

IDEAS

You must remember this

Joshua Foer's charming account of his year of training for the U.S. Memory Championship is ... well, memorable

Moonwalking with Einstein

The Art and Science of Remembering Everything

By Joshua Foer

Penguin Press, 306 pages, \$33.50

REVIEWED BY SIOBHAN ROBERTS

The opening of this review requires nothing more than a representative witticism from the book it is meant to critique. Of which there are many; don't get me wrong. Alas, no such pithy anecdote is leaping forth from my memory bank.

But, ah yes, it's coming back to me now ... I do recall learning somewhere within the pages of *Moonwalking with Einstein*, the erudite and charming first book from Joshua Foer, that this lapse could be due to a number of sure-fire memory killers: too much wine; too little sleep (for one, this book kept me awake reading, but it didn't do my memory any favours); or, on the macro level, an atrophied memory that has become too dependent on modern technology, external prostheses such the Internet, my smart phone and even the good old-fashioned book itself.

Dissatisfied with his own forgetful memory – he forgets the food in the oven, where he parked the car, and when “its” is “it’s” or when it’s “its” – Foer enterprisingly embarks on a stint of participatory journalism, moving into his parents' basement for a year while he trains for the 2006 U.S. Memory Championship.

The story follows Foer as he ramps up his training (coached by a Grand Master of Memory and a Professor of Memory Expertise), interspersed with a survey course on the history of memory. He travels from the fifth century B.C., when the Greek poet Simonides invented the “memory palace” – also known as “the art of memory,” the mnemonic device Foer deployed – through to current cutting-edge science that uses functional MRIs to watch memorable brains at work.

The survey is interesting enough. Though Foer dwells there a little long at times, and the moral of his story, that the role of memory is for better and for worse ever-changing, gets a tad repetitive (that said, dwelling and repeating are good strategies for remembering, so maybe it's all part of a subliminal motive).



Foer is at his amiable and amusing and irresistible best when he's being himself in the present tense. iSTOCKPHOTO

THE FABULOUS FOERS

As much attention as young Foer is getting for *Moonwalking with Einstein*, he's a Joshua-come-lately to the fraternal literary party. His brothers:

Jonathan Safran Foer

The author of the smash debut novel *Everything is Illuminated* has lately followed up with *Eating Animals*, a powerful plea for a vegetarian diet and against factory farming. He's also married to another newly minted A-list novelist, Nicole Krauss.

Franklin Foer

The eldest brother is editor of the influential political-cultural magazine *The New Republic* and author of *How Football Explains the World*, a bestselling book on international soccer.

Foer as a narrator is at his amiable and amusing and irresistible best when he's being himself in the present tense: taking the mickey out of memory missionary Tony Buzan, who founded the World Memory Championship; going for a walk around the block with an elderly amnesiac whose memory goes back only as far as his most recent thought; and visiting the library with Kim Peek (a.k.a. Rain Man), who has never forgotten anything, not one word of the 9,000 books he has read, at 10 seconds per page, with each eye scanning facing pages independently and simultaneously.

And when Foer susses out the autistic savant Daniel Tammet, the book becomes a veritable page-turner. Tammet is well known for his synesthesia, which allows him to perform complex multiplication and division with no conscious mental effort. When he thinks of a number, it takes on

in his mind's eye a distinct colour and shape, and when he multiplies, say, two three-digit numbers, the abstract properties of the factors meld to form the product, like brushstrokes of blue and yellow watercolour paint blending into green.

Observing Tammet, Foer comes to suspect he is not a savant, but rather simply a practised Mental Athlete (as they call themselves). Foer performs a sting operation of sorts. On three separate occasions, he asks Tammet to describe what the number 9,412 looks like. Tammet gives three very different answers. On the third try, Foer confronts the world's most famous savant with his theory that he is not truly a savant. “It was one of the most uncomfortable sentences I'd ever spoken to anyone,” Foer says.

It was uncomfortable even to read. It made me cringe and wonder whether this wasn't heading

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JOSHUA FOER

dangerously in the direction of a journalist gratuitously being a journalist, trying to catch his subject out for some titillating copy. But Foer had done some serious sleuthing. And by then I trusted his instincts, his thoughtful and rigorous intentions. As did Tammet, because he didn't take offence. He implicitly appreciated Foer's thesis: that while it's inspiring to believe there are savants with superhuman memories, perhaps Tammet is evidence of an “even more inspiring idea: that we all have remarkable capacities asleep inside of us.”

Foer himself being a prime example. He didn't get a most memorable \$1.2-million U.S. for this book for nothing. He suffered considerable indignities. Obsessively practising, for example, sitting on “a folding chair in the basement of my parents' home at 6:45 a.m., wearing underpants, earmuffs and memory goggles, with a printout of eight hundred random digits in my lap and an image in my mind's eye of a lingerie-glad garden gnome [the mnemonic for the number 562,632] suspended over my grandmother's kitchen table.” Once he turned around to find his father standing there staring at him, perplexed and likely a bit worried. But now, no doubt, rather proud. Because Foer handily won the 2006 U.S. Memory Championship. Sorry, forgot: Spoiler alert!

Siobhan Roberts is writing a biography about Princeton mathematician John Horton Conway, whose excellent memory is not as excellent as he believes it to be.