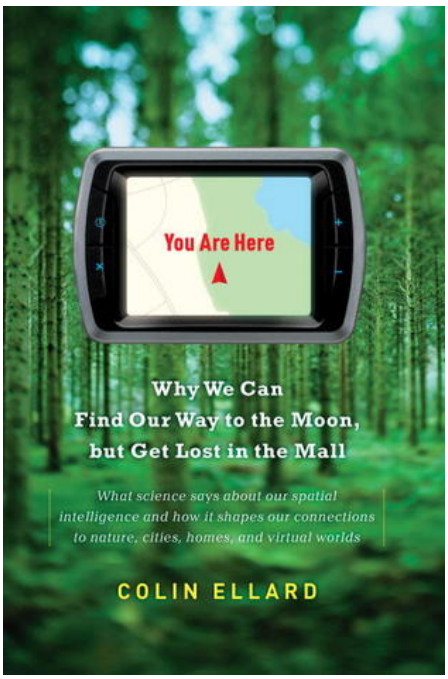

You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall

Colin Ellard

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You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall Details

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From Reader Review You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall for online ebook

Arlene S says

Not much detail about literally finding our way (wayfaring/wayfinding, author calles it), so definitely not a self-help book, and quite theoretical --research background about ants and bees. Instead, it is an examination of our perceptions of spaces we inhabit, including experiments with people in virtual space. The expanded subtitle is a very accurate representation as to purpose of book: "What science says about our spatial intelligence and how it shapes our connections to nature, cities, homes, and virtual worlds." If this sounds like a research paper --yup-- science book written for the general reader in the spirit of author Gladwell, but not as engaging, perhaps because it is a narrower topic. Starts out with some biology (how various animal species find their way) and thereafter delves mostly into psychology (author is a behavioral neuroscientist). Some interesting stuff, but fairly tedious reading, especially through the middle. Author tries to bump up the interest with examples, personal anecdotes and fact tidbits, but these seemed to me just peripheral and didn't do the job. Agree with many other reveiws here on GR on the book's shortcomings. (it's true, one chapter is a "soapbox" about getting people --esp. kids-- into nature. But I agree with him on this, so I didn't mind) It did introduce me to some new architectural concepts, and a few new vocabulary words. (isovist, and another word that I forgot to write down because I thought I would never use it, so can't remember it now. Kind of mad about not writing it down, since I do like to collect esoteric words.) Oops, I'm rambling on. To sum up, glad I read it, but was hard to get through it. Ideas: good; book: just OK.

Frank Stein says

Ellard is a scientist at the Research Laboratory for Immersive Virtual Environments (RELIEVE) at the University of Waterloo, and he and his lab seem to spend most of their time thinking about ways to make animals lost.

What if we tied magnets to homing pigeons? What if we gave ants little stilts so that they misremembered the distance they had walked? What if we put headphones and blindfolds on dogs and put them in a maze? What if we put a gerbil in a dark, spinning box and walked it into a different room?

Although some of these experiments are pretty ridiculous, overall they have helped scientists discover how animals map space. Some animals use the earth's magnetic field, some remember landmarks. Ants apparently remember how many steps they took.

But the experiments on humans are of course the most interesting. For instance, we tend to align everything in a North-South, East-West direction (we tend to think LA is West of Reno, and that South America is directly South of North America). We also tend to "regionalize" and naturally believe that distances between visible spaces are greater than distances in a certain, visible space. Overall, we tend to get lost really, really easily. You put a blindfold on us and we're helpless within a few steps. Dogs and gerbils got us beat by miles.

Unfortunately Ellard spends too much time on the implications of our lousy spatial sense for the environment (we're disconnected from the natural world? Shocking!) and his own unsupported musings on everything from yard design to the effects of the internet. If only these maunderings could be severed from the science

part.

Emily says

This book was not quite what I expected. I opened it hoping to find out why my husband can drive straight to a house on the other side of town that he's only been to once before, seven years ago, in the dark, while I clutch written directions in my hand the first ten times I go to a friend's house around the corner. Instead it spoke more generally to the concepts of how people and animals orient themselves to their surroundings: landmarks, magnetic fields, awareness of winds and wave patterns, etc.

I admit to being fascinated by some of the studies Ellard references (Gluing pig-hair stilts to ant's legs to alter the length of their stride and determine if they are counting steps? Now *that* is experimental science!!). I liked the anecdotes he sprinkled throughout the book, but I wanted more; sometimes he dove a bit too deeply into the psychological depths to keep me engaged. I also wanted more diagrams and pictures - he describes so many different types of space and perceptions that I had a hard time picturing. More visual clues would have been helpful.

Some interesting extensions of the concept of "space" included a chapter on cyberspace and how the internet has affected the intelligibility of space. His chapter on greenspace especially seemed quite preachy to me, but it had some great suggestions for getting children outside and exploring nature.

And I think I may take up geocaching as a hobby.

For more book reviews, visit my blog, Build Enough Bookshelves.

Mark says

The author summarizes in the last sentence of the last chapter a major theme repeated throughout the book (particularly in the second half): “Our future together depends on finding ways to understand and to feel the deep truth of [the] connection between person and place.” “Locateness” is a fundamental gift that the periphery gives us”—it is attractive and restorative to the human psyche. Contact with nature and with natural space is good for our mind because we have a deep genetic connection and attraction (biophilia) to the natural world. And our inability to make connections between different types of space – the indoors and the outdoors, the urban and the rural- has a basis in the makeup of the human mind and the way that we engage with space.

Humankind’s increasing failure to live up to this picture paints a bleak future in the mind of the author. For example, because spaces are completely separated by enclosures, we have difficulty connecting the warm security of our living rooms with the toxic foam floating down a river in the parkland (or the litter we throw out on the ground by the fast food restaurant) just outside of our doors. Remote control garage doors openers allow commuting homeowners to drive directly from the office to the interior of their living space without making any contact with the outside world. But I found myself sometimes challenging this hypothesis: are things really so bleak? And are the fixes he proposes all good ones?

In the discussion of virtual reality Ellard notes some important issues. “We are surprisingly quick to accept

virtual spaces such as chasms or cliffs as the real thing." Dual awareness, similar to lucid dreaming, is the norm. What longer term chronic exposure to highly immersive virtual settings will result once "Avatar" like helmet-based virtual reality scenarios find themselves in peoples' homes in a few short years? Understanding how we are affected by these transformations in how we live in space is perhaps no less urgent than the challenges presented by climate change. We know from history that, all calls for prudent forethought notwithstanding, whatever we can make, we will make. So we need to try to anticipate and influence outcomes for the better while we still have the chance.

Nevertheless, some of the proposed fixes to getting reconnected with spaces in this book seem a little far-fetched. In order to reaffix ourselves to outdoor spaces, we should intensively utilize virtual reality and so-called "ubiquitous computing" (the so-called inverse of virtual reality, which grounds us to the larger environment by monitoring in the background selected variables in a "gentle" way that do not demand our full attention). For example, the author's laboratory, RELIVE (Research Laboratory for Immersive Virtual Environments), has as a goal the design virtual structures whose size and shape adapt over time to reflect the preferences and interest of the observer, as measured by their movements and physiological state. They are even brainstorming how to design responsive architecture-- virtual buildings that can sense movements and even the physiology of their occupants, adjusting their properties accordingly to yield maximal comfort. In order to save humanity and get a fresh fix on reality, in order "to guard against the scary image of the future of living in ways functionally equivalent to brains in jars jacked into computer terminals", we must reassert the importance of the "where" into our lives" by proactively using newly available and emerging technologies like GPS, Google Earth, devices which emit different sounds in different places, and so called "geo-coding" techniques to tag our activities, snapshots, phone calls, and blogs with precise latitude and longitude information in order to re-root us to reality.

In the area of personal application, it seems fare more easier and practical for me to reconnect with my surroundings by re-committing to getting out in the neighborhood on my bicycle, sitting out more on the front porch, visiting the local park and school track, and even walking over to the office instead of driving. It would be good also to get out and camp again for the first time in years! These are all solutions to which the author would applaud. On the opposite end of the spectrum, in order to make more solid connection with my environment, I should perhaps read less (!) unplug myself from my mp3 player, the TV, and the computer, all in order to proactively reconnect with my surroundings.

As someone who believes in the Judeo-Christian heritage as related in Genesis 1, I believe God has created me not just for a relationship with the created world around me (the author's point about reconnecting with spaces has some validity), but, just as importantly, also with Himself and with the PEOPLE around me. So I wonder if the proposed solutions to reconnect with spaces through the use of technology miss the greater problem and will only serve to isolate us further from one another as we exist in a "one person shell" created by headphones, the Ipod, and before that, the Walkman, cell phones, and automobiles (Daniel Goleman, Social Intelligence, p. 6-8). The continuing invasion of technology into our daily lives results in human autism: nominal communication in actual isolation.

Enough for criticizing the philosophy of the book. The first half, which discusses how various creatures, including humankind navigate is itself worth the read! Ants count their steps, pigeons and sea turtles detect magnetic fields, seafarers supposedly detect ocean swells with their testicles or by other unknown means, other peoples apparently connect themselves to locations using stories and songs. Scout bees use waggle dances, some bird species remember up to 80,000 different cache locations in a single fall season, etc. captivating. I would have liked if the book had emphasized this section more fully, as I felt it was the strength of the book. Finally, I found the following ideas to be food for further thought:

*We Have Inaccurate Maps in Our Heads: Force of gravity (we are upright creatures) and the line of horizon leads us to neatly categorize things in term s of verticals and horizontals. Most people flounder through a highly schematized version of physical space that has only a weak relationship with the real world. We prefer to be in positions that give us some visual cover (refuge) but from which we can look out over large vistas of space (prospect).

*Our House Plans and Urban Planning: It is the quality of space, rather than its quantity, that influences our behavior. An integral connection supposedly exists between the design of the English home and their enviably successful way of life: true courtesy lies in the very absence of conspicuous marks of it.

*Space Syntax Analysis: simple diagrams of rooms and hallways collapse info about the sizes of the rooms represented by dots, or hallway lengths represented by lines, but they make highly accurate predictions about how people explore spaces and how well they are able to locate themselves. The comments about food court, grocery store, and casino designs were enlightening but I would have liked it to have been fleshed out further.

*Aggregate Behavior of People: though knowing the functional organization of a space (where the stores, washrooms are, etc.) can enhance our ability to predict movements through that space, the organization of the space is a much stronger predictor of our movements that what kinds of functions are served by the space. For example, many businesses are successful precisely because of where they choose to locate. Skilled architects and designers can bring people together or keep them apart with the same precision that a skilled potter employs to make a jug designed to meet out single drops of precious oil, as they attempt to do in designing casinos, etc.

*When it comes to urban planning, the same feature that draws people into public spaces (the desire to be near and to observe others) ironically seems to actually repel them from mass rapid transit systems. Car provides a sense of continuity and security from the private spaces of home all the way to the spatial threshold of the workplace.

*We supposedly abuse the environment in the US because we view land as a private economic resource while in Europe land is owned more with the understanding that one will be a good steward of the land for the common good. Early suburbs in America were designed from the beginning to be free of mixed use. Public spaces were entirely absent. Today it is the same: winding roads encourage privacy and discourage pedestrians. They are designed to facilitate cars, not walking.

*Lack of quality public spaces make social contacts in suburban settings difficult. As one is less likely to make chance encounters with neighbors on the street (ditto inside halls in office buildings), one has to work harder and in less natural ways to build social networks.

*Average house sizes have ballooned from about 900 sq. feet in 190 to more than 2,400 sq. feet in early 21st century, while family size has decreased. But the move away from courtyard homes (traditional in Taiwan where I live) has moved us further away from our connection with space.

*Few public spaces are successful, possibly because they are all prospect without refuge.
*Whether in public spaces in the real world, or in cyberspace, Jane Jacob’s dictum “life attracts life” holds true. One of the surest ways to boost a feeling of presence in a virtual world is to share that world with other people.

Bob says

For me the charm of this book is how unassumingly Ellard can share "mathematics-grade" abstractions ("taxis", "gradient fields"), combine them in an argument about the nature of human beings' perception of spatial relations, and then convincingly demonstrate how important this is to every one of us. It was easy to follow the argument, even though I *do* get lost in malls.
His contention is that people base their spatial perception on visual chunks connected by narrative, associative, or procedural links that have no real "distance" property. Compared with animals, whose navigational schemes and the interesting experiments that have elucidated them comprise the first half of the books, humans have little real understanding of relations between two unseen landmarks. Surprisingly, such an apparent disability confers on us the ability to "create" our own environment in a way that is convincing, at least to ourselves. The book's second half describes many of the benefits of "made environments" in housing, workplaces, cities, and even "virtual worlds," as well as the environmental harm being caused by our inability or refusal to understand interconnectedness in our planet's limited space.
The bibliography is wonderful, collecting similar, popular treatments of interesting topics in social science.

Brittany says

How I Came To Read This Book: Harper Collins sent it to me as a (very?) advanced readers edition. Like, a year in advance. As such, this is one of the least 'finished' ARE's I've ever received (and it impacted the book!)

The Plot: Colin Ellard is a professor at the University of Waterloo interested in our fragile human relationship with space - and place. In this nonfiction book, he first looks at how our (average)navigational fumblings compare to that of some of nature's most magnificent self-directed animals, as well as some select niche groups of people who have amazing navigation & space skills. The second part of the book then looks at how our rather basic grasp of space influences the way we interact with (and build) our homes, neighbourhoods, cities, public places, the internet, and greenspaces.

The Good & The Bad: As mentioned above, this book was greatly impacted by the fact it was 'unfinished' for an ARE. To break up the rather dense material, Ellard throws in quite a few engaging, interesting examples - that are supposed to be accompanied by diagrams. While I found myself getting into (and absorbing information from) the real-life examples, the lack of diagrams failed to fully cement things in my brain, and I didn't take a whole lot away from the book. Luckily, the latter half - which focuses more on humans - made it a bit easier to get through, and the reason why this book gets 3 stars instead of 2 is I feel the diagrams would have greatly influenced my enjoyment of the whole thing. That being said, I did take away perhaps Ellard's overriding purpose in writing this book - I found myself analyzing my relationship with space, and thinking about how Ellard's suggestions would impact my world, and our collective one also.

The Bottom Line: An interesting concept if you're interested in such things - but one that would be greatly served by the missing diagrams in my ARE!

Anything Memorable?: Not in particular. I feel like I had an opportunity or two to bring up concepts in the book while I was reading it but that's all.

50-Book Challenge?: Book #11 in 2009.

Grace says

This is definitely an interesting read, but I was disappointed by the depth and breadth of the content. After reading this book, I'm still not sure if I understand why we can find our way to the moon but get lost in the mall. Maybe my lack of understanding has something to do with the fact that I had to steal minutes here and there to read this book (it took me over a week, which is really out of character for me) or maybe it's because it was a shallow attempt at bringing interesting and crucial knowledge to the masses. For lack of better terms, I hate it when non-fiction books barely scratch the surface of a really interesting topic for fear of digging too deep and negatively impacting sales. I kind of felt like that was what was happening here. Oh, and by the end of the book, I couldn't help but feel like I was sitting at the base of Colin Ellard's soapbox as he spouted his beliefs on the environment and raising spatially aware children.

Emily says

You Are Here is a book about wayfinding and the perception of space.

It starts with a description of how various animals--those that are renowned for their navigational ability and those that aren't--find their way to a fixed point. For example, bees can "tell" each other how to get to a food source and homing pigeons and some ants can get home from distant places (relative to their body size, at least). The author compares this to human navigation tactics. Humans are relatively easily disoriented and not good at judging scale or distances, but possess the unique ability to create and follow an abstract map. For example, I might draw a map of the route from my apartment to my mother's house in which the entire middle is condensed into a short line representing the NJ Turnpike, and you would understand this.

The second part of the book is devoted to these quirks of human spatial perceptions. For example, we process spatial information by breaking it into chunks. Canada is north of the U.S., so we are inclined to think that Montreal is north of Seattle (it isn't). Our understanding develops with age. A child might think that an airplane is a machine that makes what is outside change, but an adult is capable of understanding how planes move us at high speed, distorting our primitive sense of place. The author argues that our reasoning and abstracting skills make it possible for us to find our way through nonphysical environments such as the web. He also talks a bit about Second Life and how people using it exhibit behavior similar to real life. (Though I roll my eyes at Second Life in general, I thought the author presented some interesting information based on it.)

Finally, the author argues that our ability to abstract physical space has distanced us from nature and our environment in ways that make it difficult for us to appreciate the threats of climate change and pollution. He talks a bit about "nature deficit disorder" and how technology makes it possible for us to experience life as a series of choppy moments at the computer, in the car, in the house--never feeling contiguous with or part of nature. Although I felt sympathy for his hypotheses, I didn't feel convinced by the way he argued them. This part of the book seemed to overreach.

Perhaps my expectations for this book were too high or too librarian-focused--I was hoping that it would focus more on our behaviors in space contrasted with our behaviors in abstracted "places" like the web. My

favorite part of the book was his discussion of the placement of furniture in the house and the idea of "isovists"--the proportion of the house can be seen from a given point. He describes how he bought an expensive reading chair, put it in a quiet room, and proceeded never to sit in it, instead preferring a ratty chair in the living room which was full of kids and distractions. Apparently people perceive locations as pleasant based on various criteria, including isovists. This really rang true to me because I also have a reading chair that I never sit in, preferring instead a corner of the sofa with the best isovists in the apartment. This spot is also preferred by Chris and Hetty; it is always the first one chosen, as evidenced by the collapsed state of that sofa cushion.

Christine says

I received this book as an ARC from Harper Collins and working title was WHERE AM I?

Interestingly enough, I read this book while I was traveling. My reasons for choosing this book to review were very personal; I am extremely “directionally challenged” and Colin Ellard is a local author for me.

This book starts out with an amusing anecdote about getting lost while on a camping trip and then moves into the mechanics of how navigation through both time and space is learned, perceived and negotiated.

Being prepared for a text book type read, this reader was pleasantly surprised. WHERE AM I is obviously a well researched book and is filled with facts presented in a logical and entertaining way. This book examines travel in every form, from negotiating our own homes to traveling the world and right through the mysterious world of cyberspace. It looks at how all life forms manage to navigate through their life-space and why some are more adept at it than others.

Colin Ellard is an experimental psychologist at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. It is encouraging to me that admits he still gets lost in his home town. This book held my attention through a turbulent plane ride back to Canada, and despite the information presented, I still managed to “misplace” my car in the Park and Fly parking lot.

David says

Interesting one day read of the definition of "space", "distance", "directions"..author has used many researches on identifying how ants, pigeons, goose, rats and humans have their ways to find their ways out. Yet also bringing out our perceptions on space, directions, office space, home and work architecture..the theme of this book is on how our modern lives and tools have destroyed our abilities to identify and use natural spots/positions to identify our positions and coordinates. Fine examples on Inuit tribes, Polynesians, Puluwot and Bedouin of their exceptional navigational methods in which we modern people have lost the ability of. It is also the way we rely too much on technologies....book also brings out CRP differences between America and EU and how they affect our lives. Interesting read to reflect we only educate our kids in a confined space which only limited our vision and inhibit our natural instinct of explorations...at the end, we should get out of our PS3, Wii, but allow kids to learn from nature where provide infinite and correct geographical pattern recognition. We humans, also have a inner map within ourselves, but it has been shut off from what we see, but not what we feel...

Kelly says

I had high hopes for this book, and in some ways those were met. From the cover, the book seemed like a scientific inquiry into how humans and other animals locate themselves on the Earth and figure out how to get where they're going. The first of the two sections does cover that in an entertaining way (ants on stilts made of pig hair, anyone?). However, the second half of the book takes it in an entirely different direction, which makes for a disjointed read.

The second section studies location in a more social science/humanistic sense, starting with the design of internal spaces and cities before finally branching off into virtual "spaces" and environmental concerns. While I found large chunks of this fascinating, especially the sections on the psychology of architecture and urban planning, it seemed like the author had originally planned this to be a much larger book than it ended up being--really, each of the chapters in the second section could have been expanded into whole other books and probably would have benefited from a longer treatment. I did get some ideas for further reading, but overall I wasn't fully satisfied by this book.

Michelle says

Well, this was like 2 books in one. The first half was an examination of how our brains experience physical space, using research on both humans and animals. This part of the book was fascinating and I enjoyed it very much. Did you know that you can mess up the homing instinct of a young homing pigeon by strapping magnets on him, but NOT an older pigeon? Did you know that scientists figured out ants navigate partly by "ant pedometer"? And that to be sure it wasn't EFFORT they were measuring, they attached little teeny weighted backpacks to the ants? Very fun stuff.
The second half of the book was much less interesting--it was an examination of what we now know about human brains and space and what that means for our homes, our cities, and our planet. The problem is that the author honestly seems to believe that we are on the verge of an imminent collapse, that he states several times that the "oceans are boiling away" and seems to mean it (?????) even though he also says that sea levels are rising dramatically. He also mentions, approvingly, urban planning, somehow forgetting even to mention the nasty side of urban planning (such as primary responsibility for our current economic state!) He seems to be quite secure in his firm belief that we need to MAKE people live different, car-less lives, packed up in crowded cities and walking everywhere, even in spite of the overwhelming evidence that most people do not WANT to live this way, and even when they are restricted to such patterns in cities, they often end up fleeing--that many of the grandly-designed "multi-use walking urban centers" are practically ghost towns. Never mind, the planners think we should have them anyway, and will keep at it until they manage to force us all to live in them whether we like it or not. The SECOND half of the book I'd as soon pull out and toss.

Mark Schlatter says

The first half of this work is devoted to explaining how we and other animal species find their way. Ellard's main point (as I see it) is that many species have a metric understanding of space. So, for instance, bees and ants and homing pigeons somehow code up distances and angles (along with environmental information) to find their way. Humans, however, think of space in topological terms rather than metric terms --- we

emphasize the connections. ("Take Main down to the library, make a right, and go around the corner from the coffee shop.")

The second half of the book takes this idea and places it in the context of human created spaces: our homes, neighborhoods, cities, and cyber-environments. There are some great references here (including performance artists who emotionally map a city), but also some dated information (does anyone use Second Life these days?). The end of the book also makes a turn to sustainability and the importance of environmental education --- nothing I disagree with, but a bit of a surprise.

Overall, I wanted to like this book a lot more than I did. There are fascinating concepts here that sometimes struggle to get out. Ellard's prose can be overwhelming at times, and after seeing the same simile pop up three times, I was wishing for a more proactive editor. Also, as a visual learner, I was often begging for pictures to illustrate the concepts.

Two Readers in Love says

When I was a child, the minister in our church would frequently start his sermon by saying “reading today's passage, I was struck by three ideas.” He would then launch into a good long sermon and build it up to a resounding closing crescendo; I'd start to lean forward to grab the hymnal in anticipation of the closing hymn... but wait... no! He would proceed to start all over, and deliver a not-quite-so-strong sermon on the **second** idea. Just when you thought that it couldn't go on any longer, our minister would launch into a sermon on the same general theme based on his **third** idea. We used to joke that his sermons inspired a profound, spiritual feeling of gratitude: you thanked God they were over. Why am I reminiscing about that dear man from long-ago? Well, reading “You Are Here” made me speculate that my former minister must have a long-lost twin, the spatial psychologist and author Colin Ellard.

“You Are Here” starts out strong. Part I “Why Ants Don't Get Lost at the Mall” offers a series of fascinating experiments that uncover how humans and other creatures navigate through space. Sadly, for those of us prone to getting lost at the mall, despite blurb on the jacket (“if you, or your keys, have ever gotten lost, Ellard can tell you how it happened – and how to stop it happening again”) this book does not offer any specific science-based insights to improve our navigation skills -- unless you are planning to become a Bedouin tracker, in which case there are some fine tips about camel dung that you will no doubt enjoy even more than I did.

In Part II, the books starts to lose its way. Taken on their own, the chapters on “House Space,” “Working Space,” and “City Space” offer nice overviews of architectural theory and urban planning, but taken together they draw on redundant material. The book would be stronger if these three chapters were condensed and restructured. The connection to 'spatial navigation' grows even looser when the book moves to the chapter on “Cyberspace.” The chapter starts off well enough with the theory that the human brain is uniquely capable of navigating virtual worlds, but after briefly presenting the result of one study on the topic of social distance in “Second Life” the rest of the chapter devolves into random musings on the powers and perils of virtual technology.

When the topic turns to “Greenspace” the book seems to wander off the path entirely. Ellard's promising hypothesis - that the way the human brain is wired to think about 'inside' and 'outside' space leads us to

devalue our impact on natural spaces - is never substantiated. He vaguely refers to Jane Jacobs' theory that the Romantic movement isolated us from nature, and extends that idea to conclude that all urbanized humans feel that nature is inherently 'outside' of our day-to-day space. From the first part of the book, I was expecting new insights into the relations between human beings and their natural environment based on brain science and psychology, not a tenuous connection based on Jacobs' iconoclastic interpretation of Romantic poetry. Ironically, the author's proposed antidote to 'nature deficit disorder' is the encouragement of exactly the type of post-industrial biophilia that was attempted by the the Romantic movement and, presumably, failed (?) There seems to be little science to go on here, so we are instead presented with a loosely-linked series of ideas on how to improve engagement with urban and suburban greenspaces. For example, from the author's own experience the environment would benefit if everyone took down their fences and let their children play together in a kind of collective backyard. This is a very nice image, but it's not exactly a scientifically-validated psychological insight nor a tested ecological approach (not to joke about anyone's kids, but surely our ecological footprint is smaller if we have fewer children, rather than letting hordes of urchins loose to play a giant game of hide and seek?)

I don't mean to sound harsh, as I enjoyed the bulk of the book. Perhaps I would have gotten more out of Part II if I read it in a separate sitting and took it on it's own terms. After reading Part I, I was expecting a scientific approach and became, well, disoriented when Part II swerved into more speculative areas. Or perhaps, like my childhood minister, Ellard would have been better served by saving some of his material for a later sermon.

Krista says

This book initially annoyed the heck out of me. Ellard's writing style seemed to schizophrenically fluctuate between ununderstandable scientific mumbo-jumbo and trite, cheeky statements complete with exclamation points. In reminding the reader of a point made earlier, Ellard often chose phrases like, "... this should remind you of ... " which I found entirely unnecessary.

But then it grew on me. Or perhaps the subject matter became more intelligible to my directionally dysfunctional brain. Ellard starts with how humans navigate space. I was lost, pun intentional, through most of this section. I did learn some things, like the earth's magnetic pull isn't as simple as my vision of it was; as if there was a bar magnet running through the core from south pole to north pole. Compasses work because of the dynamo effect, "the movements of massive amounts of conductive molten iron deep within the planet's core. These movements, caused in turn by the rotation of the earth, throw gigantic magnetic field lines across the surface of the planet and far out into the space surrounding it. When we hold a small navigational compass in our hand and watch the needle align with magnetic north, we are witnessing an alignment between the slender rod of metal in our hand and these huge churning seas of molten rock and metal deep beneath us." Whoa.

But then he got to Part II (which was cheekily entitled "Making Your Way In the World Today") wherein he discussed our homes, our buildings and our cities. I was particularly intrigued by the concept of "isovist," the volume of space visible from a given point and how isovists affect where we choose to spend time. Ergo, we must place our furniture with regard to isovists. Intriguing.

I also enjoyed his take on those huge foyers/entrance halls in suburban houses, as it echoed thoughts I've always had and then added to them. "... entrance foyers can consist of multistory spaces complete with overlooking balconies and grandiose chandelier ... the effect of such entryways can be psychologically

negative, causing visitors to jerk their heads upward in anxiety as they walk through the front door, as if they have found themselves at the bottom of a mineshaft. The irony of such grand foyers is that they are seldom used, as the majority of owners of these houses drive directly into attached garages and enter through humble back doors into laundry or mud rooms. It often seems as though the main function of the foyer, as the part of the house that makes that important first impression, is more to stun potential buyers into submission than it is to exert any kind of positive influence on the owners of the house or its visitors."

Then Ellard falls apart again, spending the last 50 pages or so preaching at you about how to save the world. I would have been fine with the preaching, but it seemed like an afterthought, tacked on because the book needed a moral message. Ellard's point, a well-taken one if not well-presented, is that we are trashing the earth because we don't care about it because we don't really spend TIME with it. So we need to get out of our isolated, isovist homes and spend time with the earth. Learn how to wayfind like the Inuits. Or at least go on a nature-walk once in a while. Ellard then adds that maybe technology will help us with this by being able to create soundscapes for our cities that will make us FEEL like we are in nature, which is not the same thing at all. Again, a little schizophrenic for my tastes.

But still an intriguing read and well worth the two days I spent reading it.
