ paddle', he's facing his dad across the net.
◦ 'What are you waiting for?' his mum shrieks, now close to
◦ a mild frenzy. His dad is also looking positively dangerous.
◦ Like he might injure himself or someone else in the close
◦ vicinity. He's doing wild warm-up stretches with his legs
◦ and bending into positions that **Kid A** has never seen before
◦ (except maybe the ones you might see in a pretzel).
◦ 'Come on, let's have a go!' his dad shouts from the other
◦ side of the table.

Kid A stares over the net at his dad. His evening really has taken an unexpected turn. But in spite of this, he holds the bat ready and waits for his dad to serve ... and this is where we press the pause button on the story. Why? Because **Kid A** has reached a big fork in his life.

*No, not THAT
Kind of fork!*

The kind where he faces a choice between two paths. One path will see him carry on living his ordinary, unremarkable life. The other path will take him on an **awesome and incredible journey**, and it all comes down to what happens next.



But let's save the best until last, and begin with the path that leads to **Kid A** becoming ...



KID AVERAGE

OK, back to the story. Concentrating hard, **Kid Average** waits (slightly longer than he thought he might have to. His dad went back into the house to get his lucky sports headband). Next thing he knows, the ball comes whizzing across the net like a bullet. And **Kid Average** misses it. Completely. Well, that was unlucky, he thinks. Dad seems good at this. Maybe he just got lucky though. Or maybe it was those stretches (or that headband). **Kid Average** tries again. This time, the ball slices sideways, bounces off the table and spins out of the garage door.

◦ ‘Never mind’, says his dad. ‘Try again.’
◦
◦ Turning a fancy shade of beetroot, **Kid Average** is not
◦ exactly enjoying this.
◦
◦ He makes another attempt at serving. This time, the ball
◦ scrapes over the net, only for his father to return the serve
◦ with such force that the ball comes back at him like a
◦ missile. It connects with his end of the table and then hits
◦ him full force on the elbow.
◦
◦ ‘Come on, buddy!’ Shouts his dad, still jumping about
◦ like a pro. ‘You can do better than that.’

Kid Average collects the ball from the garage floor and considers asking for the headband to use as a bandage. He shuffles back to the table but his heart just isn’t in it. As far as he’s concerned, he could face further humiliation from his dad (who seems to have found his inner Olympian) or be in his bedroom with his games console. Just then, the console wins.

◦ ‘I’ve had enough’, he says, setting the bat on the table.
◦ ‘But thanks anyway.’

For a while, his parents blame each other. Or rather his mum blames his dad for being too competitive, but it quickly becomes clear that **Kid Average** just doesn't have the **fire** in him to take up the challenge.

◦ 'But I'm no good at it,' protests **Kid Average** when
◦ his dad suggests a game the following week. And, to be fair,
◦ his bruises have only just faded from the last time ...

◦ 'Why don't you practise with Andrew?' his mum
◦ suggests. This was **Kid Average's** worst nightmare. Never
◦ mind his dad, his brother was more competitive than Mo
◦ Farah in the 10,000 m final. There was no way he wanted a
◦ pasting from that muppet, who was bound to tell everyone
◦ at school about it, too.

◦ 'No thanks', sighs **Kid Average**, who takes himself off
◦ to his bedroom. 'He's bound to be better than me anyway.'



Time goes by. His dad takes up golf and the table-tennis table in the garage begins to gather dust. His mum piles his dad's new golf clubs on it for a while, before she gets fed up with the lack of space. Eventually she takes it apart, stacks it to one side, and sells it to their next-door neighbour for an absolute bargain.

Meanwhile, **Kid Average** continues to shuffle through life. His school reports suggest he could try harder, but it never happens. In his eyes, challenges are obstacles, and definitely best avoided. Instead, he ignores his parents' pleas to get out more and rarely leaves his room. There, with his console in hand and snacks within easy reach, he sets about, well ... doing ...

NOTHING.

It's fair to say that **Kid Average** is living up to his name.

But one day he's surfing through sports videos, looking for something to pass the time, when he comes across a live stream of the National Table Tennis Championship Finals. Seeing this brings his not-so-amazing ping-pong debut back to him. The match is taking place inside a huge hall, watched by hundreds of spectators. The camera zooms in on the player with the ball in hand. He's totally focused and completely calm, as if perhaps he's been working towards this moment for a long time. **Kid Average** sits up straight. His attention is glued to the screen. Because the player on the screen in front of him, preparing to serve for the championship, looks strikingly familiar ...

Just being awesome!



KID AWESOME

Now let's rewind to the point where **Kid A's** story reached that fork in the path. He's facing his dad across the net, remember? **Kid A's** first attempt at hitting the ball goes seriously badly wrong. The second try is worse and the third attempt results in a bruise the size of the table-tennis ball on his elbow. Unlike **Kid Average**, however, he doesn't give up.

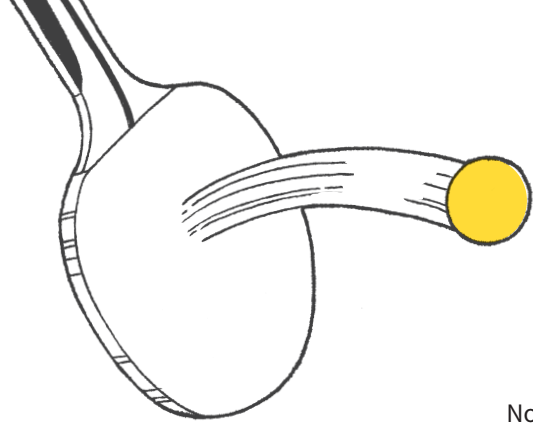
Instead he feels some kind of knot in his stomach. At first, he thinks it might be the two chocolate bars he had at afternoon break. But that's not it. It's something else. He realises that he wants to put up a fight, to get a bit better, and to show his dad that he can win at least one point off him.

OK, so he knows he's got some improving to do. Actually, that is the understatement of the millennium. He has got absolutely stacks of improving to do, but instead of putting down the bat and burying his head back into his laptop, he tells himself that, if he tries, in time he might just do a bit better. After all, what's the worst that could happen? And at the very least his mum might dial down the excitable frog moves. So, rather than quitting right there and right then, he picks up the ball and tries again.

*And again,
And again,
And again,
And again...*

(OK, so you get the point ...)

An hour later, he's yet to score a point against his dad. But he's quite a lot better, there have been no further ping pong-induced injuries and he's learning from the experience. Every now and then, he even



surprises himself with a half-decent return serve, and there was a moment when he almost put a shot past his dad ...

Now admittedly, **Kid A** is not going to win any prizes (yet), but he's making minor improvements and is definitely a little bit better than totally useless. And what's more, he's quite enjoying it. It turns out that this surprise was one of his parents' better ideas.

While **Kid Average** has decided he's no good, given up completely and gone to bed, **Kid Awesome** is determined and sticks to it. He **really** wants to improve. Not just by a little bit, but as far as he can take things. **Kid Awesome** is set on becoming the best table-tennis player he can, and he realises that this all comes down to how often he can get in the garage to practise. He starts to love the game. So much so that he has even started thinking about asking his brother to help him practise.

Strangely, **Kid Awesome** has stopped minding that his brother might be better than him. Well, that's not quite true. He minds (a bit) less. Because the fact that his brother is better forces **Kid Awesome** to work even harder at the game. Together, the pair put in so many hours at the table that their dad has to check on them to make sure that everyone is still in one piece. But thanks to spending so much time with a bat in hand, **Kid Awesome** starts to learn from his mistakes, and picks up skills that no amount of stretching from his dad or brother could ever hope to match.

Word spreads through the street that table tennis is pretty good fun. And what happens in an ordinary town, when someone gets something new? Yep, you guessed it. Everyone wants one. Before **Kid Awesome** knows it, the whole area is **wild for ping pong**. The table-tennis club at school is inundated with new members.

By now, with plenty of practice (after school, most weekends and holidays), **Kid Awesome** is beyond good. He joins a regional team on a winning streak and then, to the delight of his parents (their table-tennis table purchase now seeming like a 24-carat gold idea), his brother, and everyone who has played a role in this long journey, he makes it to the final of the National Championships ...

The match is streamed live. **Kid Awesome** finds himself under the spotlights and under pressure, but he's ready for this moment. He's been training hard, and all his preparations are going to plan. It's a tough match, his greatest challenge yet. **Kid Awesome's** opponent proves to be skilful and a bit cunning, but he doesn't lose his cool. He battles hard and finds himself at match point. All of a sudden, with the audience holding their breath, he realises just how far he's come. For years now, he's been getting up early to practise, and loving the challenge of improving his game. With this in mind he serves for the match and ...

   **WINS!**  

KIDAWESOME punches the air. It's a ...



DREAM COME TRUE



And that's the thing about dreams – they can come true. But unlike all those fairy tales we hear about, they don't happen by accident.

That's where the book in your hands comes in. It's all about how we turn our dreams into something we really can achieve.

Now, we're not talking about those fantasy type of dreams where your school is invaded during a zombie apocalypse. We aren't even talking about major dreams – you know, the one where you're receiving an **Oscar** for directing a Hollywood blockbuster or you've been awarded the **Nobel Peace Prize** for your services to international diplomacy.

NO, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THE DREAMS YOU HAVE OF LANDING THAT PART IN THE SCHOOL PLAY, OF (FINALLY) GETTING INTO THE ATHLETICS TEAM, OF HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES IN CHOIR PRACTICE OR EVEN IMPROVING SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE NEXT MATHS TEST.

Whatever your ambition, even if it seems out of your reach right now, this book is all about how to fulfil your potential and achieve it. This might seem like a bold promise, but there's one more thing you need to know about **Kid Awesome**. That boy who chose the path to becoming a champion?

IT WAS ME.

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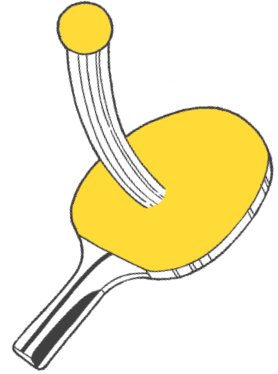
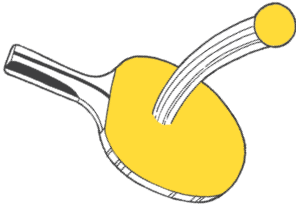


My name is Matthew. Some years ago, I became the British number one table-tennis player. I even represented Great Britain in the Olympics, which is worthy of a fist-bump, right? Now, it would be very easy for me to pretend this was down to a natural talent. I could boast that I was born with lightning-quick reactions, but that would be a fib. Yes, when I won the crown I had a reputation for speed, gutsiness and quick wits, but I cannot honestly say that I arrived in this world with a ping-pong bat in my hand. My background is as unremarkable as I described. I was very average. An OK kid, but with nothing to hint that I could become an elite sportsperson. Nothing to suggest that I could be **AWESOME**.

The truth is I had to learn the skills I needed to become the best. Not only that, I had to start from scratch. Yes, my parents were table-tennis fans, which gave me a small head start over my friends, but I had to practise with passion and dedication to learn my skills. It was hard work, with a lot of setbacks on the way, but I gained valuable lessons from every moment.

So, let's forget those types of stories that we hear about people being 'born gifted' or 'naturally talented' when it comes to explaining how someone got really good at something. I'm here to reveal the truth, and the fact that it's possible for anyone to get really good at (almost) anything – and that includes **YOU**.

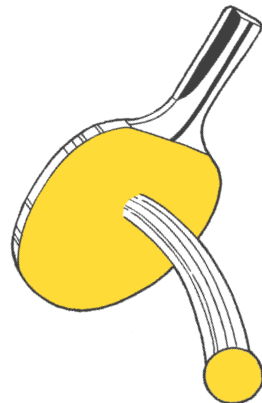
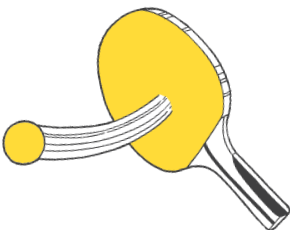
So, let's break down the factors that earned me the crown as the table-tennis prince. And I'm warning you now, it's all about grit, not glamour ...



1 THE TABLE

My parents are still unable to explain why they decided to fill their garage with a full-size table-tennis table – a super-deluxe model with gold lettering, since you ask. Even so, I can be sure there weren't many kids that had one, which gave me a head start. It didn't make me instantly better than anyone else, though, I simply started practising earlier than most. As time went by, people began to say I was 'a genius with the bat' and that I had a '**natural talent**'. But they hadn't seen the table in my garage. And they definitely hadn't seen how many rainy Sundays and evenings after school I'd spent in there, tirelessly batting the ball back and forth in an effort to improve.

It makes you think, doesn't it? Is there someone awesome that you think is just naturally brilliant at something? I wonder what they've got in their garage...?



2 MY OLDER BROTHER

My brother is awesome. And luckily he is also hugely competitive. True story – he used to make me play snooker with three balls missing from the table. That way, if I beat him, he could tell his friends that he hadn't really lost. He reckoned it wasn't an actual match if some of the balls were missing. Crazy times.

But it wasn't just snooker, he wanted to be the best at table tennis too. And he was awesome (did I mention that?). So, he became my 'ready to go at any moment' kind of practice partner. He was as available as a **24-hour McDonalds**, so with a table in the garage we would duel before school, and spend hours in the evenings whipping the ball back and forth. I can't lie, I secretly wanted to dominate each match and leave my brother begging for mercy, and I've no doubt he wanted to do the same to me. So, we battled it out together, testing each other's reflexes and experimenting with new moves. Without realising it, he and I put in thousands of hours of practice, and it showed in our razor-sharp skills.

3 A TEACHER WITH A PASSION FOR PING PONG!

Chances are you can name a teacher who loves their subject. When they're all fired up about sharing their knowledge, or know how to make you laugh as you learn, their enthusiasm is infectious and before you know it, you're enjoying it as much as they are.

At school, Mr Charters was a good teacher but it was his passion for

sport that had the biggest impact on me. He had bright eyes, a black beard and a wonderful way of encouraging you to give it your all. **'Life is about being the best you can possibly be'**, he said. While he ran almost all of the after-school clubs, it was table tennis that meant the most to him. He also happened to be one of the nation's top coaches, and a talent scout on the lookout for players with potential to learn and improve. It meant that he encouraged anyone who showed the slightest interest in the sport to check out the local table-tennis club. Its name was Omega.

4 THE LOCAL CLUB

Imagine a super-exclusive centre for the finest table-tennis players in the country ... and then forget it. Despite having 'mega' in its title, Omega was anything but. It was pretty much just a run-down hut with a couple of tables. It was very basic; freezing cold in winter and sweltering in summer, but a **magnet** for young players like me.

Once you had demonstrated that you knew a chop from a forehand slice (technical table-tennis shots rather than cuts of raw meat, in case you were concerned) you would be granted the ultimate honour: a key to Omega. This wasn't just any key, but one that opened the door day or night to the table-tennis palace (for 'palace' read 'shack') of my hometown.

I'd like to say that I had the honour of being the only keyholder, but in reality, most of the kids in the streets around mine also had one. As a result, the local area began to boast an unusually high number of **prize-winning** young table-tennis players.

Now here's something to consider ... When I played table tennis for England many of the top players in the country (men and women) came from my street in Reading. Not the surrounding area, but my **ACTUAL STREET**. That is quite weird, don't you think? About as weird as the whole cast of Harry Potter being born in the same cul-de-sac in Chelmsford. Or is it? (They weren't by the way – the Harry Potter cast – I just made that up to illustrate my point.)

You see, it all comes down to how you become awesome at stuff. Which (remember) is what this book is all about. Lots of people seem to think that you need to be born with certain 'gifts', or 'talents'. But if that is true, why were so many of the '**gifted**' and '**talented**' table tennis players born in my ordinary street in Reading? It doesn't make any sense.

It only starts to make sense once you realise that it wasn't their 'gifts' or 'talents' that were making all these kids so much better at table tennis than the kids ten streets away. Instead, it was their access to Omega, to Mr Charters and all of the hours they spent practising together. Quite simply, the kids ten streets away didn't do that.

Now, table tennis might not be your thing, and that's OK, we're all drawn to different interests and hobbies. At the same time, rest assured that this book isn't simply about getting **gold medals** or **excellent exam grades**. Oh no. Whether you want to master street magic, pull off awesome skateboard stunts or bake the perfect cupcake, knowing that you don't have to be born 'gifted' at these things to be good at them is really important. Once you know that you can develop your skills with practice, determination and

(this one is optional) an annoyingly competitive older brother, it just makes a whole lot more sense to give something a try.

So, whatever you want to be awesome at, this book is here with strategies, hints and tips to fulfilling your potential and making it happen.



All you have to do is take one step at a time, beginning by turning the page ...

