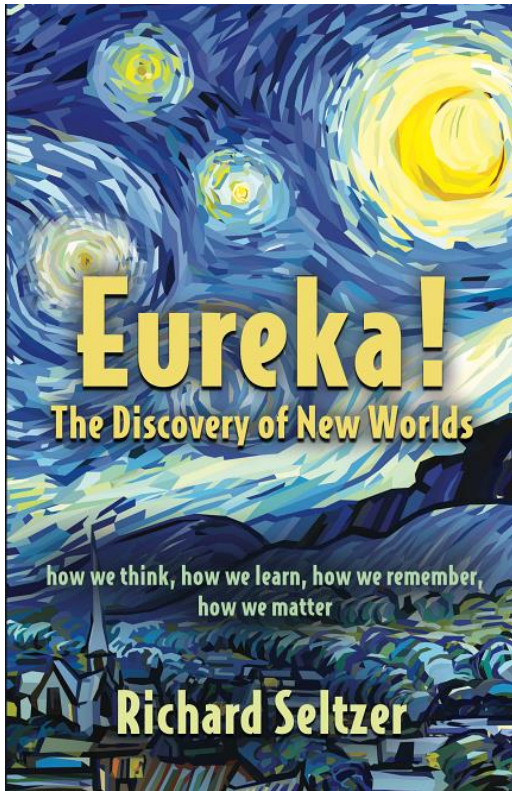
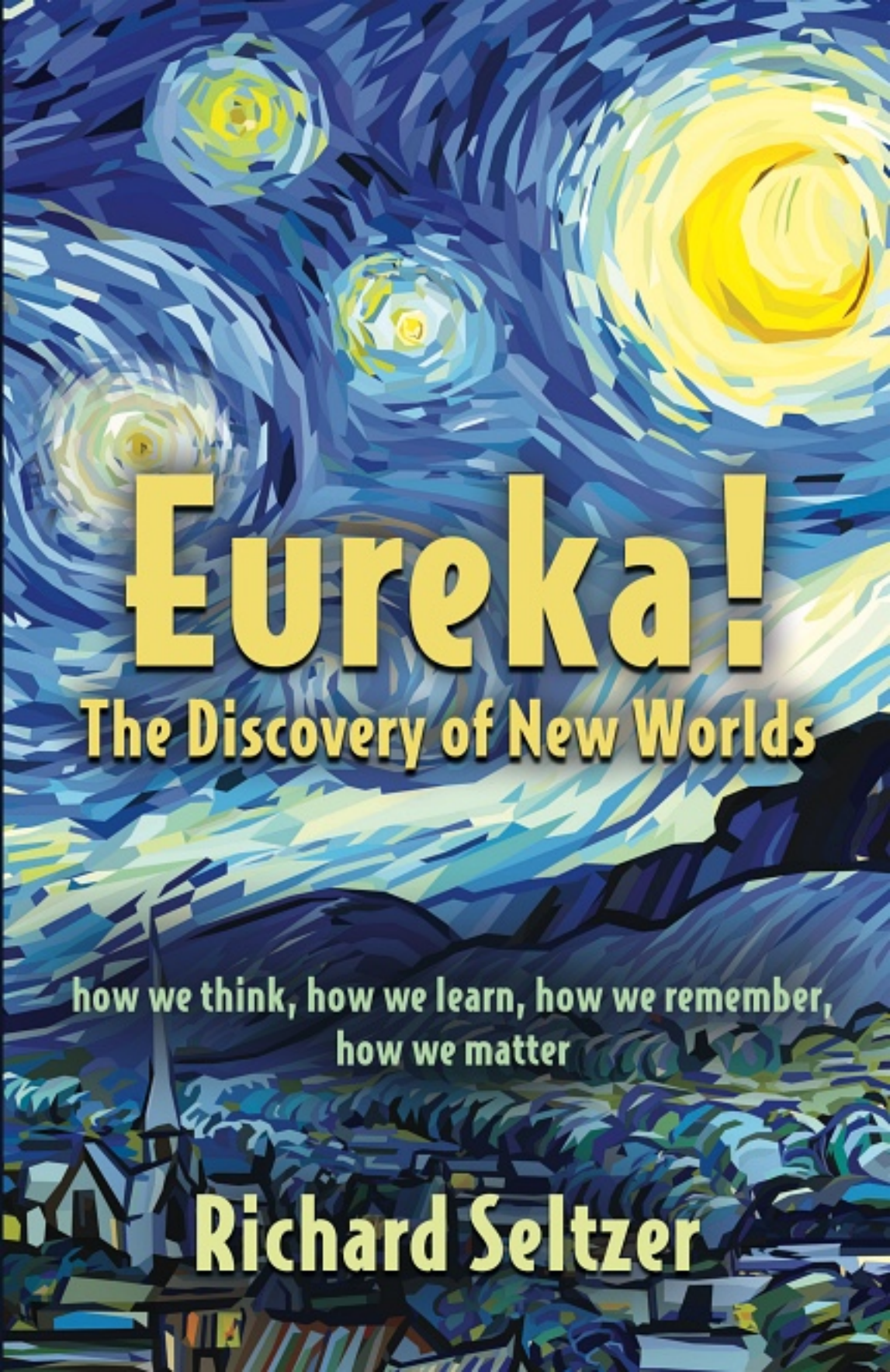




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Eureka! The Discovery of New Worlds:
how we think, how we learn, how we remember, how we matter
By Richard Seltzer

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Eureka!

The Discovery of New Worlds

how we think, how we learn, how we remember,
how we matter

Richard Seltzer

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Chapter One:

The Alchemist's Workshop

Mr. Cat

When I was three, a stray kitten came to our porch and I fetched a saucer of milk for him. He came back and I served him again. Soon he wouldn't leave, which delighted me. I named him "Mr. Cat" and picked him up and carried him everywhere. Mom wanted me to back off. She said I was smothering him, that a cat is like a person. "Imagine how you'd feel if someone held you tight like that and wouldn't let go of you." I couldn't imagine that.

Then perhaps by chance, but perhaps by genius, Mom told me the story of *Gulliver's Travels*. There are other worlds. In some of them people are much smaller than us—like kittens compared to us. And in some, people are like giants, and we're like kittens to them.

The next time I was in the backyard talking to Mr. Cat and holding him tight, I imagined I saw a giant looming over the neighbor's fence, staring down at me. I was afraid he might pick me up and carry me off, and smother me with love as I had Mr. Cat. I dropped Mr. Cat, ran into the house, and after that treated Mr. Cat with more respect and distance.

My Storied Past

In nursery school, I was cast in the role of the Troll in *The Billy Goats' Gruff*. The story was much more fun from the inside than it was when told to me. I still remember hearing the goat hooves on the bridge above me and scaring the goats away with my deep loud voice.

Other stories became bedtime favorites, told by Mom, with unpredictable variations, sometimes accompanied by shadows on the wall:

Goldilocks and the Three Bears—What to Goldilocks seemed natural and fun was very different to the bears, especially Baby Bear, whose bed was broken. I knew how he felt. I rooted for him.

Hansel and Gretel—I, too, might go for a walk where I was told not to go. And I might leave a trail of breadcrumbs so I could find my way back. I could make a mistake like that unless I thought about what might happen next, then next. Imagining isn't just for make-believe—it's how we see ahead.

Little Red Riding Hood—The Wolf pretended to be the Grandmother. Anyone could pretend to be anyone else, no matter how far-fetched, and could pretend to be someone pretending to be someone else. No limits.

The Three Little Pigs—The pigs were brothers, I presume—raised and taught the same way. And they all faced the same wolf. But one was much smarter than the others. Not

the smartness of knowing facts. He saw things differently. What seemed natural to him wouldn't occur to the other two.

Alice in Wonderland—There were pencil marks on the doorpost by my bedroom. I could see how much I was growing. I had seen photos of Dad when he was my age. I knew that one day—the sooner the better—I'd be as tall as he was, maybe taller. So it was easy for me to imagine someone changing from very small to very big in an instant. And I could imagine being too tall to go through a door, then suddenly too short to reach the key on the table.

Rip Van Winkle—The world changes. I don't notice from day to day, like I don't notice I'm growing unless I make marks on the doorpost. But if I were to fall asleep for twenty years, I'd wake up in a different world; and to everyone else, I'd be a different person. And perhaps to myself as well.

Sleeping Beauty—The life we live depends not just on where we are, but also on when we are. Sleeping Beauty was lucky that a wicked witch put her to sleep for a hundred years. If that hadn't happened, she'd have never met her Prince. She'd have died before he was born.

Rumpelstiltskin—The names of people and things aren't random. Knowing the true name of anyone or anything gives you power over it. Mind over matter. Mind matters.

I remember Mom explaining the meaning of the word "mausoleum" when it appeared in an Arabian Nights story she

was reading to me, maybe in the third grade. At some point I had graduated from stories told to me to stories Mom read to me. And she read to me every night, long after I could read for myself. That was a ritual, like kneeling and praying before climbing into bed.

She explained that a mausoleum had drawers, like a bureau, with dead bodies in them. I saw that in my mind's eye. I was there, in person, in that scene. Ever after that, I wouldn't leave a drawer open when I was alone in my room at night. And even now I hesitate to open a drawer in the dark, not because I believe in ghosts, but because that caution shaped how I perceive the world.

My Ten Cents

When I was four years old, Mom gave me a dime once a week, and I could walk to the corner drugstore and buy whatever I wanted. For a penny, I could buy a bag of hard candy. For a nickel, a candy bar. For ten cents, an ice cream cone or a comic book or a plastic cowboy or Indian on a horse.

The choice was between objects and experiences. If I bought cowboys and Indians, I could play with them over and over. And if I bought comic books, I could look at them (not read them yet) over and over. In either case, I could share or trade them with friends. If instead, I bought candy or ice cream, while the experience would be delightful, it wouldn't last. The act of enjoying it would destroy it. I would end up with nothing. Despite temptation, I almost never opted for candy or ice cream.

When my kids were young, I hoped that they would enjoy the toys and comics I had treasured at their age and had saved for them. But they showed little interest in the old stuff, caught up as they were in the new objects of popular culture that they and their friends saw advertised.

Now I value experiences. The boxes of cowboys and Indians and comic books just take up space. They're a burden to me; and, after I go, they'll be considered trash. At this stage of my life, I want to enjoy the moment rather than accumulate tangible goods. I value ephemeral beauty and pleasure.

Bottlecap Worlds

A year ago, when I included that anecdote in my book *One Family*, I thought it highlighted the contrast between the generations and between the person I was as a child and the person I am now.

But today, I see those cowboys and Indians differently. I realize that what came next encapsulates an important change in how I saw the world—a discovery, a Eureka! moment that I didn't notice when it occurred.

Like other kids my age, I saw the plastic figures as symbols rather than objects. It's bizarre that thinking that way comes so naturally to us—that in my imagination those bits of plastic were full-grown men and horses, performing for me.

That's not just a childish illusion. It's embedded in the architecture of the human mind. A toy doll can be a baby. Coins or pieces of paper or checks or records stored on computers can be "money," by which people can exchange value, rather than trading physical goods. And in special circumstances, anything can take the place of money—like *Monopoly* money in the context of that game; like plastic tokens when playing poker. And sometimes the tokens can later be converted to "real" money.

Symbols of things and symbols of symbols. We all take that for granted, just as a child takes for granted that this piece of plastic is an Indian. Perhaps he'll be more specific and call this one "Cochise" today and "Sitting Bull" tomorrow; names that only he and a few playmates know or care about.

So what I did next was "natural." It makes perfect sense, given the human talent and tendency to make symbols of anything and everything.

First I realized (without thinking about the strangeness of this transformation) that the plastic figures need not stand for cowboys and Indians. They could be other kinds of characters in other times and other places—WWII, Trojan War, sci-fi—anything. They didn't need to resemble what they stood for.

And then I made the leap that to me seemed natural but to others might seem odd: I could substitute anything for the plastic figures—something far less expensive that I had lots of. A token is just a token. Anything can be anything.

I settled on bottlecaps, which were abundant and free. So what others threw away as trash, I saved as toys. Because I eventually had over a thousand of them, I could stage huge battles on the living room floor. And, if I wished, a single bottlecap could represent a platoon, a company, or more, making it possible to stage an entire war based on what I knew from storybooks, television, and movies. And I could add sheets, blankets and pillows to shape the landscape, like the props used with my electric train set. I could build entire worlds based on my imagination.

Once I had made the leap from trash to token, it was easy to assign different roles to different types of bottlecap. First they were cowboys and Indians, like the plastic figures. With the cork side up, they were alive. Flipped over they were dead. Beer caps with aluminum on top of the cork were Indians. Soda bottle caps with just the cork were the US Cavalry. Ginger ale caps, with shiny

white on top of the cork, were captains of cavalry. Caps with the cork removed were major characters. I glued a small strip of paper with the individual's name to the bare metal. Sometimes I reenacted the Trojan War—the Indians morphing to Trojans and the cavalry to Greeks.

Sometimes I controlled the action, deciding which to flip and when. Sometimes I shook the rug underneath them and removed the dead from the battlefield.

By chance, I saved those bottlecaps. Forty years later, I sold many of them on eBay as collectibles, some for as much as \$20 a piece.

Today's junk becomes tomorrow's treasure.

The only thing that doesn't change is change itself—the only absolute truth, as my fifth grade teacher told me.

He knew everything.

Or did he?

Bang! Bang!

I was an only child, but I wasn't lonely. Sometimes I played bottlecap war games with friends who quickly caught on, like they did when we played make-believe and assumed roles of characters from western TV shows, with cowboy hats and toy guns and holsters.

The guns we used for such games could be store-bought and realistic looking, with caps that went off like gunshots when you pulled the trigger. Or we could simply imagine our hands with extended index fingers were guns and point them at each other saying "Bang! Bang!." And if friends weren't available, I'd imagine them and their choices and their actions.

I'm reminded of an incident when Tim, then a third grader, was in an afterschool program at the YMCA. One day Barb and I got a call to tell us they were kicking him out of the program for violation of their "zero-tolerance gun policy." It turned out that he and a friend were playing cops-and-robbers, pointing fingers at one another and shouting "Bang! Bang!" After a bizarre conversation with the person in charge, Tim was let off the hook. But another such serious offense would not be tolerated.

Later, when he was a freshman at Rochester Institute of Technology, Tim was reprimanded on another gun charge. He had brought to school some of the spent shell casings my Dad had brought home from his Army Reserve service and that I had played with as a kid, mixing them in with my bottlecaps. I had passed them on to Tim. They weren't live ammunition, but having

them on his desk in his dorm room was considered a serious offense.

Such are the risks of symbolism. Some people mistake the symbol for what it represents. Intending to reduce the likelihood of violence, they try to constrain what we imagine and pretend, not just what we do. But I suspect there's value in the childhood urge to fight battles and slay monsters. Our fantasies prepare us to cope with unexpected and seemingly impossible challenges.

Play Ball!

As a child, I also spent lots of time in an imaginary baseball world. When friends were available we would play a scaled-down version of the real game. We could use anything as bases and define the playing field by existing fences and natural features of the yard. We could use hardball, softball, wiffle ball, tennis ball, or rubber ball; baseball bat, plastic bat, or stick. We could have any number of players on each side so long as the numbers were equal. We might field the ball and run the bases or we might define hits and outs based on where the ball ended up and how it got there. We'd play as many innings as we had time for. We created a model of the "real game" and played by our own rules.

If no friends were available, I would throw a tennis ball against stairs. Not a wall because then the bounces would be too predictable. That would be boring. Rather, I'd throw against steps for the variety and surprise of bounces. Some would fly over my head, out of reach, for a home run. Some were catchable on the fly for an out. Some bounced and rolled on the ground to be caught smoothly for an out. Some I would stop but not catch for a single. Others would bounce past me for a double or triple. I would play both teams in succession, playing the roles of actual major league players, trying my best when throwing and catching regardless of what team I was representing.

If a friend was available, we would take turns throwing and catching. The person throwing the ball was the team at bat, and the other player was the team in the field.

When I was older, I became addicted to a board game called *All-Star Baseball*. There were cardboard disks, each bearing the name of a contemporary major-league player. The edge of each disk was partitioned into numbered segments. 1 was a home run. 5 was a triple. 10 was a strike out, etc. The spaces were sized to approximate the player's actual performance record. You put the disk on a spinner, and where the spinner stopped indicated what the player did when batting in the game. The rules of baseball applied (number of outs and innings, etc.) You could play against someone or alone, doing the spinning for both sides. I arranged the disks into teams and kept written records of the performance of individuals and teams.

In addition to the contemporary edition of the game which I got for Christmas, Dad also gave me the 1941 edition that his younger brothers had played with as kids. The board was in bad shape, but the coded cards still worked fine. So I could have teams from that era play one another. Or I could add a Babe Ruth or a Joe DiMaggio to a modern team.

I continued to play that game with myself as a teenager, making my own cards. I would consult a book of baseball statistics and use the percentages of a player's performance to determine the size of numbered segments along the edge.

World building/model building came naturally to me and was great fun. No one needed to teach me or my friends. We made up rules and modified them to match the circumstances—where we could play and how many players and what objects we could use as tokens. It went without saying that anything could stand for

anything else, just like in make-believe, where anyone could play any role.

And, of course, I made a board game of my own, modelling world history and staging wars. If you chose to be a dictator you could have a large standing army and mobilize it quickly. And if your country were a democracy, your people would defend their country better and longer. The type of your economy also mattered; as did where you stationed your troops and ships and planes. Looking back, it seems like a rudimentary version of videogames like *Civilization*.

Better Not Lose Your Marbles

For me, marbles were for playing, not collecting. You would draw a circle on the pavement with chalk and put target marbles inside. Then you would take turns flicking shooter marbles with the back of your thumb, trying to dislodge the ones in the circle. Whatever you knocked out of the circle was yours. The target marbles were made of glass. Some had swirls of color. Others, called "cat-eyes," were clear with a dash of color on the inside. The shooter marbles were often agates, much larger than the targets and made of stone. They were rare and expensive in kids' reckoning. You were proud of yours and wouldn't risk them as targets.

In addition to their roles in games, marbles and baseball cards served as kid currency. We learned about value and risk, how to barter and negotiate. We learned the rudiments of business and also how to gamble. Some kids learned to bully and steal, others to deal with bullies and thieves. I never wanted to lose my marbles.

Dad, too, had played with marbles as a kid, and I prized the agates he passed down to me. He also gave me his metal fire engine pulled by a horse, plus dozens of lead soldiers in World War I helmets. My kids weren't interested in those or my plastic cowboys-and-Indians or my bottlecaps. An heirloom is only an heirloom if the next generation values it.

Model Kits

Cousins of mine, brothers a few years older than me, were deeply involved in building physical models from kits. They would glue together plastic or wooden pieces to make replicas of airplanes or ships.

But you had to follow directions for the assembly to work. And the resulting figures were too fragile to use in active games. They were meant for display on shelves. That was no fun. When I was given such kits as birthday presents, the boxes sat unopened.

Meanwhile the cousins got addicted to the glue, which they sniffed for a high, and they wound up with serious lung problems.

Instead of model kits, for Christmas I asked for a chemistry set. I wanted to find out what happened when mixing this and that. I wanted to experiment without bounds.

But when I was in the fifth grade and my parents deemed me old enough for a Junior Chemcraft set, I learned there were limits. I could only use the set under supervision and had to follow the directions. The first lessons weren't about discovery at all. They were about measuring and weighing.

I wanted to discover for myself.

Why should I repeat experiments that other kids had already done?

I soon lost interest. And I never took chemistry as a course in high school or college. I would never become a chemist, or any other kind of scientist.

For years I regretted that decision. I knew that things could be transformed by natural processes but I had little understanding of why or how. That seemed like a huge hole in my knowledge of the world—one of many. How could I ever hope to learn everything I had missed?

Only much later did I realize that my curiosity hadn't disappeared. It had found a different laboratory.

Instead of chemicals, I experimented with ideas—mixing stories, history, chess, language, psychology, computers, poetry, and whatever else happened to be at hand.

I wanted to see what happened when unlikely ideas collided.

I know that we can never know everything—and can never be completely certain about what we do know. But our minds can fill in blanks, recognize patterns, imagine possibilities, and connect pieces that don't obviously belong together. From childhood, we possess the remarkable ability to use tokens, signs, and symbols to turn one thing into another.

Kids used to call me "Alky," as in Alka Seltzer. I hated that nickname. As Rumpelstiltskin knew, names matter. And that name didn't have anything to do with who I believed I was.

Now, after all these years, I would wear it proudly.

Alky

as in Alchemist.

My 'Real' Name

Dad and I shared a name: Richard Warren Seltzer.

Dad liked to be called "Dick." I was "Ritchie" as a child, spelled with a "t" as in Fort Ritchie, which had romantic overtones for my parents. I suspect that was where I was conceived.

When I was old enough for Ritchie to sound childish, I was called "Dick," like Dad.

I didn't like having the same name as Dad because that implied I was expected to follow in his footsteps. It also meant that he could—deliberately or accidentally—open my mail. In those days physical mail mattered. And being a "junior" felt demeaning—"lesser," the opposite of "the great." I left off the "junior" on forms, and when I was on my own after college, outside the family context, I insisted on being called not "Dick," not "Rick" either (which sounded like "Dick"), but "Richard" or "Rich." I had changed. I had a new perspective on the world and on myself, so I needed a new label for myself.

When my sister, named "Sallie" at birth (after Mom's father's sister), reached adulthood, she renamed herself "Raven" and, for a while, used a different last name (though unmarried), until she finally settled on "Raven Seltzer." And now I'm finally used to it and call her that without hesitation.

Books by Richard Seltzer

Non-Fiction

Eureka! The Discovery of New Worlds

Voices of the Owned (editor)

How to Partner with AI

In Flux

One Family

Why Knot?

Trojan War Fiction

Let the Women Have Their Say

Trojan Tales

We First Met in Ithaca, or Was it Eden?

Breeze

Shakespeare Fiction

Shakespeare's Twin Sister

We All Are Shakespeare

Other Fiction

The Bulatovich Saga: The Name of Hero

Meter Maid Marion, How to Tutor a Ghost, The Third Tortoise

Richard Seltzer

To Gether Tales

Echoes from the Attic (with Ethel Kaiden)

Parallel Lives

Beyond the 4th Door

Nevermind

Saint Smith and Other Stories

Children's Books

The Lizard of Oz and Other Stories

Now and Then and Other Tales from Ome

Jokes

Grandad Jokes

Translations (from Russian)

Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes by Alexander Bulatovich

The Muse of Far Wanderings of Nikolai Gumilyov by Apollon
Davidson

Business Books

Web Business Boot Camp

The AltaVista Search Revolution (two editions)

Take Charge of Your Website

The Social Web

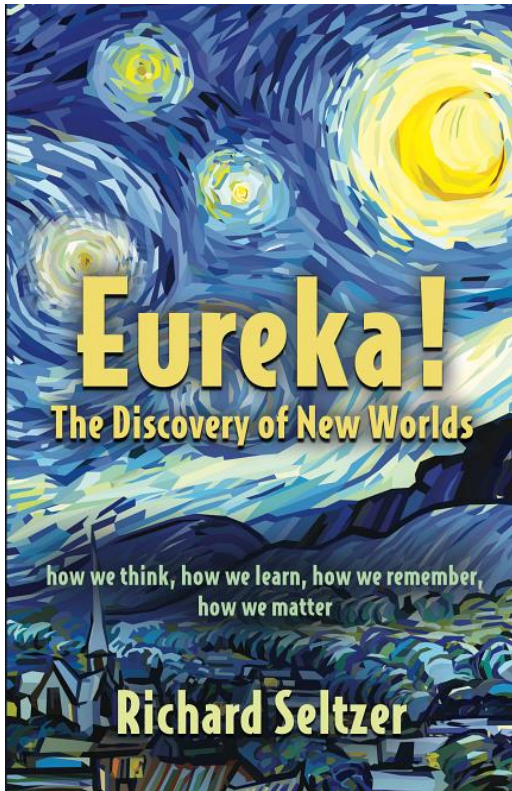
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