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MAGIC FOR NEUROSCIENTISTS

By [Laura Sanders](#)

Web edition: Tuesday, October 20th, 2009

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CHICAGO -- Magicians and neuroscientists may not seem like a likely match, but they have one important thing in common: A fascination with the brain. As *Science News* pointed out in this article about [science and magic](#) in April, neuroscientists delve deep into the human mind to see how things like attention, perception and memory work, while magicians manipulate these very same things to confound their audience.

This unlikely alliance was solidified October 17 at the Society for Neuroscience's [Annual Meeting](#) in Chicago as two world-class magicians demonstrated some of their tricks to an audience of thousands of neuroscientists. (The size of the scientist crowd may have rivaled the motley crew of America's Got Talent hopefuls, who were waiting in a monster line that snaked around a different part of the conference center.

Although neuroscientists seem like they might be a tough crowd, everyone in the room was enamored. By all reports, the scientists seemed thrilled to have such interesting new colleagues.

Apollo Robbins, known professionally as the "Gentleman Thief," has an unusual set of skills that allowed him to, among other dastardly deeds, "borrow" Jennifer Garner's engagement ring, switch Troy Aikman and Jerome Bettis' licenses, and relieve Jimmy Carter's secret service agents of their wallets, watches and confidential itineraries. (For more of Robbins' rap sheet, check out his website [Istealstuff.com](#)

[Eric Mead](#), the other magician who performed, offered some salient advice: The key to magic, he says, is "to look people in the eye and lie intentionally." But that only works because these highly skilled mind-benders are so attuned to the mysteries of the brain that they can literally manipulate a person's reality.

Robbins talked about three tricks that lead to the magician's so-called grift sense — the ability to instantly read and respond to other people's signals. First, he says, proximity is everything. Getting into someone else's personal space without setting off alarms is hard. But tricks like moving in sideways, avoiding direct eye contact and tilting the head can all make the intrusive move more innocuous. Second, movements that draw the eye can provide the magician cover to do the trick. Creating a multitude of small motions, instead of one big motion, keeps a person's gaze right where the magician wants it. And third, manipulating a person's interior dialog can cause a person to let down his or her guard. Once someone has a raucous internal dialog going on, the senses become dulled to the outside world, leaving them vulnerable to a trick.

Had Apollo Robbins and Eric Mead ventured over to the America's Got Talent auditions next door, there would have been no contest — these magicians would have made the competition disappear.

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