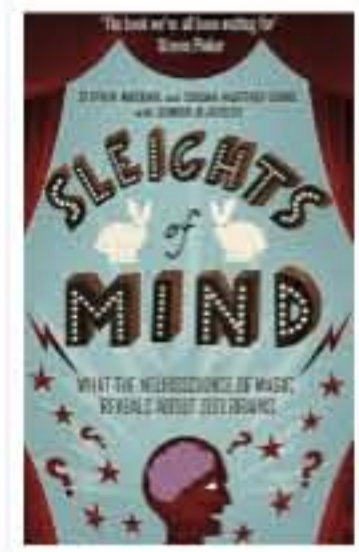




SATURDAY, 25 JUNE 2011

It's a Kind of Magic!



A blog post by Patrick Redmond

I am nought but a pattern recognising monkey. Skeptics know all too well how easily we can be fooled. How our brains, albeit it the pinnacle of primate evolution, are not in fact faultless processors of cognitive and sensory information, but more akin to a ZX81 linked up to a £15 digital camera from down the market and an old ear trumpet. Just to get by and handle everything that's thrown at it, your brain takes a whole load of shortcuts and is susceptible to many different forms of manipulation and persuasion from society, individuals and our own

imagination.

When I first wandered into the skeptical arena I noticed two distinct strands that compliment and contribute to the sphere, science and magic. I'm not sure if skeptics are allowed to have heroes or raise people on too high a pedestal, but if I was to take a very unscientific straw poll asking people to name the two most prominent figures associated with the movement, you would get Carl Sagan and James Randi right up at the top, a scientist and a magician.

Both disciplines bring their own tools to bear in the fight against pseudoscience and the promotion of critical thinking. Scientists can push forward our knowledge by uncovering the secrets that the universe holds through leaps of imagination backed up by trial and data, but what about magicians what can they do? They are the people best placed to challenge those frauds that take advantage of our natural disposition to be fooled. From Houdini's debunking of self proclaimed psychics up to Randi's interactions with such people as Peter Popoff and would-be claimants of the \$1,000,000 Challenge, supporting the old adage, about setting a thief to catch a thief.

This is great for me as I love science and I love magic so getting involved in something that incorporates both is brilliant. In Sleights of Mind, neuroscientists Steve Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde turn the scientific scrutiny of their profession onto the mechanisms and art of the magician. They show how an understanding of how the brain works can illuminate the practice of magic and indeed vice versa. How magicians exploit the gaps and glitches in the functioning of the human brain and can actually point us towards interesting roads of study and exploration.

This is a great book that is a whole lot of fun to read. You also get the idea that it was a whole lot of fun to research and write, have a look at their [website](#) later. This isn't a throw away topic for this couple and if you listen to their interview on our [podcast](#) you can hear just how serious they are about this and their work in sensory illusions too. They immerse themselves in magic and meet some of the greatest living magicians in the world in their quest, including James the Amazing Randi himself who has no problem in seeing the potential of what they are doing.

The book does explain some of the secrets behind the tricks but you don't have to read those bits if you don't want to as they are marked out with spoiler alerts; I know you will though. The explanations are often linked to references for videos on the Internet, demonstrating the tricks described. The great thing is that even when you know how it's done, you can still get fooled. Rather than detracting from the mystery, for me at least, it heightened the appreciation of what I was seeing, or in most cases not seeing. I enjoyed the book immensely as it was simultaneously entertaining and enlightening. It provides insights and explanations that are fun and surprisingly practical. For instance I no longer feel guilty for not noticing my wife has changed her top and I think I understand why I left the butter in the washing machine. I also might be prepared for the next person to phone up asking me to switch energy providers or help them shift \$1,000,000 from Nigeria.

I'll leave you with a video of Apollo Robbins, one of the magicians that they work with, for your entertainment. Watch how he pulls his victim's attention all over the place like he has it on a piece of string. Then for your further pleasure listen to my conversation with the [authors here](#) and buy the [book here](#).

Patrick Redmond - Born in Stoke and moved the vast distance to live in Birmingham. He is one of the organisers of Birmingham Skeptics in the Pub.

Posted by Birmingham Skeptics at 00:04
Labels: magic, neuroscience, skepticism

0 comments:

[Post a Comment](#)

Links to this post

[Create a Link](#)

[Newer Post](#) [Home](#) [Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Birmingham Skeptics in the Pub meet twice a month. Once to listen to an interesting speaker and once for a social gathering. Please look around the site and if you're interested in coming we'd love to see you.

PAGES

- [Home](#)
- [Skeptics in the Pub Contacts, Links and Resources](#)
- [It's All About Us](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Socials](#)
- [How to send in your posts](#)

NEXT EVENT



Birmingham Skeptics
Wednesday 13th July, 7.30pm
The Victoria
48 John Bright Street
Birmingham B1 1BN
Free entry with suggested donation

- [Twitter](#)
- [Write for Us](#)



Birmingham Skeptics in the Pub
on Facebook
[Like](#) 177

SUBSCRIBE TO

POPULAR POSTS

-  [Jon Ronson - Time to get Organised](#)
-  [The Weekly Round Up - 9/7/11](#)
-  [Podcast Posting - Interview with Mark Crislip](#)
-  [Prophecy Fails, Atheists Laugh, But Faith Wins Again.](#)
-  [Alpha Skeptic](#)

LATEST PODCAST

BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2011 (34)
 - ▶ July (2)
 - ▼ June (4)
 - [Prophecy Fails, Atheists Laugh, But Faith Wins Aga...](#)
 - [It's a Kind of Magic!](#)
 - [Image Consciousness](#)
 - [John Baskerville \(1706-1775\) Dandy, Spy, Printer, ...](#)
 - ▶ May (3)
 - ▶ April (6)
 - ▶ March (9)
 - ▶ February (5)
 - ▶ January (5)
- ▶ 2010 (14)

SEARCH THIS BLOG