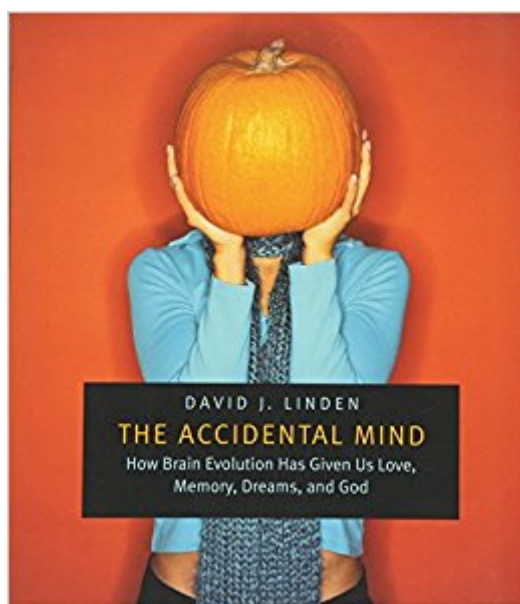


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The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, And God



Synopsis

You've probably seen it before: a human brain dramatically lit from the side, the camera circling it like a helicopter shot of Stonehenge, and a modulated baritone voice exalting the brain's elegant design in reverent tones. To which this book says: Pure nonsense. In a work at once deeply learned and wonderfully accessible, the neuroscientist David Linden counters the widespread assumption that the brain is a paragon of design--and in its place gives us a compelling explanation of how the brain's serendipitous evolution has resulted in nothing short of our humanity. A guide to the strange and often illogical world of neural function, *The Accidental Mind* shows how the brain is not an optimized, general-purpose problem-solving machine, but rather a weird agglomeration of ad-hoc solutions that have been piled on through millions of years of evolutionary history. Moreover, Linden tells us how the constraints of evolved brain design have ultimately led to almost every transcendent human foible: our long childhoods, our extensive memory capacity, our search for love and long-term relationships, our need to create compelling narrative, and, ultimately, the universal cultural impulse to create both religious and scientific explanations. With forays into evolutionary biology, this analysis of mental function answers some of our most common questions about how we've come to be who we are.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. The brain, that "cobbled-together mess," is the subject of this lively mix of solid science and fascinating case histories. Linden, a neuroscientist from Johns Hopkins University,

offers "the Reader's Digest version" of how the brain functions, followed quickly by the "real biology," before tackling the big questions: Why are people religious? How do we form memories? What makes sleep so vital to mental health? Which is more important, nature or nurture? Linden tackles these problems head on, debunking myths (people do, in fact, use more than 10 percent of their brains) and offering interesting trivia (Einstein's brain was a bit on the small side) along the way. Anti-evolutionary arguments are answered in a chapter titled "The Unintelligent Design of the Brain," in which Linden proposes that it's the brain's "weird agglomeration of ad hoc solutions" that makes humans unique. The book's greatest strength is Linden's knack for demystifying biology and neuroscience with vivid similes (he calls the brain, weighing two percent of total body weight and using 20 percent of its energy, the "Hummer H2 of the body"). Though packed with textbook-ready data, the book grips readers like a masterful teacher; those with little science experience may be surprised to find themselves interested in--and even chuckling over--the migration of neurons along radial glia, and anxious to find out what happens next. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a terrific book that accomplishes its aim of presenting a biological view of how the brain works, and does so in a charming, fetching style. (Joshua R. Sanes, Professor of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Harvard University) This is the first scientific book I've read with "attitude."

David Linden is something of a Howard Stern shock jock and there's a lot of heavy breathing in this overview of brain function and the linkage between psychological and brain processes. Linden is clearly a thoughtful scientist and this comes through in his excellent choice of facts and theories to present. This is a very intelligent book. (John Lisman, Professor of Biology, Brandeis University) [A] lively mix of solid science and fascinating case histories... The book's greatest strength is Linden's knack for demystifying biology and neuroscience with vivid similes (he calls the brain, weighing two percent of total body weight and using 20 percent of its energy, the Hummer H2 of the body).

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(Publishers Weekly (starred review) 2007-03-26) More than another salvo in the battle over whether biological structures are the products of supernatural design or biological evolution (though Linden has no doubt it's the latter), research on our brain's primitive foundation is cracking such puzzles as why we cannot tickle ourselves, why we are driven to spin narratives even in our dreams and why

reptilian traits persist in our gray matter. (Sharon Begley Newsweek 2007-04-09) Linden tells his story well, in an engaging style, with plenty of erudition and a refreshing honesty about how much remains unknown. The book should easily hold the attention of readers with little background in biology and no prior knowledge of brains. It would make an excellent present for curious non-scientists and a good book for undergraduates who are just entering into the brain's magic menagerie. Even readers trained in neuroscience are likely to enjoy the many tidbits of rarely taught information--on love, sex, gender, sleep and dreams--that spice up Linden's main argument. The Accidental Mind stands out for being highly readable and clearly educational. No doubt, the human brain evolved along a constrained path and is, in some respects, designed imperfectly. Linden will send that message home...We still know too little about the brain's inner workings to judge how well it does its job. What we do know, and what The Accidental Mind helps us to realize, is that the human brain is not designed as many have imagined. (Georg Striedter Nature 2007-06-07) The majority of this book is an enjoyable neurosciences primer for the general reader. Evolutionary and psychological perspectives provide occasional insights about the mind, but mostly the subject here is the organ capable of conjuring it into existence. Linden makes clear that the physical substrate of our mental phenomena--the squidgy and haphazard mass of our brain--is a gloriously evolved muddle. (Druin Burch Times Literary Supplement 2007-06-01) Many popular neuroscience books emphasize the brain's complexity using terms of purpose: this region is for emotion, that one for vision, and so forth, each interacting in a perfectly designed whole. This ambitious, engaging, and often irreverent book by Linden adopts a quite different perspective, instead emphasizing the evolutionary origins of the human brain...The book...end[s] with a well-argued discussion of the tension between neuroscience and intelligent design. The emphasis on evolution is laudable...making this book an important counterpoint to breathless paeans to brain design. (S. A. Huettel Choice 2007-08-01) For anyone interested in a skillfully guided tour through the world of neural function, The Accidental Mind is a playful yet academically informed work that addresses issues as diverse as intelligent design, the fallibility of the senses, the human religious impulse, and the possible heritability of sexual orientation. Without overwhelming the reader with the biochemical underpinnings of neural function, Linden explores the role that neural design (structure and function) has in the explication of various human behaviors. (Charles J. Alt History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences 2007-12-01) Linden provides an accessible and up to date guide through this maze [that is the brain]. (Steven Rose The Guardian 2008-12-27)

The title for this book "The Accidental Mind" is incredibly fitting after one consumes its content. This

book is a fantastic (and honest) explanation of the human brain, or better yet, the conglomerate of organs that function in our skull that work just good enough to get us through life. For those not familiar with the science, Dr. Linden does a incredible job breaking down the more indigestible parts to make this book an easy read, especially for those who don't have a background in neuroscience. The book is a true page turner for those interested in the age old question of "how does the brain work". A warning to potential readers, after finishing this book, you will probably end with more questions than when you started, different ones, but more. I will admit, after reading the epilogue, I feel myself dying to read his insights on the topics he chose to keep out of the book, but here's hoping a sequel of sorts!

David Linden's "The Accidental Mind" is a neat little book. He has two main purposes: (a) to write a readable introduction on brain science, accessible to nonspecialists; (b) to make the case that (page 6) ". . .the brain is an inelegant and inefficient agglomeration of stuff, which nonetheless works surprisingly well." As to the first point, this volume is a far cry from the magnificent work, Michael Gazzaniga's *The Cognitive Neurosciences III: Third Edition*. However, if one is not well steeped in knowledge and understanding of the neurosciences, Gazzaniga's edited work is close to impenetrable. This book is well and crisply written, explaining simply how neurons work the structure of the brain, how the brain develops, and so on. As to the second point? He asserts that, quoting Francois Jacob (Page 6), "Evolution is a tinkerer, not an engineer." That is, evolution operates on organisms as they are and then the process of change takes advantage of the material already existent to adapt to new conditions and challenges. Thus, the human brain is mounted on older, more primitive structures, in an ill fitting complex. As he says (page 21): "The brain is built like an ice cream cone (and you are the top scoop): Through evolutionary time, as higher functions were added, a new scoop was placed on top, but the lower scoops were left largely unchanged." Thereafter, he speaks of the structure of the brain, how the fully mature human brain develops (with both nature and nurture having roles to play), how the brain is associated with all manner of emotions, learning, religion, and so on. The Ninth chapter has a title that speaks directly to Linden's first theme--"The Unintelligent Design of the Brain." Here, he slyly critiques advocates of the "Intelligent Design" perspective by noting that the brain is hardly an exemplar of some great design. As noted already, he sees the brain as inefficient and "jury-rigged." This is a book that provides plenty of insight into how neuroscientists study the structure and function of the brain--and presents some of the exciting possibilities for future research. In sum, this is a work that ought to be attended to by those interested in the brain sciences, but who cannot readily read the technical

literature.

If you have an interest in how we "tick" this is a fast great read with fascinating and sometimes just fun facts. He achieved his goal of making brain science easy to understand for those of us without his level of expertise. I'm a registered nurse and learned plenty that I didn't know.

The mind is what the brain does. Fortunately, throughout a process lasting several thousand years, evolutionary improvement of the brain has expanded and increased substantially the mind's capabilities. To the best of my knowledge, no computer has as yet been constructed that can duplicate what the mind does. Think about this: Until now, the finest human minds have been unable to improve on a design that David Linden characterizes as "a cobbled-together mess." Later in the book, he refers to the brain's systems as a "Rube Goldberg contraption." Note: Reuben Lucius Goldberg (1883-1970) was an American cartoonist, sculptor, author, engineer and inventor who gained renown for inventing immensely complicated machines that could perform the simplest of tasks, such as filling a spoon with sugar. What he offers in this book is to be his reader's guide to a "strange and often illogical world of neural function," pointing out during the guided tour "the most unusual and counterintuitive aspects of brain and neural design and explaining how they mold our lives." To what does the book's title refer? Linden offers an explanation (of sorts) on Pages 240-242 when explaining accidental design. What about intelligent design? "The idea of intelligent design is an assertion," not a reality I wish I had known about Figure 9.2 on Page 244 when I began to read this book. "The Main Evolutionary Constraints on Brain Design" encapsulates the main arguments of Linden's book. Others have shared their reasons for holding this book in such high regard. I agree with those reasons, of course, while adding two of my own: First, to the extent possible, unlike Rube Goldberg, Linden explains even the most complicated terms and processes in layman's terms. He does NOT dumb down the material. Rather, he uses a nomenclature that creates access to much of the material for those who such as I who took only the required science courses and refuse to remember anything about them. Also, I really appreciate Linden's wit. He immediately establishes and then sustains a personal, almost (not quite) collegial rapport with his reader. There is a playful, sometimes irreverent tone to his many of his comments. He obviously enjoys learning and seems to enjoy helping others to learn at least as much.

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