

Dollars and change

By Caroline Leavitt, Globe Correspondent | February 21, 2010

Looking for some advice you can really take to the bank? To understand money matters, you might want to invest in **“The Cartoon Introduction to Economics: Volume One: Microeconomics”** by cartoonist Grady Klein and economist Yoram Bauman, which not only helps clarify a difficult subject for students and lay people, but is also uproariously funny, practical, and relevant.

Understanding economics can help you win that Persian rug on eBay (use automatic bidding to shade your bid) and explain part of the reason even healthy people can't get health insurance at a reasonable price (companies can't predict who will be sick and who will stay healthy, so they employ the theory of adverse selection to charge more in order to cover the expected costs of everyone). Klein's exuberantly puckish drawings use pirates, cavemen, hippies, and mad scientists to make complex economic concepts like risk and game theory and competitive markets a hoot, while Bauman, an entertainer who explains the economy at comedy clubs and universities across the country, makes the topic so cool and entertaining, you'll want to pre-order the upcoming Volume Two.

Once you've got this basic understanding of economics, you may want to grab **“One Year to an Organized Financial Life: From Your Bills to Your Bank Account, Your Home to Your Retirement, the Week-by-Week Guide to Achieving Financial Peace of Mind”** by certified financial adviser Regina Leeds. A nuts-and-bolts guide to organizing your files, paying your bills, and cutting costs and clutter, the book uses what Leeds calls a Zen approach, creating an environment and financial system that not only nurtures, but offers week-by-week routines and habits-of-the-month (like writing expenditures down) that can help you control your finances. Her advice is simple (create a set place for items that are always being lost), practical (check your phone bill because you may be paying for services you don't need), and essential (she includes a template for a living will). Calm and empowering, this handy guide is so well thought-out that just leafing through the pages might make you feel more in control.

Finances can be an equal-opportunity thorn in both male and female sides, but two books opt for an intimate “just among us girlfriends” slant. **“Get Financially Naked: How to Talk Money With Your Honey”** by personal finance experts Manisha Thakor and Sharon Kedar advises women on the havoc poor financial planning can wreak on a relationship. Women often avoid discussing finances with their partners, say the authors, because they find it stressful, boring, or awkward, but financial compatibility is part of being a couple. The authors guide you through getting your financial house in order, right down to how much home you can really afford, where your money drains are, and how to talk to your significant other so you're both on the same page about saving, spending, and your financial futures. Frank, witty, and filled with quizzes and worksheets, this invaluable little guide reveals that when it comes to using four letter words you really need both “love” and “save.”

Although being called a bitch every few pages may be a little off-putting to some readers, author Rosalyn Hoffman in **“Bitches on a Budget: Sage Advice for Surviving Tough Times in Style”** means it to be an empowering term for tough-as-manicured-nails women who know what they want and aren't afraid to go out and get it. A former buyer for Bonwit Teller and Lord & Taylor, Hoffman advises women on how to be both fiscally responsible and utterly fabulous, with tips that are thrifty, ingenious, and still manage to feel like indulgences. Shop for looks, not labels, she urges, by cruising expensive stores for styles and then finding facsimiles at cheaper places. Color your crowning glory at home or trade in cabs for car sharing, public transportation, or bikes. Forget pricey theater tickets and hit free cultural events. “Bitches on a Budget” is all about living in style without breaking the bank.

Dealing with money can carry all sorts of baggage, but those stresses don't have to rule and ruin your life. **“Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation”** by Daniel J. Siegel, UCLA clinical professor of psychiatry, explores how our emotional responses are not as hard-wired as we think they are. Siegel promotes what he calls “focused control,” a method to sense and then alter emotional storms. By paying attention to a difficult moment without being swept up in judgment, you can begin to realize that

emotions are just neural firings that you can keep in check. Full of remarkable case histories of people who used this system to control borderline personality disorder, depression, and addiction, this revolutionary book can make you look at your feelings differently, one investment that can pay untold dividends.