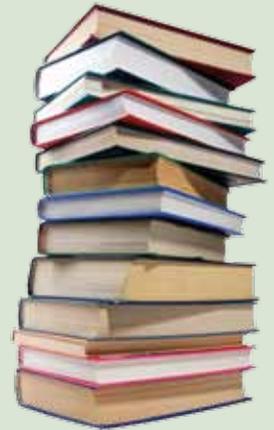


The Brain That Changes Itself

Reviewed by Vincent Sicari
Author: Norman Doidge
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This is a truly awesome organ that each of us has within. Just how awesome and just how complex is the essay of Norman Doidge in his wonderfully written best-seller, *The Brain that Changes Itself*. But Norman Doidge is not merely trying to describe. He charts, he chronicles, he illustrates. His thesis is that the brain can learn new ways of doing things, that it can make up for its own defects, whether they be induced by injury, violence or the apparently chaotic and despotic nature of our inherited genes.

This book describes the journey of many individuals through their fascinatingly horrific life stories of injury and wholeness, of incompleteness and fulfillment, of incomprehension and knowingness. But it is a book that is truly inspirational, it is full of hope. It does not dwell on the macabre for its own sake, but it doesn't hide the wondrous question of human pain.

In some ways Norman Doidge owes much to Oliver Sacks, that great neurologist and author who gave us such classics as *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. For those who enjoyed his books, and I am one, this book by Doidge will be a wonderful new read. Popular science has always been a favourite of mine, and I have spent many an hour in the thrilling company of David Attenborough, Paul Davies or Stephen Jay Gould. But this kind of writing is a special genre that not only educates. It fascinates. It makes you wonder what it means to be human.

Norman Doidge begins with the story of Cheryl Schiltz: *the Woman Perpetually Falling*. Can you really imagine what it means to feel like that. It can drive you through despair to the desperation of suicide. Cheryl was the victim of a mal-administered medicament. As simple as that. And that changed her life completely. She lost her sense of balance. The amazing instrument that we all have in our skulls, the semi-circular

canals, those delicate instruments that we all take for granted, in Cheryl just simply failed. She could not walk. She could not detect the movement of her own body through space. Even when she fell and found herself on the ground, she still felt as if she was falling through into an infinite abyss. Cheryl was cured. She regained her sense of balance. She can now walk. And it was by the amazing adaptability that the brain possesses. Through the work of brain science pioneers such as Paul Bach y Rita, Cheryl re-trained areas of her brain not previously devoted to balance to do the task that had been destroyed in her by the wrongful administration of a common drug.

And that is what this book is really about. Doidge calls it the brain's plasticity: how areas of the brain usually dedicated to certain specific functions can learn to perform new tasks. The scientists whose work Doidge examines make what appear to be radical claims for their techniques and technologies. The blind can be made to see, and the hearing impaired can be taught to hear. The retarded can be healed. The scientist, Michael Mezernich, even teaches autistic children to communicate.

Norman Doidge demonstrates how deeply ingrained pathways of the brain can be re-directed, how habits can be changed. And how traumatic experiences suffered by individuals can be integrated.

This book is a challenge for all of us. It purports to demonstrate that the brain is not a static organ that learns in the early years of our lives and then shuts down to perform certain learned behaviours. No, this is an organ of infinite complexity, it is an organ whose functions are only being discovered in our own time. We are not the playthings of others or events. We can take control of our lives.