



The Man Who Forgot How To Read

Howard Engel

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Finding the words: the remarkable journey of a bestselling writer struck with a rare and devastating affliction and how he triumphed over his condition.

One hot mid-summer morning in Toronto, bestselling crime novelist Howard Engel got up to fetch his morning paper and discovered he could no longer read it. The letters had mysteriously jumbled themselves into something that looked like Cyrillic one moment and Korean the next. "Was this a Serbo-Croatian version of The Globe?" he wondered. Overnight, while he slept, Engel had experienced a stroke and now suffered from a rare condition called alexia sine agraphia, meaning that while he could still write, he could no longer read. Engel's gentle humour and matter-of-fact tone set the stage for this extraordinary memoir that traces the writer's journey through a life-changing episode. Describing his stay in hospital, Engel also discovers other horrifying and fascinating new "insults" to his brain: Geography eludes him; he can no longer navigate.

Apples and grapefruit now look the same (only by smelling each one can he tell them apart). And yet, despite these devastating disabilities and the almost certain loss of his career and a huge chunk of his identity, Engel prepares to reconcile with his condition. He contacts renowned neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks for advice, forging a lasting friendship. He bravely begins to learn how to read all over again. And, in the face of obstacles, his imagination triumphs in the writing of his latest Benny Cooperman detective novel, Memory Book. Engel describes the painstaking writing process of this 2005 bestseller, which has the detective developing alexia after being struck on the head.

An absorbingly detailed and uplifting story, filled with sly wit and candid insights, The Man Who Forgot How to Read will appeal to Engel's legion of fans, as well as to all those fascinated by the mysteries of the mind, on and off the page.

The Man Who Forgot How To Read Details

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Angela says

This is a fascinating book on a number of levels. The whole concept and detailed description of the author's wrecked perception after his stroke was amazing and thought provoking. I also loved reading his thoughts and feelings about the writing process in general - both before and after the "insult" to his brain. It was a very quick and easy read, but one that left me pondering for a long time.

TienvoorNegen says

I don't usually read 'brain'-books. It is a phase I have left behind me. But since some of the problems this writer talks about resemble my own I was tempted.

Even though acquiring my brain injury is in my past, it still shapes my present. And I find, especially when meeting new people, that explaining the invisible after effects of my stroke are still quite impossible. So reading someone else's descriptions can sometimes be very helpful.

I didn't particularly like reading this book, for me, the story itself was of little interest. My focus was on particular details. How he describes how he experiences time, for instance. Or how he knows where certain streets are, but not know where they go.

And his problem with alexia, was mine, and where reading is now back on, I'm still below zero (pun intended) with numbers.

The afterword by Oliver Sacks moved me. 'It is a struggle that calls for heroic determination and courage, as well as great resourcefulness, patience and, not least, humour- simply to survive...'

That touched something in me as well. Because I agree. And am proud to survive. And thrive. And recognizing my own determination in making it so.

Ha. It is not very often that a book review ends in a proud statement about myself. But this one did. And it feels good.

Leslie says

Spoiled by Oliver Sacks' magnificent prose, I felt that Engel's memoir didn't quite measure up. Upon reflection, however, the amazing achievement of being able to continue writing after the stroke which led to his disability - alexia sine agraphia - overshadows any faults. Engels memoir is not only entertaining, it provides a unique perspective on what happens to stroke patients and how they handle lasting disability.

Read-alikes would include Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Cytowicz' *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, and of course, anything by Sacks, but especially *A Leg to Stand On*.

VWrulesChick says

What is your passion life? What would you do if you could no longer do it? That was the case for Howard Engel, who is writes novels about crime. But one summer morning, he encounters he can no longer read. What would happen to him, his life, his passion?

This is a memoir based on his road to recovery from this rare medical condition after having a stroke. His challenges and his need to continue to write. I found it an easy and quick read. I better understand the challenges of having a stroke and all the physical and mental effort needed to perform simple daily activities. Kudos to Howard and wishing much success of his future novels.

nat says

-Aku kecanduan buku. Aku selalu membawa dua atau lebih buku di mana pun berada. Kantorku dipenuhi dengan rak buku. Aku kecanduan kata-kata yang dicetak- (p.7)

-Di mana pun aku menetap, di benua apapun, semua ruang horizontal sudah menyanggah tumpukan buku- (p.19)

-Alexia adalah duri utama untuk diriku. Sine agraphia merupakan cara yang ditawarkan untuk membuatku merasa nyaman. Aku serasa diberi tahu bahwa kaki kananku harus diamputasi tapi aku bisa menyimpan sepatu dan kaus kaki- p.39

Buku ini adalah sebuah memoar dari seorang penulis best-seller yang menderita penyakit, yang seakan menutup pintu utama ke dunianya.

Howard Engel gemar sekali membaca. Dalam beberapa kutipan di atas, nampak bahwa buku dan dirinya tak dapat dipisahkan. Seorang penulis umumnya adalah seorang yang gemar membaca, namun seorang pembaca tidak selalu suka/mampu menulis. Howard telah mencapai fase dapat menulis dengan baik, terbukti dari larisnya novel thriller yang ditulisnya.

Di suatu pagi, bangun dari tidurnya, tiba-tiba Howard tidak dapat membaca tulisan pada surat kabar langganannya. Seakan-akan itu adalah tulisan dari negara lain dengan bahasa lain. Namun yang salah ternyata bukan surat kabar itu. Howard pun mengalami hal yang sama untuk tulisan-tulisan lain yang ada di sekitarnya, besar ataupun kecil. Howard tidak buta, ia masih dapat melihat sinar mentari maupun orang-orang di sekitarnya, walaupun gangguan itupun berkembang menjadi sulitnya ia membedakan atau mengenali wajah orang, bahkan sulit membedakan antara tomat dan jeruk.

Howard mendapatkan suatu penyakit yang disebut alexia sine agraphia akibat stroke yang menyerangnya. Penjelasan lebih lanjut tentang penyakit ini ada dalam buku ini. Gambarnya, Howard tak lagi dapat membaca, suatu hal yang sangat digemarinya, walaupun ia masih dapat menulis. Bayangkan, jika suatu hal sangat kita sukai, sudah mendarah daging, tiba-tiba direnggut dari kita oleh sebuah penyakit, bagaimana terguncangnya ? Aku sendiri yang bukan penulis profesional (lebih cenderung pada pembaca) kalaupun dihadapkan pada penyakit yang sama, bisa jadi stres. Guncangan yang dialami Howard lebih besar, karena meskipun ia masih dapat menulis, ia tidak akan dapat membaca maupun mengedit tulisannya yang seperti ceker ayam. Howard seolah menemui pintu yang tertutup untuk masa depan dan kebahagiaannya. Bayangkan, seorang tukang pijat refleksi yang tiba-tiba tak dapat menggunakan tangannya, atau seorang penyanyi yang tiba-tiba suaranya hilang, atau seorang fotografer yang kehilangan penglihatannya ?

Masa-masa berat dialami Howard, kala ia menjalani terapi di rumah sakit, maupun menjalani hari-harinya di luar rumah sakit. Howard harus belajar dari awal lagi, dan menerjemahkan huruf dalam kata-kata seolah-olah itu relief dari tulisan zaman purbakala. Howard menghadapi itu semua dengan semangat dan emosi yang naik turun. Perjuangannya patut diacungi jempol.

Lalu apakah penglihatan Howard bisa kembali seperti semula ? Ataukah untuk selamanya Howard tak bisa membaca lagi ?

Jawabannya dapat ditemukan dalam buku ini. Perjalanan Howard diceritakan secara runtut, meski aku kurang mendapatkan sentuhan pribadi dalam buku ini. Bagaimana akhirnya Howard bisa lebih mengenali dirinya dan pekerjaannya melalui peristiwa ini.

Aku menjadi tahu bagaimana Howard menghadapinya, meskipun aku belum tahu apakah aku akan dapat menghadapinya sekuat Howard, jika saja aku mengalami yang sama ?

Mary Mcqueen says

Mr. Engel deduced that he had had a stroke one morning as he looked at his newspaper and saw hieroglyphs instead of words. The interesting feature of this condition was/is that he could still write while not being able to read what was just written.

Interesting to folks interested in brain dysfunctions and recuperation and adjustment to brain damage.

Tim Seefeldt says

Howard was kind enough to talk to me about his journey after I lost the ability to read post stroke. Great man. Great writer.

Evi Yuniati says

Howard Engel...penulis fiksi kriminal yang begitu gemar membaca dan membaca adalah hidupnya tiba-tiba suatu hari karena stroke harus kehilangan kemampuan membacanya (Alexia Sine Agraphia). Bagaimana rasanya bila seorang penulis yang dalam pekerjaannya juga berhubungan dengan membaca untuk mengedit kembali tulisannya harus kembali belajar membaca seperti anak kecil?

Ketidak mampuan itu tidak menjadikan Howard putus asa. Selama dalam masa rehabilitasi Howard terus dan terus belajar untuk mendapatkan kembali kemampuannya dalam membaca dan mengingat nama, orang ataupun situasi dan kondisi yang mulai memudar. Perjuangan Howard tidak sia-sia dan itu dibuktikan dengan peluncuran buku baru Benny Cooperman.

Menghadapi penyakitnya Howard begitu tenang dan bukannya loyo tapi malah semakin semangat bagaimana caranya untuk sembuh. Top lah...karena begitu cintanya dengan dunia baca dan menulis Howard tidak menyerah. Semoga buku ini bisa menginspirasi banyak orang bahwa menyerah dengan keadaan tidak baik dan lebih baik berusaha sampai titik darah penghabisan.

Artslyz says

enjoyable. not an oliver sacks book, but still an interesting step into neurology for the non-scientist!

Jan C says

Pretty amazing story.

What happens to a writer who suddenly learns that he can't read. One morning he gets up, picks up the paper and determines that it must be printed in a foreign language. It is subsequently determined that he had a stroke and was left with alexia - the ability to write but no longer able to read.

"When my mind froze up, writing can only be compared to trying to move a ton of raw liver uphill by hand."

Engel is a mystery writer and wonders how he is going to be able to earn a living if he can't read what he has written.

I thought his description of the time in the rehab center was excellent. How he learned to start finding his way around again, going to the grocery, going on a walk and being able to find his way back.

He was able to write a mystery story putting his protagonist, Bennie Cooperman, in the hospital. Not sure if he gave him alexia or not but did give him some form of mental illness or brain damage (probably temporary) and he has to resolve a mystery while in the hospital.

He apparently still has some problems but they are getting better and he is working with them.

And, Oliver Sacks wrote an afterword. Not sure if Engel was just told about Sacks or if he had known about him before his stroke. But somewhere in this process he wrote Sacks a letter and eventually went to visit him. Sacks also wrote an afterword for the mystery story, *Memory Book: A Benny Cooperman Detective Novel*.

Tony says

Engel, Howard. *THE MAN WHO FORGOT HOW TO READ: A Memoir*. (2008). ****. On a hot mid-summer morning, Engel went to his front door to pick up his daily newspaper. When he glanced at it, it looked like it was printed in Serbo-Croatian. He opened it up, thinking one of his friends had played a prank, and the inside was the same. He realized that he had had a stroke overnight, and that his vision was impaired. When he checked himself into the stroke clinic at the hospital, he learned that he had indeed had a stroke, and now had a condition known as alexia sine agraphia.

This meant that he could no longer read or recognize the printed word. The odd thing about this condition is that he was still able to write, but couldn't read what he had written. Engel, aside from being the author of the Benny Cooperman detective novels, was normally a voracious reader – going through about ten books a week. That was his life. Now he would have to re-learn how to cope with this new condition and somehow pick up the threads of his career as a writer. This is a fascinating memoir that takes us on the trip that Engel had to make to learn how to compensate and partly overcome this disorder. We learn a lot about how the mind works and how we can trick it into doing what we want it to do when it has forgotten how to do it. the

book also contains an afterword by Dr. Oliver Sacks, the noted psychiatrist and writer with whom Engel consulted during his illness. Recommended.

Daniel Hooker says

How do I give a lukewarm review to such an astounding and incredible story and author? It is indeed an incredible tale, but unfortunately it contains so many of Engel's acknowledged deficits that the prose is quite dry. Large elements are repeated across several chapters and the same analogies appear over and over.

The Oliver Sacks afterword is cleverly left until after you have worked through Engel's tale, and immediately reveals what was missing: a clinician's knowledge, comparison to others' experiences with alexia, and an editor's pen.

Ami says

I couldn't get past the few few chapters. While I think the conversational tone is fine to use in writing, the author was too repetitive about inconsequential information. For instance, pointing out who Lolly was every time he used the name.

Petra CigareX says

The author, a writer of the Benny Cooperman series of detective novels had a stroke and was stricken with alexia - the inability to read, although he could still write, slightly restricted vision and a really bad memory. This book is the story of his time from the stroke until he had his first post-trauma novel published.

Its a slight book, very simply written (which I enjoyed) and somewhat repetitive. He's a brave man, one of life's 'triers', but the book would have been better off as an essay in a suitable magazine.

Five stars for courage, four stars in admiration, but three stars for enjoyment.

Sue Smith says

A fascinating glimpse at the struggles of a stroke victim suddenly stricken with a rare condition called 'alexia sine agraphia'.

Doesn't sound fascinating though, does it?! I thought so as well when I started this book snuggled into my bed - and was promptly asleep after 5 pages. (Books that are text book related have that effect on me unfortunately). So - note to self - don't read this one in bed.

So once I got to reading this one sitting up in a chair, the story was very revealing and very interesting. Alexia sine agraphia is a condition where you can write, but you can't read what you've written. It affects your ability to read - in essence, it becomes a very difficult procedure, if even one that you can conquer at all.

In this case the stroke doesn't affect you at all bodily, it strikes you in your brain, specifically where you handle language.

What made this book so interesting was that the man the stroke happened to was a writer by trade. He's written many books - primarily a detective series following a specific character - and he happened to be a voracious reader... of everything. So when he woke up to the start of his stroke and he realized that his friends weren't pulling a world class joke by putting out a serbo-croatian paper on his front doorstep and that something was seriously wrong, he had the presense of mind to know it and head to the hospital. Then came the struggle to come back to a semblance of normalacy. It's that fight to become a shadow of your former self that makes this book a trully fascinating look at our inner workings of the mind.

Personally, I can't imagine loosing the ability to read. It is such a huge part of what I am and what I enjoy. So when you read someone else's struggle to overcome the handicap, you can't help but be amazed. I'll give you this much, Howard Engel is a fighter. He took the challenge head on and through hard work and a wonderful circle of friendly support, he has been able to continue with his writing career. It's inspiring to say the least.
