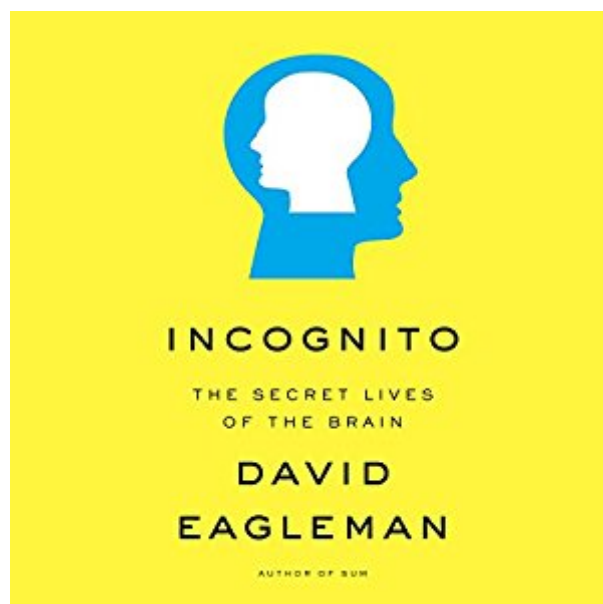


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Incognito: The Secret Lives Of The Brain



Synopsis

If the conscious mind—the part you consider to be you—is just the tip of the iceberg, what is the rest doing? In this sparkling and provocative new book, the renowned neuroscientist David Eagleman navigates the depths of the subconscious brain to illuminate surprising mysteries: Why can your foot move halfway to the brake pedal before you become consciously aware of danger ahead? Why do you hear your name being mentioned in a conversation that you didn't think you were listening to? What do Ulysses and the credit crunch have in common? Why did Thomas Edison electrocute an elephant in 1916? Why are people whose names begin with J more likely to marry other people whose names begin with J? Why is it so difficult to keep a secret? And how is it possible to get angry at yourself—who, exactly, is mad at whom? Taking in brain damage, plane spotting, dating, drugs, beauty, infidelity, synesthesia, criminal law, artificial intelligence, and visual illusions, *Incognito* is a thrilling subsurface exploration of the mind and all its contradictions.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Perhaps I shouldn't have read this book. I am a neuroscientist, and clearly this is meant for a lay audience, however I often enjoy such books for their concise synthesis of research and the freedom they give the author to speculate. Unfortunately it became clear quickly that this would not be such a book - p.19 announces that the author is from the Malcolm Gladwell school of nonfiction "Why was Topsy the elephant electrocuted by Thomas Edison in 1919? ... is there a real Mel Gibson? ... why do strippers make more money at certain times of month?" Ask intriguing questions, link them with

vague explanations, file them under a catchy one-word title, and voila NY Times bestseller. While I have little doubt that this book will do well commercially and be enjoyed by many, I cannot recommend it to anyone with a serious interest in neuroscience. While chapter two is a solid introduction to perception as inference, it is downhill from there. It becomes clear that Eagleman is not interested in any systematic review of the unconscious factors that influence our decisions, but is merely interested in presenting flashy examples. This by itself wouldn't be so objectionable, if he had actually come up with interesting and novel examples, instead of simply reciting old standards and cribbing from other authors. Eagleman has borrowed so much of his material that V.S. Ramachandran should demand royalties. However, Eagleman apparently hasn't read Ramachandran carefully enough, as he references his paper "Why do gentlemen prefer blondes?", apparently unaware that the paper was satirical. How embarrassing. Eagleman attempts to go beyond the flashy examples in Chapter 5, declaring that the brain is a "team of rivals." This reference to D.K.

This is an exceptionally well done work. I thought the first couple of chapters weren't going anywhere particularly interesting but just then author, David Eagleman, really started building his argument and tying it all together. Incognito does a remarkably good job of mixing in just enough anecdote to explain his points without overdoing them like many writers of popular science do nowadays. This book is mostly scientific information and thoughtful analysis. Maybe this is because he isn't a writer by profession, but actually practices in the field of neuroscience. In a relatively short book of 250 pages he packs in a lot of information and in my opinion is very persuasive. This book argues the following ideas and more: 1) Your conscious mind is the "tip of the iceberg" and the rest of the iceberg (your brain) is what is really running the show 2) The vast majority of your brain's processing which leads to what you do and what you think is not accessible to your conscious mind 3) Your brain contains many modules that overlap and compete as rivals 4) "You" are your biology, but you can't be understood by simple reductionism 5) You have little if any "free will" and what that means 6) Your neurobiology is a result of a constant interplay of genes and environment. The ideas in this book in general are not new to me although they probably are to many people. If you have read popular books about the mind in the last decade, the idea that much of our mind is not accessible to us introspectively is hardly a revelation. However the author articulated some of my own vague ideas about what this actually means and I found myself say "Yes!" fairly frequently.

I thought I already knew quite a bit about neuroscience and human behavior, but I learned so much from this book that my mind is still reeling. While reading *Incognito*, I actually experienced the kind of spiraling mind-expansion that I haven't felt since...well...never mind....The book, which is grounded in a massive amount of neuroscience research, is written in a conversational manner with lots of analogies and metaphors that make the information both accessible and retrievable. For example, consciousness is described as being like the CEO of a very large company, having little awareness of the details of day-to-day operation, responsible only for setting major goals and for adapting to major changes. While his metaphors become redundant at times (especially "team of rivals," a phrase repeated so often as to become irritating), the author is generally skilled at finding ways to explain complicated processes in a straightforward manner. He also creates opportunities for active engagement by providing optical illusions and mental exercises that help the reader actually experience some of the idiosyncrasies of the brain. Since I had read some of the reviews before finishing the book, I was apprehensive about the penultimate chapter on the justice system and the concept of culpability. I thought the main point would be that nobody should be held culpable for misdeeds because so many of our actions are not under our control. But the author clearly states that "explanation does not equal exculpation." He does, however, suggest that although we don't currently have the scientific sophistication to find the biological underpinnings of all deviant behavior, we have learned enough to suggest that we will keep finding more explanations.

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