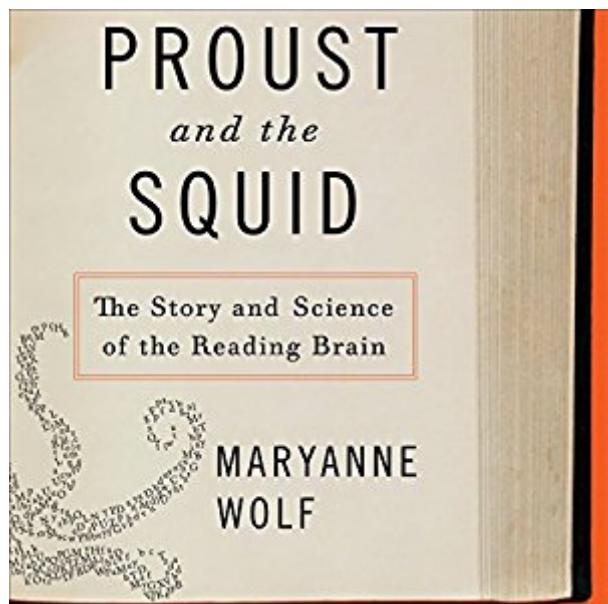


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Proust And The Squid: The Story And Science Of The Reading Brain



Synopsis

"Human beings were never born to read," writes Tufts University cognitive neuroscientist and child development expert Maryanne Wolf. Reading is a human invention that reflects how the brain rearranges itself to learn something new. In this ambitious, provocative book, Wolf chronicles the remarkable journey of the reading brain not only over the past five thousand years, since writing began, but also over the course of a single child's life, showing in the process why children with dyslexia have reading difficulties and singular gifts. Lively, erudite, and rich with examples, *Proust and the Squid* asserts that the brain that examined the tiny clay tablets of the Sumerians was a very different brain from the one that is immersed in today's technology-driven literacy. The potential transformations in this changed reading brain, Wolf argues, have profound implications for every child and for the intellectual development of our species.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 8 hours and 26 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: HighBridge, a division of Recorded Books

Audible.com Release Date: August 26, 2008

Language: English

ASIN: B001EY6XFM

Best Sellers Rank: #100 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Language Arts & Disciplines #150 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science > Medicine #153 in Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Neurology > Neuroscience

Customer Reviews

What is it about humans that makes them so different from the other inhabitants of this planet? It is not our big brains: many species do just fine with a much simpler model. It is not our instincts and intuitions: many species have us beaten there as well. And it is certainly not our empathy or compassion: we can see that those are highly developed in dozens of other species. The real difference seems to be the way in which we can communicate information that endures.

Communications that survive us and can be passed to people that we have never met. Complex languages that were able to meld the experiences of many senses were the first step. We can tell stories that contain much more than information: they contain and evoke emotions, memories and

even tastes and smells. The second step is far more recent, and it is the strange alchemy that in the last few thousand years enabled our ancestors to record, interpret and teach the significance of squiggles and scratchings. This engaging book focuses on a question that many of us have asked at some time or other. How did we come upon the unlikely skill called reading? How did our brains achieve this extraordinary feat, working only with neurological systems that had never tried to make sense of systematized rule-based visually presented material? And what happens in our brain when our eyes scan a line of type? Why do some of us, or some of our children, find it difficult to process the visual information locked in words? Maryanne Wolf is a professor at Tufts University, where she directs the Center for Reading and Language Research and in this book she offers explanations for these and many other questions.

I was attracted to this book by the title: What could Proust and a Squid have in common? As it turned out, squids make only two cameo appearances in the book on pages 5-6 and 226 (probably to justify the title in references to the early use of squids in neuroscience studies and for conjecture about passing along genetic traits that make survival more difficult), but Proust is pretty mainstream throughout the book as a resource and reference for describing the richness that reading can bring to individual experience. Professor Wolf has written a multidisciplinary book that is mind-boggling in its breadth. You'll learn everything from how writing and alphabets developed to why Socrates disfavored reading to how mental processes vary among dyslexics who are reading different languages to the best ways for diagnosing and overcoming reading difficulties. Yet unlike most multidisciplinary books, this one is very brief and compact. But that compactness is misleading; *Proust and the Squid* is a challenging book to read and contemplate. Only good readers with a lot of background in literature and neuroscience can probably grasp this book. What's more, there are vast numbers of references that you can pursue if you want to know more. The writing style makes the book denser than it needed to be. Professor Wolf makes matters worse for lay readers by insisting on the correct scientific names throughout, when the ordinary names would have made the material easier to grasp. As a result, at times you'll feel like you are taking a course in disciplinary vocabulary.

Maryanne Wolf has written a richly informative work, which covered a number of areas that I had very limited knowledge of. She is an academic who has made numerous complex subjects and concepts accessible to the non-specialist, yet has not trivialized the material. She never explains when and how she had the inspiration for a very memorable title, which would nag with the

question: What could Marcel Proust and a Squid possibly have in common? Ah, like so much in the book, and in real life, it is the connections that our neuro-pathways make. The author has covered three principal topics. As she explains in the first chapter: "This book consists of three areas of knowledge: the early history of how our species learned to read, from the time of the Sumerians to Socrates; the developmental life cycle of humans as they learn to read in ever more sophisticated ways over time; and the story and science of what happens when the brain can't learn to read." Admittedly, rather late in life, I finally read *The Odyssey*. The version was a new one by Barry B. Powell. In his introduction, he posits the theory that the Greek alphabet was invented around 800 B.C., in order to record the poetic rhythm of Homer's epic tale. Thus I was particularly attentive to Wolf's account of how writing systems evolved, starting with the "bird tracks," of the Sumerians through the Akkadians (a language I have only recently become aware of - apparently there are a few hundred people in the world still trying to keep the language alive) and on to the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians. Each of these languages contained a pictorial element.

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