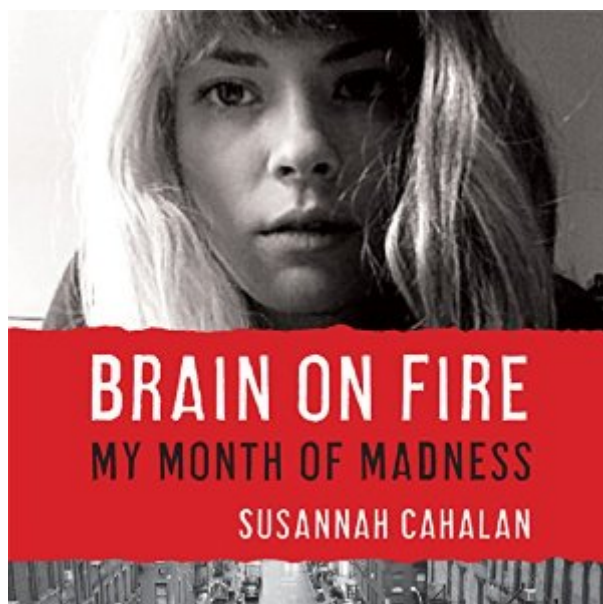


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# Brain On Fire: My Month Of Madness



## Synopsis

In 2009, Susannah Cahalan woke up in a strange hospital room strapped to a bed, under guard, and unable to move or speak. Her medical records - from a month-long hospital stay of which she had no memory - reported psychosis, violence, and dangerous instability. Yet, only weeks earlier she had been a healthy, ambitious twenty-four-year-old, six months into her first serious relationship and a sparkling career as a cub reporter. Susannah's astonishing memoir chronicles the swift path of her illness and the lucky, last-minute intervention led by one of the few doctors capable of saving her life. Weeks ticked by and Susannah moved inexplicably from violence to catatonia. Over one million dollars worth of blood tests and brain scans revealed nothing. The exhausted doctors were ready to commit her to the psychiatric ward, until the celebrated neurologist, Dr. Souhel Najjar, joined her team. With the use of a simple - yet ingenious - test, he was able to make a lifesaving diagnosis - revealing a newly discovered autoimmune disorder in which the body attacks the brain. With sharp reporting drawn from hospital records, scientific research, and interviews with doctors and family, *Brain on Fire* is a crackling mystery and an unflinching, gripping personal story that marks the debut of an extraordinary writer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Brain on Fire* is Susannah Cahalan's reconstruction of her harrowing year with a brain inflammation. Cahalan was a 24 year old reporter with the New York Post in 2008 when she began to exhibit signs of mental illness. She was living on her own in NYC and had recently begun a serious relationship

with Stephen. Cahalan's symptoms were a mixture of the physical (weakness on her left side, difficulty speaking) and the mental (paranoia, violence and psychosis). Her condition was undiagnosed for an agonizing period of time. Some of her physicians thought she was suffering from alcohol withdrawal despite the fact that she told them she was only an occasional drinker. She came very close to being diagnosed as a schizophrenic. Both of her parents but especially her father insisted that her illness had a physical cause and only with this advocacy was she admitted to NYU. There she was diagnosed as having an autoimmune inflammation in the one hemisphere of her brain. In a marvelous nod to medicine as an art not a science she is finally diagnosed by a physician who administers a simple straight forward test - she is asked to fill in numbers on a drawing of a clock. Because she writes all of the numbers on one side of the drawing the physicians now have proof that the half of her brain is inflamed. So after over one million dollars worth of laboratory tests, she is diagnosed by a savvy MD with pencil and paper! Once the diagnosis of autoimmune disease is confirmed by researchers at Penn, Cahalan has a slow but steady recovery. There are two back stories going on that deserve a mention. One, her new boyfriend Stephen sticks around even when her strange behavior appears to have a mental origin not a physical one. Surely a guy worth knowing!

"Brain on Fire" is the true story of Susannah Cahalan's "lost month of madness," most of which she remembers imperfectly or not at all. Since she is a reporter, however, she has been able to piece together much of what happened by speaking to doctors, nurses, friends, and family; reading "thousands of pages of medical records"; consulting her dad's journal and her parents' "hospital notebook"; watching video footage of herself; and trying to reconstruct any impressions that she still retains. In the preface, Susannah is in NYU Medical Center, restrained by "a thick mesh vest" to prevent her from pulling out her EEG wires or trying to escape from her "captors." The precise origin of Cahalan's illness is unknown, but one day in 2009, this pretty, carefree, vivacious, and confident New York Post reporter began to exhibit strange symptoms. She became obsessed with bedbugs, developed migraines as well as tingling and numbness in her left hand, cried uncontrollably, had persistent insomnia, could no longer cope with her professional responsibilities, felt as if she was "slogging through quicksand," and experienced seizures, hallucinations, and paranoia. Fortunately, her parents and boyfriend, Stephen, stood by her, refusing to believe that she was psychotic and needed to be institutionalized. After a variety of physicians examined her and ran batteries of tests--but failed to pinpoint the exact cause of her physical and mental deterioration--Susannah found her savior in Dr. Souhel Najjar, "the man to go to when nothing made sense." He suspected

that she might be suffering from autoimmune encephalitis and a neuro-oncologist named Dr. Josep Dalmau confirmed the diagnosis. Soon, Dr.

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