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On a sunny fall afternoon in 1988, Jon Sarkin was playing golf when, without a whisper of warning, his life changed forever. As he bent down to pick up his golf ball, something strange and massive happened inside his head; part of his brain seemed to unhinge, to split apart and float away. For an utterly inexplicable reason, a tiny blood vessel, thin as a thread, deep inside the folds of his gray matter had suddenly shifted ever so slightly, rubbing up against his acoustic nerve. Any noise now caused him excruciating pain.

After months of seeking treatment to no avail, in desperation Sarkin resorted to radical deep-brain surgery, which seemed to go well until during recovery his brain began to bleed and he suffered a major stroke. When he awoke, he was a different man. Before the stroke, he was a calm, disciplined chiropractor, a happily married husband and father of a newborn son. Now he was transformed into a volatile and wildly exuberant obsessive, seized by a manic desire to create art, devoting virtually all his waking hours to furiously drawing, painting, and writing poems and letters to himself, strangely detached from his wife and child, and unable to return to his normal working life. His sense of self had been shattered, his intellect intact but his way of being drastically altered. His art became a relentless quest for the right words and pictures to unlock the secrets of how to live this strange new life. And what was even stranger was that he remembered his former self.

In a beautifully crafted narrative, award-winning journalist and Pulitzer Prize finalist Amy Ellis Nutt interweaves Sarkin's remarkable story with a fascinating tour of the history of and latest findings in neuroscience and evolution that illuminate how the brain produces, from its web of billions of neurons and chaos of liquid electrical pulses, the richness of human experience that makes us who we are. Nutt brings vividly to life pivotal moments of discovery in neuroscience, from the shocking "rebirth" of a young girl hanged in 1650 to the first autopsy of an autistic savant's brain, and the extraordinary true stories of people whose personalities and cognitive abilities were dramatically altered by brain trauma, often in shocking ways.

Probing recent revelations about the workings of creativity in the brain and the role of art in the evolution of human intelligence, she reveals how Jon Sarkin's obsessive need to create mirrors the earliest function of art in the brain. Introducing major findings about how our sense of self transcends the bounds of our own bodies, she explores how it is that the brain generates an individual "self" and how, if damage to our brains can so alter who we are, we can nonetheless be said to have a soul.

For Jon Sarkin, with his personality and sense of self permanently altered, making art became his bridge back to life, a means of reassembling from the shards of his former self a new man who could rejoin his family and fashion a viable life. He is now an acclaimed artist who exhibits at some of the country's most prestigious venues, as well as a devoted husband to his wife, Kim, and father to their three children. At once wrenching and inspiring, this is a story of the remarkable human capacity to overcome the most daunting obstacles and of the extraordinary workings of the human mind.

Shadows Bright as Glass: The Remarkable Story of One Man's Journey from Brain Trauma to Artistic Triumph Details

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From Reader Review Shadows Bright as Glass: The Remarkable Story of One Man's Journey from Brain Trauma to Artistic Triumph for online ebook

Adrienne says

I was disappointed by this book. I felt there was a disconnect between the history of neuroscience and Sarkin's story. They could have been two separate books and been far more interesting. Plus I found the shift in tone between the history chapters and those of his life distracting. For the Sarkin bits, the language seemed overly flowery. I don't feel that this book did his life or his art justice. I also can't fathom why photos of his artwork were not included within the text.

Sarah Ewald says

A fascinating read.

This is the story of Jon Sarkin, an amazing artist who cannot stop painting. At age 35, he suffered from tinnitus (acquired after the relatively benign act of bending over to pick up a golf ball which resulted in a blood vessel exerting pressure on his auditory nerve in the brain). After a subsequent operation to relieve the condition, he experienced a stroke. The ensuing operation removed parts of his brain to stop the bleeding. As a result, his brain 're-wired' giving him a condition in which he is obsessed by drawing. He has adapted to become an award-winning artist of note.

The author follows the progress of Mr. Sarkin's recovery and life adaptations, and also explores the areas of brain injury and brain abnormalities.

This book is a reminder that I am blessed to be normal, and that we can all be a breath away from tragedy.

Rick says

Would it have killed them to include just one sample of his art? Just one? Geez.

I got tired of and beaten down by the author's overuse of similes to explain what she was trying to express. Way too many sentences followed this format: "Jon's brain was like [blah blah blah]" or "Jon's search for himself was like [blah blah blah]" or "Jon saw the world like it was [blah blah blah]."

I also was rolling my eyes every time the author made a reference to the "self" or the "soul."

The science was interesting, but only up to a point.

In my opinion, for a significant portion of the second half of the book, the author left Sarkin behind. I also thought she sort of time traveled in her narrative, for no apparent reason. One chapter might be about 2009; the next about events in 2005. And, finally, I thought she rather suddenly dropped the storyline about his brother's death after suggesting it had some significance.

Chana says

The amazing story of Jon Sarkin, a man who suffers a near fatal brain injury but over the following years

becomes an obsessive and successful artist. He was not an artist beforehand, he was a chiropractor. His wife stands by him the whole way, and it must have been very, very difficult for her, but she stands by him, has two more children with him and is so grateful for her husband despite how damaged and changed he is after the injury. So inspirational. A perfect book to read going into Rosh Hashana. To me, this book shouts out the existence of God and the miracle of life. I really am in awe of both Kim and Jon Sarkin, but I guess because I am a woman and a wife, I see Kim as a role model in dealing with adversity. Lots of tears for me with this one. Oh, and take a look at Jon Sarkin's art. WOW!! Amazing that this man was not an artist beforehand, and that this is what he accomplishes after his injuries!!

Esther Bradley-detally says

Oscar Wilde's opening quote from *De Profundis* got me - "When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?"

Inside cover, "On a sunny fall afternoon in 1988, Jon Sarkin was playing golf when, without a whisper of warning, his life changed forever. As he bent down to pick up his golf ball, something strange and massive happened inside his head; part of his brain seemed to unhinge, to split apart and float away. For an utterly inexplicable reason, a tiny blood vessel, thin as a thread, deep inside the folds of his gray matter had suddenly shifted ever so slightly, rubbing up against his acoustic nerve. Any noise now caused him excruciating pain."

That's just the first paragraph on the inside cover. Fascinating, gripping, informative, courageous, both he and his family, and he goes from mild mannered chiropractor to relentless artist.

Amazing

Sally Monaghan says

Fascinating. Nutt strikes a really delicate balance between telling the story of Jon Sarkin and his family after his devastating stroke, and the still developing science of how our brain functions and affects our sense of self. Sarkin's story is amazing--he was a chiropractor, married with a young son, but after his stroke developed a compulsion and a talent to create art. Other aspects of his personality changed drastically also--most importantly, his ability to relate to and care for his family. The author follows him on his journey to make peace with his new self. However, she also takes the incredibly complex science of the study of the brain from its earliest days to today and explains it in terms that anyone can understand and relate to. As I said, absolutely fascinating.

Note that although, the book jacket states that Nutt was a Pulitzer finalist for her 2009 newspaper account of Jon Sarkin, in fact, she just won the Pulitzer for her 2010 story about the sinking of a scallop boat off of Cape May, NJ. She's an amazingly talented researcher and writer. Can't wait until she writes more.

Sarah says

This book was absolutely fascinating. Easy to read, with a compelling mix of historical anecdotes and scientific research, Amy Nutt explores and explains many of the mysteries of the brain. What happens when parts of our brains stop functioning the way they should? Where in our mental activity is our sense of self located? Is the brain a separate thing from the mind? Nutt doesn't always have the answers, but she uses the story of John Sarkin to challenge herself and her readers to explore the questions.

Emily McCormack says

I read this book for biology for a book report summary I had to complete. Even though I was not really intrigued by the book, it was a really good story in general with Jon Sarkin going from having a brain issue and almost dying, to one of the best artists ever.

Karyn Gayle says

Very interesting read. This is a nonfiction account of Jon Sarkin's reinvention of self, after experiencing a stroke followed by brain surgery. In addition to Jon's remarkable story, the book presents a general history of Neurology and its current advances. The book also addresses the question concerning from where one's "identity" comes. What makes you, YOU? The brain is truly fascinating, yet we know so little about it. In Jon's story, he is a calm and disciplined medical doctor who suddenly becomes an impulsive, obsessive artist following a stroke. What makes Jon's story unique is, he remembers his former self and seems to maintain his intellect. But, he is no longer the Jon Sarkin who existed before the stroke.

Ms.pegasus says

At 35 Jon Sarkin was content with the certain routines of his life. He had a satisfying career helping others as a successful chiropractor; he was a reliable and loving family man; he enjoyed golf and jamming on his guitar with friends. On October 20, 1988 all of that changed. A single capillary shifted, pressing on the vestibulocochlear (8th cranial) nerve in his brain. He was left dizzy to the point of nausea, hypersensitive to the most innocuous sensations, and plagued by a relentless high pitched whine. After nearly a year of unproductive medical testing, he sought out Dr. Peter Jannetta, a pioneering neurosurgeon, for a high risk operation to lift the capillary off the nerve. The surgery appeared successful but 3 days later a blood vessel in his brain ruptured. The stroke-like episode and operation to remove the clot and stop the bleeding revealed a permanently damaged left cerebellum, and left Sarkin with an altered personality. He now uttered a stream of random word associations, syntactically recognizable but irrelevant to any listener. His speech seemed a reflexive response to what he was feeling. His impulses were unmodulated. Peculiar obsessions drove his behavior. His sense of isolation was reminiscent of autism.

Yet, in a sense, he was lucky. Perhaps because Sarkin was conscious of the contrast between his previous self and his present state, he was able to transform. An attempt to re-establish old routines by returning to his practice failed. The effort was both stressful and unsatisfying. Fortunately, he had other resources — resources that his undamaged right cerebellum could utilize. In his youth he had been interested in drawing.

He was also a fan of the off-beat comics of Roger Crumb. A favorite book from adolescence was Carlos Castaneda's JOURNEY TO IXTLAN. An experience of the Sixties had conditioned him to experimentation. The transformation did not come quickly. Four years after the operation, he finally sold his practice. He had come to find relief in the repetitive process and immediacy of drawing. His visual memories had become amplified and incorporating them into his drawings and paintings gave his damaged left cerebellum relief from tasks it could no longer accomplish. Two years after he had sold his practice, he leased space for a small art studio. He created new routines. The environment helped. He lived in Gloucester and enjoyed walking along the shore where other artists congregated to work.

Amy Ellis Nutt intersperses her story with chapters on neuroscience. In 1991 Giacomo Rizzolatti identified what he called "mirror neurons." Whether a macaque is eating or watching another macaque eat, these neurons light up in an MRI with the same pattern. Neuroscientists hypothesize that damaged mirror neuron circuits contribute to the lack of empathy characteristic of autism. In 1989 psychiatrist Darold Treffert advanced the idea that acquired savantism can result when instinctive or unconscious memory systems attempt to compensate for impaired analytic and learning systems. These systems commandeer unused neurons to effect a realigned network.

She also links philosophical intuitions to the fragmented findings of neuroscience. We experience vision as a continuous stream. It is the brain that creates that illusion by filling in gaps and editing out what is deemed extraneous information. *"Sarkin's brain no longer followed the usual visual rules for seamless perception. Instead of the usual expectations and confirmation biases, his brain saw everything at once and did little to prioritize the information."* (p.161) The result was a transformed world view best understood by the layperson in the frameworks of philosophy or the metaphors of poetry rather than the MRI's of neurons lighting up like a complicated pinball machine.

Sarkin became an artist obsessed with highly personal images. By focusing on the process rather than the translation of ideas, and by embracing art as a physical compulsion, he entered the portal of art therapy. That he became a celebrated artist is almost beside the point. Sarkin assesses the relationship between his art and his new self with the observation: *"My art is a metaphor of my emotional experience...And since my life is my art, my quest for self IS my art."* (p.198)

There is no cohesive theory of cognition to explain Sarkin's strange journey. Readers well-versed in the neuroscience literature may find this book disappointing. Its success lies in integrating neuroscience with philosophical and poetic insight. The frailty of the human mind and its resourcefulness at deriving meaning are the themes that emerge from this unusual biography. This is eloquently expressed in the concluding paragraph: *"There are pools of perception that lie untouched in most human beings, like the water beneath a frozen river that churns and swirls but remains invisible. Sarkin's stroke had punched a hole through the ice. Set loose from the constraints of normal reasoning, he had plunged into a riotous river of unmediated perception. His brain refocused on the random details of life, mixing memory and emotion, then distilling his experiences into words and images. He knew he was no longer the man he had been. His brain was a broken mirror, its pieces reflecting all the different parts — the husband, the child, the father, the artist, the writer, the obsessive. He had become, like one of his favorite poets Wallace Stevens once wrote, the sum of all 'human shadows, bright as glass.'"* (p.250)

NOTES:

The source of the Wallace Stevens quote is part viii of the poem, "Things of August."

The video "Unbound" described in Chapter 34 can be viewed on the artist's website:

<http://jsarkin.com/?s=unbound>

Guster's "Do you love me" video described in Chapter 34 can be viewed on this website:
<https://vimeo.com/14383131>

Gail says

Well, this book was breathtaking. I snatched it from a pile of books and dove in and couldn't put it down. After I finished it at 2 a.m., I turned to the jacket to find out who this incredible author is: she is a Pulitzer finalist. What a writer! This book was a study of a man, Jon Sarkin, whose life was radically altered after he experienced a stroke. His story is the backdrop for a tour through historical ideas about how the brain functions and about current understandings and research into brain function and notions of what constitutes 'the self.' Sarkin developed a prodigious art ability and a compulsive drive to create--both art and in writing, and interestingly, is able to visit another man who has experienced the same type of compulsion years after they both developed the dramatic changes. This is a fantastic book!

Juliana Haught says

This book traces the real-life story of a (still-living) man, Jon Sarkin, whose life is dramatically changed by a freakish medical event in his head, and then further and forever changed by complications from the surgery he went through in a bid to get his normal life back. At the same time, the book takes the reader through the brain, the history of neuroscience and how the various parts of the brain work, and then takes us back into the story of this man and what he (and his family) must grapple with. The book goes back-and-forth throughout, so that we gain an exquisite view into the human brain while we trace Sarkin's story. There isn't resolution per se, but it's inspiring and humbling to see the strength of human spirit and intelligence and need to connect, even in the face of unthinkable trauma.

Jenna Condon says

It wasn't my favorite book, but I would recommend it to others. I personally not very interested in brain science so if you like brain science this is the perfect book for you.

Natajia says

I found myself to be more interested in the science and stories about how and what has been learned about the brain than I did about the subject at hand. By the end, I was skipping past everything about Sarkin to get to the science behind it. The same parts of his story were repeated over and over, but just using different words to describe it. Boring.

And as another stated, why wouldn't they include a sample of his artwork??? I mean, come on. It's like buying a cookbook that didn't have ingredients listed in there.

Beth Nieman says

This is the story of a male chiropractor who experienced a strange mental "shift" one day while playing golf--a small blood vessel in his head slightly shifted and began to press on a nerve, causing him to have a very severe case of tinnitus (noise in the ears), which the man himself described as sounding like "a thousand screaming baboons." It was exhausting and stressful to the point where he submitted to a risky brain surgery. While the surgery stopped the tinnitus, after surgery he had a stroke and sustained some permanent damage to the left hemisphere of his brain.

The most poignant parts describe his wife's grief over the changes in her husband. She and he had been delightfully happy together and starting a family--yet after this occurred, it was no longer safe for her to leave her husband alone with their child because he couldn't stay focused enough to keep the child from danger--even though he loved the child very much. Though her husband was still with her physically, his personality and mental processes changed profoundly.

It was interesting to read Nutt's account of how the man shaped a new life for himself, and how he is able to work by supporting himself with his art--a newfound interest (obsession, really) since the brain damage. Interspersed through are chapters that cover brain science and research, and some discussion of other cases of life after a brain injury.

People who enjoy personal memoirs, psychology and science will probably like reading this book.
