

It's magic... it's neuroscience... it's neuromagic!

By [cmixgeek](#) | [May 14, 2013](#) | [Geeking Out, Non-Fiction](#)

Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals about Our Everyday Deceptions by Stephen L. Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde (taking a breath) is a mouthful. It is also a delightfully fun and informative surprise. C'mon... there is a part of you that is dying to be able to talk neuroscience like a pro, right? No? Well, I guess that's okay because this book is not going to convert you to a bio or neuro nerd. But if you have even the tiniest curiosity about how our brains work to deceive (and protect) us on a daily basis – and even how some folks have learned to manipulate that tendency, then this book is for you. We haven't done one of these purely Geek Out reads in a while, so come with me won't you? Let's get our nerd on!

Fun Facts: I don't want to ruin the joy of reading *Sleights of Mind* for yourselves, so let me just dump a few random chunks of geek knowledge on you. If these tidbits don't intrigue, this book is probably not for you. But, if like me, you were amazed and at least a little horrified by some of them, then give *Sleights of Mind* a perusal. There is plenty more where this comes from:

In discussing the relative limitation of the human optic nerve, the authors explain that each human eye is about as powerful as a one-megapixel camera and that it is only high-def in a tiny portion of the field of view. In other words... we only clearly see that which we look directly at – the rest is construct and blurred images.

In discussing our perception of personal space the authors describe our attachment to the area immediately surrounding our physical bodies and how violated we can feel when it is penetrated. They give a wonderful example of a child giggling like mad when we simply wiggle our fingers over their ribs. Apparently, our sense of personal space is a function of our mind/body connection our whole life – and not the result of crowded elevators and rude cineplex patrons.

The authors also demonstrate the near-fact that we humans don't have the free will we think we do... but fortunately we have "free won't" and that is pretty much just as good.

The geek in me also loved the bit about how early magicians (being the techno-nerds they were) developed the parachute, the ribbonless typewriter, and the coin-operated lock for vending machines.

This book skims over a number of intriguing ideas – sort of an intro to neurobiology and psychology. There are compelling insights into autism, gender-bias, natural selection, and other sociological phenomena. Any one of the ideas expressed in this book would be worthy of a book all it's own. Macknik and Conde don't spend a lot of time on any one concept though but zip on to the next, based loosely on a progression or exploration of magic tricks. This conceit is high concept for sure, but maybe did not serve the material as well as the authors intended. Too often, while reading this book, I wanted more information or a slower discussion but instead got a spoiler alert and explanation of how magicians fold cards, dig through trash cans for clues, or use props to obfuscate reality.

Odds and Ends: The Amazing Randi is, well, amazing yet again. The Worm knows of him best through his Uri Geller challenge and his contributions to the Skeptical Movement. He is a brilliant mind, in addition to being a lecturer and magician. One can easily see how his own dual interests in science and magic lend themselves to this book's subject matter, and his chapters are the most interesting and well-integrated. The rest, though, feels somewhat forced. It is possible the writers overestimated mainstream readers' infatuation with magic tricks. Many of the most lasting examples and experiments in *Sleights of Mind* do not involve magic at all.

The more I thought about what felt slightly off about *Sleights of Mind*, the more I took a look at what worked. Then it started to occur to me that the authors used something fantastic and mysterious (neuroscience) to explain something else fantastic and mysterious (magic) and the result was something far less impactful than it should have been. When Macknik and Conde explain eye movements and concentration using everyday examples, it sticks. We can all relate to zoning out while driving home or to not noticing something obvious to others. But by adding the extra layer of describing a magic trick (which we adults already assume is just that – a trick) it sort of downplays the dramatic reveal of the science. Not a whole hell of a lot of us spend much time wondering how magicians accomplish their feats of skill. But we all get a little freaked out when we pull into our own driveway after a commute and have no memory of driving home. Add to that the practical, layman's use for such information and it is easy to see why experiments about ethnic and gender bias or pilot error have more resonance than the "ah-ha" moment of realizing that a magician has (shockingly) tricked you or outright lied.


One last comment about the content in *Sleights of Mind*... there are very useful links as footnotes (in the Kindle version, at least) so the reader can actually see some of the experiments and tricks performed. This feature is super helpful given the fact that making a coin disappear is not the most visually stunning scenario imaginable, and even less so when the authors are forced to merely describe the act. Props to the authors for being sensitive to the limitations of print here and including links. They also went out of their way to include simple graphics and photos to demonstrate many of their illusions. A word of caution, though: If you do read this book in Kindle format, be careful where you touch to advance to the next page. This work is footnote laden and you may just find yourself jumping around to disparate ideas and explanations without meaning to.

Final Thoughts: For my own money, I'd prefer to read more about Macknik and Conde's neuro research and less about magic tricks, but I totally get what they were going for here. Perhaps it is more a function of my own particular nerd brain that I didn't enjoy the interruptions to the more interesting discussions about how the brain works – just to find out how disappointingly mundane some of these traditional magic tricks are. I must admit the mentalist tricks were interesting, in as far as they did manipulate the brain's tendency to follow certain neurological and psychological models. Ultimately, I was left with a sense of awe and majesty... with the science of it all. The 'magic' was kinda' dull.

This book will absolutely not be for everyone. It stops a little short for the folks deeply interested in the neuroscience, and it blunts and demystifies the entertainment value of magic for the fans of that particular form of fun. In trying to make the science accessible, *Sleights of Mind* sort of split the difference between two approaches to their subject matter and in doing so, did not excel in either. That said, the sheer amount of interesting neurological and perceptual information contained in the book makes it worth a read. The Worm's beef is less with the content and more with the method of delivery. For similarly


astounding insight into the human mind and psyche, The Worm recommends *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell (which is also briefly acknowledged in *Sleights of Mind*).

Thanks to the [Skeptic's Guide to the Universe](#) podcast for exposing (visual pun intended) The Worm to this work back in October of 2011.



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