



Strange Brains and Genius: The Secret Lives Of Eccentric Scientists And Madmen

Clifford A. Pickover

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Never has the term *mad scientist* been more fascinatingly explored than in internationally recognized popular science author Clifford Pickover's richly researched wild ride through the bizarre lives of eccentric geniuses. A few highlights:

"The Pigeon Man from Manhattan" Legendary inventor Nikola Tesla had abnormally long thumbs, a peculiar love of pigeons, and a horror of women's pearls.

"The Worm Man from Devonshire" Forefather of modern electric-circuit design Oliver Heaviside furnished his home with granite blocks and sometimes consumed only milk for days (as did Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison).

"The Rabbit-Eater from Lichfield" Renowned scholar Samuel Johnson had so many tics and quirks that some mistook him for an idiot. In fact, his behavior matches modern definitions of obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette's syndrome.

Pickover also addresses many provocative topics: the link between genius and madness, the role the brain plays in alien abduction and religious experiences, UFOs, cryonics -- even the whereabouts of Einstein's brain!

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From Reader Review Strange Brains and Genius: The Secret Lives Of Eccentric Scientists And Madmen for online ebook

Arminius says

The secret lives of eccentric scientists are a fascinating look at what creative people with very odd habits accomplished throughout recent history. The first part of the books showcases these individuals. I will give a brief summation of two of my favorite ones. The commonality of the group was that none of them were married. They were mostly all asexual.

Oliver Heavside was an English inventor who established mathematical foundations for modern electric circuit design. His weird behaviors included scotophilia (love of the dark), claustrophilia (enjoyed working in tight spaces) and thermophilia (loved sweltering hot places to work in). He also painted his nails pink and replaced his furniture with granite blocks.

Geoffrey Pike an inventor who controlled one third of the world's tin supply by creating a mathematical formula that predicted stock prices. When World War I broke out he volunteered for the English Newspaper the Daily Chronicle to go to Germany and report his findings. He was caught and imprisoned as a spy. However, he escaped prison by calculating the time of day the sun would temporarily blind the guard's eyes. Then he crawled by the unsuspecting Guard undetected. Some of his odd behaviors included hypergraphia (obsessive writing), he only ate herring and biscuits and he detested socks.

The author proceeds to ask current intellectuals a series of questions which I found to be the most boring part of the book.

The author afterwards explains why these people were both brilliant and crazy. One possibility is that they all may have had a disease called Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE). TLE effects only part of the brain and can alter consciousness. TLE can foster profound insights and mystical visions along with great creativity. It is summarized in this book that people who believe they have been abducted by Aliens and have seen various religious symbols have suffered from TLE which caused their hallucinations.

The book ends with describing recent findings in mental and behavior illness causes and potential cures.

John says

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&r...>

Tesla slaved for Edison for about a year when they finally had an argument forcing Tesla to leave Edison like a bat out of hell. It all began when Tesla suggested that he could increase the efficiency of Edison's dynamos and save Edison considerable money. Edison loved the idea and replied that he would reward Tesla. "There's \$50,000 in it for you," Edison said, "if you can do it." Tesla worked frantically for months, hardly sleeping. When Tesla made significant improvements, redesigned the dynamos, and installed automatic controls, he asked Edison for his \$50,000 reward. Edison replied, "Tesla, you don't understand our American humor."

Heavside (like Tesla) suffered from scotophilia, was obsessed with birds and subsisted almost entirely off of

milk.

TLE can foster profound insights & mystical experiences to such a degree that some patients prefer not to take anticonvulsive drugs that deprive them of their creativity & of their enjoyable paranormal or mystical experiences.

TLE affects only part of the brain & alters (but does not eliminate) consciousness.

van Gogh called his seizures "the storm within," & he realized that they were the source of his hallucinations, unprovoked feelings of anger, fear, confusion, & uncontrollable floods of early memories- reminiscent of Tesla's uncontrollable visions.

Another common symptom experienced by temporal lobe epileptics is jamais vu (the feeling of never having been in what should be familiar place-the opposite of deja vu)

Galton writes, "The amplitude of the moral oscillations of religious men is greater than that of others whose average moral positions." also commented on the unfortunate persecution of intellectuals by the Church & the rampant breeding of the unintelligent. But the Church chose to preach & exact celibacy. The notion that a missionary or other pious enterprise carries any immunity from danger has never been entertained by insurance companies.

Vikki says

This book was very good. It tells of the secret lives of eccentric scientist and madment. There was some on Ted Kaczynki which was especially interesting to me.

Nicole M. says

The premise of this book is interesting and it could have had the potential to be good, but it turns out that the book just isn't quite good. Indeed, there are some interesting facts to be learned (I learned about pykrete), but the organization is all over the map and it's just not written very well. Not very memorable.

Kris Marolt says

Truly a sometimes funny, sometimes scary book.

Paul says

Wanted this to be better than it was. Still, it was rather interesting.

Jason says

Taking a scattershot approach, Clifford Pickover first sketches biographies of various "mad geniuses" including Nikola Tesla, Samuel Johnson, and the Unabomber (this section was fun, with lots of strange factoids and trivia). He then describes what we know about obsessive-compulsive disorder and speculates on

the connections between the aforementioned mad geniuses and OCD and other neurological peculiarities. He describes a fascinating questionnaire on genius and IQ that he shared online, as well as many of the thoughtful and thought-provoking responses that he received (this was my favorite section in the book), after which he winds down with a section on temporal lobe epilepsy and religious experience (another section I found especially interesting, given my own interesting history with TLE). He concludes with the assertion that human thought and behavior is far more constrained by neuroanatomy and neurochemistry than we would like to believe. *Then* he has another chapter in which he describes other characters from the history of science who didn't make the final cut to be included in the earlier biographical section, and finally he wraps up the book with a section of blurbs summarizing cutting edge (as of 1998) research on the brain and various eccentricities. Methinks Pickover himself would fit in quite well with some of the characters in this book.

Juliana says

The chapters in this book seem completely random, but somehow it works. Pickover presents great case studies of history's smartest weirdos. Also, if you carry this book around, you can start interesting conversations with total strangers.

Trey says

An interesting examination of some quirky thinkers and how their weirdness may have influenced their ideas. I liked it.

Abraham Ray says

good book about eccentric scientists!

Mark Russell says

Strange Brains & Genius by Clifford Pickover is basically a series of biographies of geniuses who were more than a little nutty. The book tries to find commonalities between these men, their genius and their respective mental disorders. While Pickford's Radio Shack psychoanalysis can seem trite and forced, it's nonetheless a fascinating read.

Among the geniuses profiled:

Nikola Tesla. One of the most otherworldly and ingenious inventors in history and a pioneer in radio and electric power, Tesla also suffered from a myriad of mental problems including OCD (everything had to be in multiples of 3's), scotophilia (a need to spend his waking hours in the dark), columniphobia (an obsession with pigeons) and perhaps most weirdly, he had sensory cross-synchronization, meaning that he could dip his finger in a glass of brandy and taste it in his mouth. He was also a severe germophobe who insisted on having 18 (because it's divisible by three) fresh towels every morning for the constant hygiene the day would demand of him. He was also frequently hyperselective about his food, living for weeks at a time off of little other than milk.

Oliver Heaviside. A brilliant self-taught mathematician and inventor, he came up with the self-loading coils that made long distance phone calls and telegraphs possible. He was also the first person to suggest the existence of an ionosphere and to introduce vector analysis into electromagnetic theory. In part because his mathematics were so far afield from what other 19th century mathematicians were doing and in part because he was self-educated and never learned to write in the accepted jargon of his day, nobody but the most able and probing mathematicians were able to make sense of his discoveries. In what seems like a strange coincidence, Heaviside (like Tesla) suffered from scotophilia, was obsessed with birds and subsisted almost entirely off of milk. He also painted his fingernails pink, a rarity for men in Victorian Britain, to put it lightly.

He was also given to severe self-loathing, so much so that whenever he signed his name to a document, he always attached the word "WORM" to the end of his signature. He was a thermophilic who would practically mummify himself in blankets and ratchet the heat up to extraordinary levels, turning his small house into a subtropical sauna. His dress and hygiene resembled that of a common tramp. Unaware that he was in fact one of the preeminent mathematical geniuses of their time, he was frequently abused and laughed at by his neighbors. He became an even greater pariah in his neighborhood when he took to running down his neighbors' chickens with his bicycle. He kept his housekeeper as a virtual prisoner, forcing her to sign a contract promising to never marry or leave the house without permission and always to wear long woollen underwear. She was eventually reduced to a catatonic state by his demands and had to be taken away to a sanatorium to recover.

Eventually, Heaviside was forced to leave as well when local boys persisted in blocking up his sewage pipes which made his house smell so bad that there was an article about it in the local paper. He eventually died due to complications from falling off a ladder and when relatives entered his house to collect his belongings, they found that he had stuffed his rafters with reams and reams of mathematical formulas and proofs which he was using as insulation. These papers, which he never saw fit to publish, proved to be so beyond their time that mathematicians are still discovering new meaning in their pages to this day.

Geoffrey Pyke. A genius of polymathic talent, Pyke was an innovator in children's education, modern warfare, stock investment and journalism. After the outbreak of the First World War, he had the novel idea of writing dispatches on the progress of the war... from Germany. Needless to say, it wasn't long until he was arrested and imprisoned as a spy. Almost immediately, he commenced planning his escape from the prison camp. In analyzing others' escape attempts, he realized that most attempts failed because they occurred at night, which was precisely when the guards and their dogs were on their greatest alert. Determined not to duplicate their failures, Pyke's plan was ingeniously simple. He calculated a spot which would be rendered invisible by the position of the sun as it shone into the nearby guard's eyes. He simply stood in that spot at the appropriate time of day until the guard passed by, at which point he slipped over the wall in broad daylight and made his way safely to Holland.

Back in London, he came up with a secret method for buying and selling commodities on the stock exchange which soon made him one of the richest men in Britain. At one point, he controlled a third of the world's supply of tin. He was a philanthropist and an innovator at heart, so he spent his immense fortune bankrolling his many projects, most notably alternative schools. At Pyke's schools, regular curriculum and traditional hierarchies were ignored in favor of treating students as equals to the teachers and allowing them to pursue their own subjects of interest. In 1928, however, his highly speculative investment scheme caved in on itself, leaving him and his many philanthropic interests, penniless overnight.

Pyke was prone to bouts of severe depression and despondent over his loss, he moved into a small shack away from his family where he would remain in obscurity until war broke out with Germany again in 1939. Aware of Pyke's prodigious intellect, Lord Mountbatten sought him out to become a wartime advisor for the British military. Like a man opening a floodgate Mountbatten soon found himself overwhelmed by a sea of

pent up ideas from Pyke. To increase the amount of time a day he could spend working, Pyke would not get dressed in the morning but rather conducted all his business in his pajamas or, if possible, from his bed.

Easily Pyke's greatest and most awe-inspiring wartime innovation came with his invention of a substance he called "Pykrete." A blend of ice and wood shavings which didn't melt and yet was as tough as steel. It was also a substance which was ridiculously cheap to make and easy to patch up should it be damaged. Lord Mountbatten was so excited by the innovation that he marched a hunk of Pykrete directly to 10 Downing street, walked in on Winston Churchill as he was taking a bath and threw it into the bathwater. When he saw the thick chunk of ice bobbing up and down in the hot bathwater without melting, Churchill authorized Pyke to begin designing what would essentially be a fleet of indestructible aircraft carriers and battleships made of ice. Of course, the war ended before any of Pyke's designs could ever be realized, but there's no denying the innovative genius behind the concept. Eventually, however, his depression won out over his genius and in 1948, he committed suicide.

And so it was with most of Pickover's strange brains. A happy ending was rarely to be found and at the heart of the book seems to be the notion that genius does not come without price. Crippling paranoia, the inability to relate to other people, severe deficits in other mental endeavors are merely, according to Pickover, the going rate for truly rare genius.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

Mental illness and genius.

TK Keanini says

When I grow up, I want to be consider worthy of the classification madman.

I've classified this book under professional-development.

I wish there was more books like this. Our society gets stuck in these basins and the only thing that gets us any progress are these minds who at the time are labelled madmen.

The fact is that most of the greatest minds throughout history were people suffering from some mental illness. In particular, most of those within the domain of mathematics who were true genius ended in the taking for there own life.

Chapter 9 is entitled, The hermit from Montana. This is the story of Theodore Kaczynski who was one of the greatest mathematicians of the 20th century but also unfortunately, he was also the Unibomber.

I have always made it a priority when learning of the masters in a particular domain to really understand the person. This book does a great job in doing that for many diciplines.

The author Pickover is much like Simon Singh in that he is a great writer with a solid foundation of science. He was a writer for Discover magazine and a research staff member for IBM.

Sandra Field says

One of my all time favorite books.

Hybridmobile says

Nice look at historical connection between genius & insanity.
