THE FRONTAL CORTEX

Profile

Jonah Lehrer is an editor at large for Seed Magazine. He's also written for The New Yorker, Nature, the Boston Globe and is a contributer to Radio Lab and Scientific American Mind. He's the author of *Proust Was A Neuroscientist*. His new book is *How We Decide*.

My Books

Magic and Neuroscience

Posted on: April 21, 2009 2:54 PM, by **Jonah Lehrer**

I've got a new article in the latest issue of Wired, guest-edited by J.J. Abrams. It's quite an excellent issue, I think, although I'm still utterly befuddled by the hidden puzzles on the glossy pages. My article is an investigation of what stage magicians can teach us about the human mind and the frailties of perception:

> For Teller (that's his full legal name), magic is more than entertainment. He wants his tricks to reveal the everyday fraud of perception so that people become aware of the tension between what is and what seems to be. Our brains don't see everything--the world is too big, too full of stimuli. So the brain takes shortcuts, constructing a picture of reality with relatively simple algorithms for what things are supposed to look like. Magicians capitalize on those rules. "Every time you perform a magic trick, you're engaging in experimental psychology," Teller says. "If the audience asks, 'How the hell did he do that?' then the experiment was successful. I've exploited the efficiencies of your mind."
>
> Now that on-the-job experimentation has taken an academic turn. A couple of years ago, Teller joined a coterie of illusionists and tricksters recruited by Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde, researchers at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, to look at the neuroscience of magic. Last summer, that work culminated in an article for the journal Nature Reviews Neuroscience called "Attention and Awareness in Stage Magic." Teller was one of the coauthors, and its publication was a signal event in a field some researchers are calling magicology, the mining of stage illusions for insights into brain function.

And here's the peer-reviewed paper.