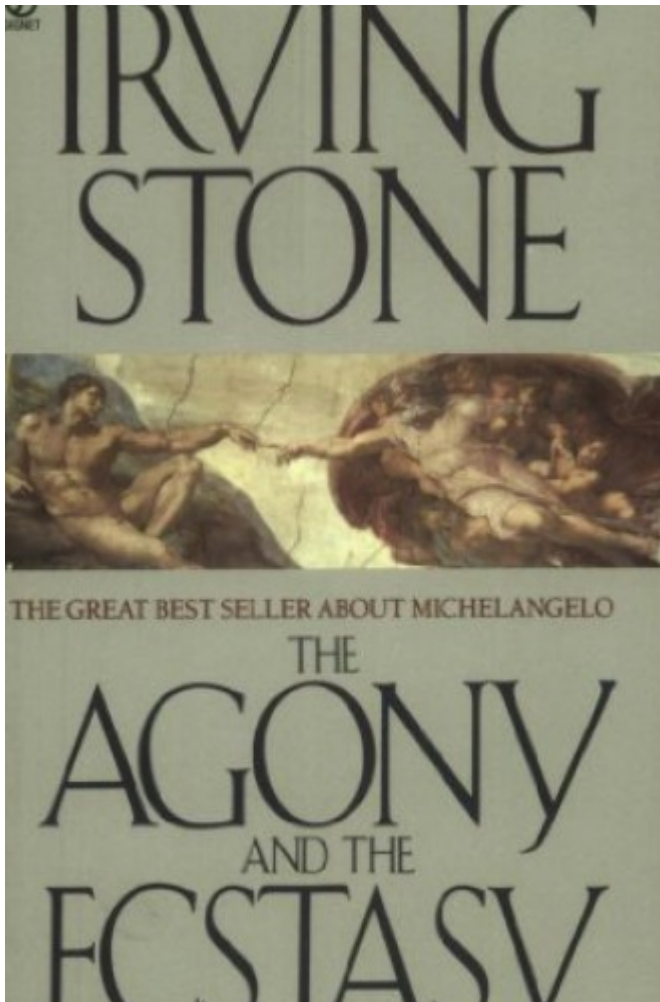


A jack of just how many trades?

By [Tyler Day](#)

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In Review



The Agony and the Ecstasy

by Irving Stone

Signet

I don't often take book recommendations. I think far too highly of my own guiding interests. But a few months ago my in-laws insisted I read Irving Stone's 1961 novel

The Agony and the Ecstasy. Perhaps Stone's most famous biographical novel, it tells the story of Michelangelo Buonarroti and his endless ups and downs navigating the artistic and political worlds of the Renaissance.

It's a wonderful story. The characters and artwork come to life, as does Michelangelo's illuminating theological journey. I'm not sure about the book's reputation as an accurate portrayal of history, but it did tap into the single question I agonize about most in life: Is it better to become great at one thing? Or pretty decent at a number of things?

Heading into the book I had this concept of the Renaissance man, the DaVinci type who excels in a number of fields. The idea was to become well rounded, holistic, complete—the Renaissance ideal. But Michelangelo's desires disrupted this notion. He had only one thing on his mind: sculpture. Political and economic necessity forced him into ironwork and painting, most famously with the Sistine Chapel. He did this begrudgingly; it was his agony. All he wanted was to do one thing, and to do it better than anyone else ever had.

I am no Michelangelo, and I don't aspire to be DaVinci. Still, the question haunts me. Growing up, I was encouraged to participate in a number of sports. I was pretty good at some of them. But I never dedicated the singular focus necessary to have a chance at being great at one. Athletes who go on to professional careers usually drop most other activities at an early age.

The question comes up every time I have a school break and try to take advantage of rare free time. Should I use the time to dive deeper into one particular subject, working toward an eventual expertise? Or should I read around, enjoy a nice piece of fiction, or learn a new skill?

It also comes up in how I consume news. Should I make sure I am expertly aware of national politics and ignore the local arts scene? Should I plow through the latest issue of the *New Yorker* to position myself among a learned crowd, or should I skip the big feature to steal some time for *People* magazine? The problem ultimately is time, and the answer has to do with what we choose to prioritize.

Of course, the whole subject smacks of privilege. The ability to choose between being a specialist and a generalist is only available to a certain few who aren't forced into a circumstance by economic or social condition. It's a bit like our modern notions of vocation: We imagine vocation to be some quest for the one job we were

meant to do, rather than an affirmation of the inherent purpose of each person's task.

In the end, DaVinci may not be the model. Michelangelo complicates it. My agony continues.