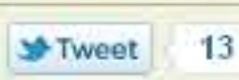


Sleights of Mind

6 Feb 2011 By collingwood21
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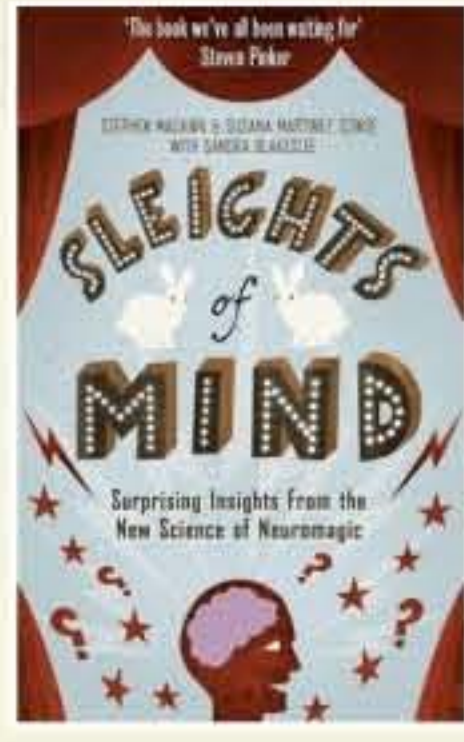
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About a year ago, the BBC screened an episode of Horizon called "Is Seeing Believing?", which explored optical illusions and how they work in our minds

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00vhw1d>). These illusions revealed many loopholes, short-cuts and inconsistencies in the way we perceive the world, which the designers of the tricks had mercilessly exploited in order to create something that simply shouldn't be possible. This not only showed that these tricks could be interesting way to explore our psychology, but also that the people who designed the tricks seemed to know more about the way our minds worked than the psychologists who studied them. The programme fascinated me, and so I couldn't wait to get stuck into Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde's new book "Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals about our Brains", which is built around a similar principle.

Magic is a fascinating thing (even to someone as cynical as me). We are amazed by it as children, and even as adults we retain this amazement despite knowing that what we are seeing is a trick and real magic doesn't exist. Yet in spite of this knowledge and our apparent rationality, and regardless of how closely we watch the magician to try and spot how he is doing it, we are time and again taken in as we appear to see the impossible happen. Objects – from coins to the entire Statue of Liberty – disappear and reappear right in front of our eyes. Spoons are bent, women are cut on half on stage, minds are read and thoughts predicted. We know these things should not be possible, and yet here they apparently are. A good magician can quite easily make you believe six impossible things before breakfast.

The question as to how they do it is not a new one, and it has been answered in many ways, many times before. A quick search on Amazon.co.uk reveals over 6,700 books on magic tricks – and that is not even mentioning the DVDs they sell and the instructional videos on YouTube and similar sites. So if we can all find out how to do magic so easily, what is possibly left to say by this book? Plenty, as it turns out. The authors are both neuroscientists working at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, who had a eureka moment; they realised what every magician already knew, that they are performing tricks and the real magic works in the spectator's mind. The magician's art takes advantage of the way our minds work, and by exploring these mechanisms through neuroscience, they reasoned they could make new discoveries about the way our minds operate. "Magicians basically do cognitive science experiments for audiences all night long" they explain, "Magic tricks test many of the same cognitive processes we study, but are incredibly robust. It doesn't matter that the entire audience knows it is being tricked; it falls for each trick every time it is performed...The idea rapidly took shape: we would bring scientists and magicians together so scientists could learn the magicians' techniques and harness their powers".

"...you don't need to have a scientific background to understand it, just an enquiring mind and a good amount of concentration."

These scientists therefore set out to learn and study magic – just why do certain tricks work in our minds? With the help of many professional magicians (including Penn and Teller) they unpick the secrets of certain tricks. Some work due to the way our eyes track movements, allowing us to be easily distracted and misdirected by someone who knows what they are doing, for

instance. Others work by exploiting our relatively poor memories, ability to be easily influenced or the point that we can only really concentrate on one thing at a time (yes, it is demonstrated here – the ability to multitask effectively is a myth). During the course of the book, these principles are each illustrated by taking apart a certain trick and explaining how it works. While these explanations always have spoiler alerts for those who would rather keep the mystique, I found that reading about how tricks work didn't actually spoil them. Quite the reverse, in fact. After reading about certain acts or tricks, I found myself looking them up online, intrigued about seeing the described effects for myself. I think I must have watched more magic over the week that I've read this book than over the previous twelve months put together. So Sleights of Mind gets a big tick in the "encourages you to find out more" box.

For those of you who might be out off by the description of this as a science book, don't be. It is aimed at a lay audience, and pitched at about the same level as New Scientist; you don't need to have a scientific background to understand it, just an enquiring mind and a good amount of concentration. I never found the book heavy going, although it is information dense and I found that reading one chapter at a time was enough (any more than that and I started to lose the thread a bit). The analysis of the magic is also supported by a nice narrative thread about the authors' progress in learning to perform magic themselves, culminating in a performance that would admit them to the prestigious Academy of Magical Arts if they are successful. It is also peppered with fascinating sidebars, exploring everything from the phenomenon of the Mechanical Turk to the way the CIA used the sleight of hand and misdirection techniques of magicians to help them during the Cold War.

Another point I liked was that the text was well supported by a series of videos available on the authors' website (www.sleightsofmind.com) – if you are having trouble following a detailed textual explanation of a complex card trick, watching a video of it certainly helps. There is also no real alternative for watching an illusion for yourself to really appreciate it. The explanations are generally good and clear, but remember that the authors are used to writing academic texts, so the revelations never seem quite as dramatic to a non-scientific audience as perhaps they could do. They try to keep the tone light and engaging, but in places it seems to spill over into something reminiscent of a school teacher desperately trying to convince their class that something is cool. The revelations in this book are cool, so I felt the writing didn't need to labour the point quite so much. Still, *Sleights of Mind* provided an interesting week of entertainment for me, and they rounded it off very nicely with an epilogue that briefly explains how what we have learned over the course of the book can be applied to everyday life – now that really is magical.

Recommended.

Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals about our Brains by Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde
Paperback, 279pp, Published by Profile Books (Feb 2011)

With thanks to Profile Books for providing this review copy of *Sleights of Mind*

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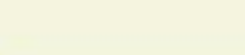
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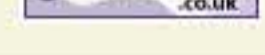
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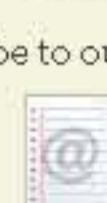
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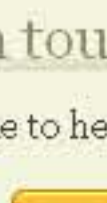
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