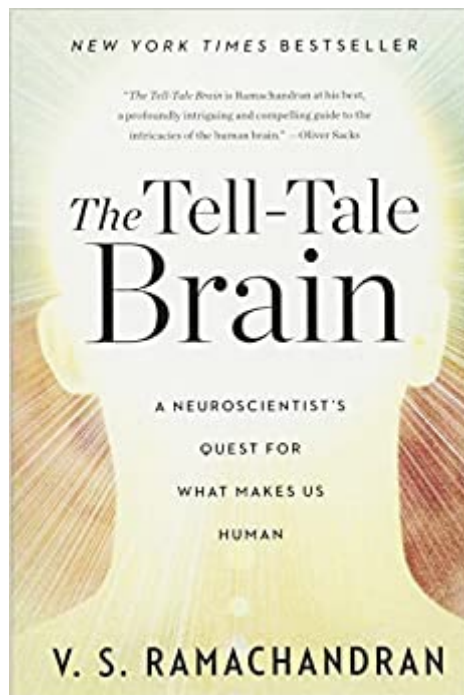




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# **The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest For What Makes Us Human**



## Synopsis

"A profound intriguing and compelling guide to the intricacies of the human brain." —Oliver Sacks In this landmark work, V. S. Ramachandran investigates strange, unforgettable cases from patients who believe they are dead to sufferers of phantom limb syndrome. With a storyteller's eye for compelling case studies and a researcher's flair for new approaches to age-old questions, Ramachandran tackles the most exciting and controversial topics in brain science, including language, creativity, and consciousness. 45 illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Ramachandran (A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness), director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at UCSD, explores why humans, who are "anatomically, neurologically and genetically, physiologically apes," are not "merely" apes. While animals can communicate with sound and gesture, and chimpanzees can even use words to express immediate needs, humans have developed the ability to speak in structurally complex sentences, and often speak in metaphor. Ramachandran speculates that, as we can map another's actions and intuit their thoughts, we also map our own sensory apparatus, perceiving our surroundings and perceiving ourselves perceiving our surroundings. We imagine the future and speculate about the past and seek to understand our place in the universe, laying the foundation for our sense of free will; we not only envisage future actions, but are aware of their potential consequences and the responsibility for our choices. Richard Dawkins has called Ramachandran "the Marco Polo of neuroscience," and with

good reason. He offers a fascinating explanation of cutting-edge-neurological research that deepens our understanding of the relationship between the perceptions of the mind and the workings of the brain. (Jan.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** The twentieth was the century of physics, with the grand unified theory its quest and goal. The twenty-first is shaping up as the century of neuroscience, with its quest and goal the reaffirmation of human exceptionalism. Boldly asserting, right off the bat, that *Homo sapiens* is "no mere ape," Ramachandran tells us why the day of neuroscience has dawned. The discovery of mirror neurons (see Marco Iacoboni's exciting *Mirroring People*, 2008) has made a real science out of psychology, for it gives the study of consciousness and the host of mental states contingent on it something physical to theorize about and experiment with. A physician (like Oliver Sacks, a neurologist) as well as a researcher, Ramachandran uses his neurology patients' predicaments to inspire inquiries into how we see and know, the origins of language, the mental basis of civilization, how we conceive of and assess art, and how the self is constructed. Always careful to point out when he is speculating rather than announcing research findings, he is also prompt to emphasize why his speculations, or theories, are not just of the armchair variety but can be put to the test because of what neuroscience has already discovered about the active structures of the human brain. --Ray Olson --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

*The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest For What Makes Us Human*, is a non-fiction New York Times Bestseller that explores the many strange cases encountered by the author, V. S. Ramachandran. He is both a doctor and a researcher who specializes in neuroscience and has studied the brains of people from around the world. Although he is an academic, his writing style is easily accessible to readers with little to no knowledge of biology, anatomy, or neuroscience. Ramachandran is able to teach the reader in an engaging way all about abilities they likely did not know their brain possessed. There are many strengths to his writing style such as easy and accessible language and pictures throughout the text to illustrate the main points that may be hard for the average reader to grasp. Additionally, there are some weakness to the book such as, because there are so many topics covered, not all the sections are as in depth as others and it might leave some readers unsatisfied with certain case summaries. The main idea of the book is that Ramachandran takes the reader through a series of stories about unique and interesting cases

involving the brain. The author is a cognitive neuroscientist and has much experience and knowledge on topics relating to the brain. Not only are the cases exciting to read, but the reader will also learn a lot they probably did not know about their own brain before. Ramachandran begins the book from an evolutionary perspective by comparing humans to apes. He considers the many differences between apes and humans and how the human mind has seemed to develop, and in some cases, fail, in a remarkably different way than our ancestors. The rest of the book is filled with detailed examples of all the ways the brain can fail to function properly. In some cases, the malfunction is merely an inconvenience, such as colorblindness or associating a smell to a certain texture, and in other cases it can result in great pain to the patient. Ramachandran goes into detail about most of the disorders he mentions, but the following paragraphs will give just a brief summary of a few of his main cases. First, he describes the case of a man with phantom limb syndrome who he met in medical school. This caused the patient to feel immense pain in a limb even though that limb had been amputated. He also discussed treatment, such as looking at a working limb in the mirror and pretending the mirror image was the real limb. He also discusses less severe cases the average person might not even consider a disease, such as seeing a certain number in a specific color regardless of what color the text actually is. After discussing these and a few other cases, Ramachandran then goes into a discussion on the complexity and impracticality of the human mind. Humans take decades to fully develop and large amounts of nutrition to function compared to animals. The author explores possibilities of why our species developed in a way that does not seem evolutionarily viable. Also, the idea of mental disorders also seems like something that should have been removed through natural selection because those with disorders would have likely struggled to survive more than those with more fully functioning cognitive processes. For the next few cases following the above discussion, Ramachandran does a good job of using illustration in the book to show what areas of the brain these disorders are taking place in. For example, in a case where a patient had slowed speech, a map of the brain with the speech centers highlighted was provided. The final chapters of the book focus on how the brain relates to beauty. Ramachandran explores why humans feel compelled to make and appreciate art when there seems to be no evolutionary reason for this ability or preference. He also proposes that there are laws to what the brain sees as beautiful. For example, a painting with contrasting colors often is perceived as more beautiful than a painting of relatively similar shades. Ramachandran ends with a final case of a man who can only recognize people by voice, not by sight. This creates the idea that the man is fully functioning when his eyes are closed, but when his eyes are open and it is made apparent he cannot recognize faces that there is something wrong with him. The author leaves the reader with

the idea that there are many selves within one person and that their changing cognitive abilities can cause these different selves to appear or disappear. Overall, this book is a good choice for anyone who is interested in neurological cases or learning more about how their own brain works. It is especially useful for those with little to no knowledge of neuroscience because the diagrams and word choice make the stories easy to follow. One downside is that not all cases are equal in length. For example, the phantom limb case was about half of a chapter long, while a case of a paralyzed woman who was convinced she could move was only a couple of pages long. Depending on the interest of the reader, they may feel like too much time was spent on one topic they were not interested in and wish more was said on a topic that intrigued them. Anyone interested in science, medicine, or their own brain should read this book. It serves as an introductory book to learning about the brain as well as a supplement to those with basic knowledge who may not have heard of all the diseases listed in the case studies. The stories are interesting and because each chapter is somewhat unique the reader can jump around to the sections that interest them most. The images help to explain more difficult sections and give the reader more specific anatomical knowledge than what could be said simply in a book for a popular audience. The only downside is that some cases seemed too short, but this will only encourage the reader to go out and learn more on their own.

A bit rambling, but the insights make up for any bits of English-as-a-second language style differences in this work. This readable humane scientist makes it a bit like taking a survey class in college to get a sense of what's "inside the package" of this complex field. Engaging but not intimidated. This is a subject I am interested in because I work with restructuring dysfunctional patterned behaviors -- addictions and addiction-like "triggered" behavior patterns -- in Anonymous Groups and in substance abuse treatment. If AA's founders' outlook on addiction still prevailed (in AA's corporate leadership), neurocircuitry would be the subject of their talks and advocacy. As it is, it's "taboo" to bring up the fact that a great deal of what we do in anonymous program meetings falls within the realm of gradually re-wiring the "shorted-out" patternings (habit, appetite) of brain circuitry that's over-ridden better judgment! Our brain's plasticity is the saving grace of sober alcoholics and PTSD-affected individuals who've intervened successfully on their own "triggers." Hard science and research is an ally early AA's warmly embraced and cultivated -- and interacted with. May it do so, soon again!

If you are interested in science, and yet you know little about neuroscience, read this book. All I can say is WOW, this is extremely fascinating. Yes, this just barely skims the surface, but it makes you

want to work in this field. And don't be intimidated, this is written for lay people.

In a word: meh. In a sentence: I won't be picking up any other Ramachandran books in the future. Ramachandran is certainly a gifted scientist. The work he's done in the field seems to have rightly earned him a god-amongst-men status in modern neuroscience. His experiments are curious and profound. All of these things, too, he likes to remind the reader of, whether subtly or otherwise. Some of the information in the book made it worth the read (blindsight, for example). Even so, it could have been a fraction of its length and you'd hear no complaints from me. Too much ink was spilt between droning, name dropping, and (humble?) bragging. Worse yet, while he worked his way through things that are in fact acutely human, the end game that I'd been sold on was that we'd land on how all those things roll up into human \*consciousness.\* That's what I wanted to read about ultimately. The final chapter, which said to concern itself with that chapter, did a lackluster job. It's hardly one at all, really. It's of handling the topic. This admittedly may have been owing, at least in part, to my own fatigue with the read by this point in the journey. The experience of the book I'd give a 2-2.5. Some of the incredibly interesting content garners a 4-5 star rating. So we'll settle with 3 in the end.

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