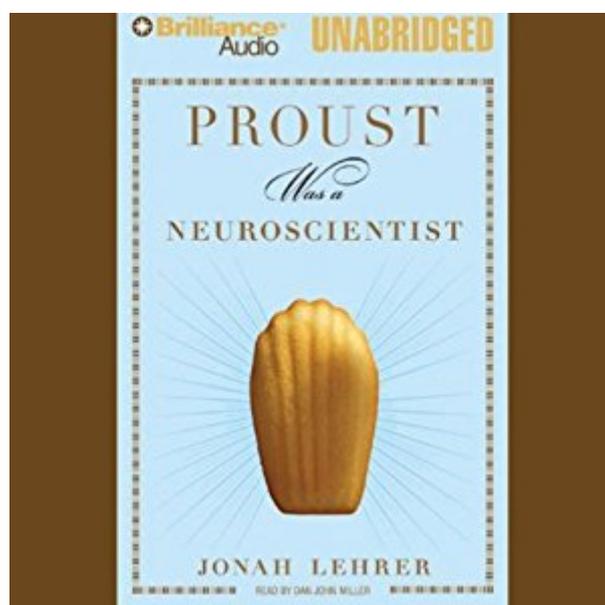


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# Proust Was A Neuroscientist



## Synopsis

In this technology-driven age, it's tempting to believe that science can solve every mystery. After all, science has cured countless diseases and even sent humans into space. But as Jonah Lehrer argues in this sparkling debut, science is not the only path to knowledge. In fact, when it comes to understanding the brain, art got there first. Taking a group of artists — a painter, a poet, a chef, a composer, and a handful of novelists — Lehrer shows how each one discovered an essential truth about the mind that science is only now rediscovering. We learn, for example, how Proust first revealed the fallibility of memory; how George Eliot discovered the brain's malleability; how the French chef Escoffier identified umami (the fifth taste); how Cézanne worked out the subtleties of vision; and how Gertrude Stein exposed the deep structure of language — a full half-century before the work of Noam Chomsky and other linguists. It's the ultimate tale of art trumping science. More broadly, Lehrer shows that there's a cost to reducing everything to atoms and acronyms and genes. Measurement is not the same as understanding, and this is what art knows better than science. An ingenious blend of biography, criticism, and first-rate science writing, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* urges science and art to listen more closely to each other, for willing minds can combine the best of both, to brilliant effect. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When I first heard of this book, I was intrigued by the title. I just recently finished Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and I've spent a good part of my career in Neuroscience. So I laughed when I saw the

madeleine, the initiator of Marcel's journey of memory, on the cover. But I'm sorry to report that this is a most irritating book. Mr. Lehrer sets up his premise that these eight great artists somehow presaged later discoveries of neuroscience and then bends over backwards to prove it. Each artist/novelist/cook is subjected to egregious cherry-picking of quotes and concepts to align their work with his shallow understanding of neuro-scientific discoveries (his scientific credentials are that he worked in a neuroscience lab as a technician). He covers a lot of ground but it is at a desperate, grad-student level of scholarship. This is confirmed in his acknowledgement section where he admits to having spent a lot of time in the library - probably reading other authors' analyses of these artists. Too bad he didn't study them himself. The book is at its best when he is simply reviewing the contributions made by these giants. Their works are described enthusiastically though not thoroughly. It's like examining the Sistine Chapel with a flashlight - he misses the big picture. But when he reduces the artist's entire body of work down to fit his argument that they somehow anticipated how the brain functions, things really fall apart. Concerning the ones I know well (Proust, Cezanne, Stravinsky, and Woolf), I was startled by how idiotic his extrapolations are. No, Proust was not a neuroscientist. He was a brilliant writer who described the human condition and human behavior like no other. It's insulting to reduce his literary adventure of memory to a discussion of dendritic prions.

*Proust Was a Neuroscientist* by Jonah Lehrer attempts to reveal ideas from artists about the mind that neuroscience is recently discovering as true. Lehrer explains both the artistic and scientific concepts in such a way that anyone could understand. This novel is not a hardcore lesson in neuroscience or art but instead a decent blend of both fields. The different chapters look at a poet, four novelists, a chef, a painter, and a composer. The chapters each follow similar patterns. Lehrer initially prepares us for each artist with a brief biography at the beginning. He then delves into certain works and exposes the neurological insights of the artists. Once we understand the artist's view on the mind, Lehrer shifts from art to science to show discoveries in neuroscience that pertain to the artist's ideas. Finally, Lehrer attempts to draw similarities between what the artist believed and what neuroscience has discovered. The book first examines the poet Walt Whitman, who saw the mind and body as inseparable. George Eliot, the novelist who believed human freedom arose from our mind's malleability, comes next. The French chef Auguste Escoffier did wonders for the culinary arts with his ideas on the plasticity of taste, the power of suggestion, and the importance of our sense of smell in tasting food. Marcel Proust uncovered the role of smell and taste in our memories as well as the memory's fallibility. Paul Cezanne used his paintings to show that our

perception plays a huge role in what and how we see the world around us. The composer Igor Stravinsky revealed that we can only begin to feel music when "the pattern we imagine starts to break down" (Lehrer 132).

I found this book disappointing. It initially appeared to be a consideration of the interaction between the arts and sciences and how the two fields complemented or contributed to one another. Instead it presents a group of artists who apparently had ideas about the mind, the brain, how we sense things, who we are as humans and contrasts these ideas with prevalent scientific ideas at the time. Since the artists' ideas were new and untested scientifically, they were frequently dismissed by some scientists. The conclusion - science was blind to the brilliant new ideas of artists, frequently willfully so. There are several things that bother me about this book. The author necessarily simplifies the science he discusses, primarily neuroscience, frequently to the point of being inaccurate and several times incorrect. Given that, it made me wonder how often the ideas of the artists were portrayed inaccurately, or incorrectly. I found it difficult to trust in what was written about the arts and artists. The author tends to make the scientific culture monolithic and unyielding. There are certainly scientists who are rigid and arrogant in their thinking, but many (most) who understand that what is known today will be modified extensively tomorrow. Even though he worked for a time in an outstanding neuroscience lab, the author does not seem to have a good grasp of the scientific method. While he clearly trumpets its limitations, it is not in the context of understanding the method itself. The adjective and verbs applied to science are frequently negative, signaling who is wrong and who is right before the discussion begins. Terms such as inane, fashionable obsession, ransacked, derision, typically stubborn are applied to science or scientists and not to artists.

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