

The Devniad, Book 32

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Down to the Bare Mental

Here are some questions Steven Pinker asks early on in his new book *How the Mind Works*.

"Why are there so many robots in fiction, but none in real life? ... Why do memories fade? How does makeup change the look of a face? Where do ethnic stereotypes come from, and why are they irrational? Why do people lose their tempers? What makes children bratty? Why do fools fall in love? What makes us laugh? And why do people believe in ghosts and spirits?"

If your mind is constituted anything like mine, your only follow-up question will be where do I buy this sucker *right now*? (Roughly anywhere: it's a hefty Norton hardcover, \$29.95.) These are exactly the kind of things inquiring minds want to know, and this incredibly interesting overview of recent trends, discoveries, and arguments in cognitive science does its brilliant and entertaining best to answer them all, and more.

Pinker, a psycholinguist, is director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He admits he's aiming at a moving target: "Every idea in the book may turn out to be wrong, but that would be progress, because our old ideas were too vapid to be wrong."

Be warned (or relieved): you're not going to hear a lot about neurons, synapses, and axons. This is about the mind, not the brain. As Pinker says, if you're doing a book review you don't get a microscope and study the composition of ink on the page. He's more interested here in what he formulates as "the big picture: that the mind

is a system of organs of computation designed by natural selection to solve the problems faced by our evolutionary ancestors in their foraging way of life."

Read that over a few times and you may see how more than 600 pages of fascinating consequences can proceed from key concepts in that premise.

The mind is a *system*, a bunch of specialized modules each solving distinct types of problems. The mind's a big thing for sure — but it's not one big thing.

And you can understand much about it by studying and applying disciplines such as robotics, computer programming, and reverse engineering, which all bear on similar problems to the ones the mind faces every second of its existence. Pinker calls the resulting computational theory of mind "one of the great ideas in intellectual history, for it solves one of the puzzles that make up the 'mind-body problem': how to connect the ethereal world of meaning and intention, the stuff of our mental lives, with a physical hunk of matter like the brain."

Also, the new discipline of *evolutionary psychology* plays an important part in understanding how the mind came to work the way it does. Or came to be at all.

Here Pinker airs his differences with even such a luminary as Harvard paleontologist and ace science writer Stephen Jay Gould. For instance, Pinker believes Gould fails to give enough weight to the mind's incredible engineering complexity. And therefore fails to credit the mind's development by the central forces of natural selection and adaptation instead of as a byproduct of other activity.

But Pinker draws on the work of Gould and others in beautifully explaining that our genes don't determine our individual actions ... though they can be pretty persuasive in an indirect manner.

"By making us enjoy life, health, sex, friends, and children, the genes buy a lottery ticket for representation in the next generation, with odds that were favorable in the environment in which we evolved ... [O]ur goals, conscious or unconscious, are not about genes at all, but about health and lovers and children and friends ... Genes are a play within a play, not the interior monologue of the players."

Pinker floats like a butterfly. He never stays with one topic or argument too long, so even a nonspecialist like me never quite gets bogged down irretrievably. His is definitely a modular mind.

But he may be the most consistently entertaining writer on scientific topics I've ever encountered. (Check out his 1994 book *The Language Instinct* for a similar treat.) Certainly the one that works the hardest at bringing in zingy examples from all over, especially from popular culture.

From Woody Allen jokes to why Magic Eye stereograms work (except for the 2 to 6 percent of the population, including myself, with poor or no cyclopean vision capability) to an analysis of the emotional life of Mr. Spock, Pinker's examples have that springy, lively quality that keeps you interested even when the dark is closing in fast.

Of course, you'll have gathered by now that this is a perfect science fiction reader's (or writer's) book. Filled with thousands of quirky little factoids and speculations. And Pinker thinks like an SF reader too, making big leaps and grand synergies, taking the outsider viewpoint, always trying to go off at an odd angle and look *back* at the problem ... In fact, since the first sentence of text deals with robots and there are citations in

the index for Isaac Asimov, Terry Bisson, Jorge Luis Borges, Anthony Burgess, H. G. Wells, and David Alexander Smith, plus 14 entries for "science fiction" itself, perhaps Pinker *is* an SF reader.

Don't you like to feel that all the great ones are?

He certainly thinks like a science fictioneer. Listen to this, in a discussion of why the eye must have been shaped by natural selection:

"Most hunks of matter cannot see, but then most hunks of matter cannot flern either, where I hereby define *flern* as the ability to have the exact size and shape and composition of the rock I just picked up."

If you're not convinced yet that you must have this book, let me just share some more bits with you more or less at random.

Pregnancy sickness or morning sickness evolved because it "protects women against eating or digesting foods with toxins that might harm the developing fetus."

"While the brains of monkeys and apes are subtly asymmetrical, the human brain, especially in the areas devoted to language, is so lopsided that the two hemispheres can be distinguished by shape in the jar."

"Humans control the fate of tigers, rather than vice versa. Human evolution is the original revenge of the nerds."

"Are we still evolving? Biologically, probably not much. Evolution has no momentum, so we will not turn into the creepy bloat-heads of science fiction. The modern human condition is not conducive to real evolution. We infest the whole habitable and not-so-habitable earth, migrate at will, and zigzag from lifestyle to lifestyle. This makes us a nebulous, moving target for natural selection."

Although "[h]ad the Pleistocene savanna contained trees bearing birth-control pills,

we might have evolved to find them as terrifying as a venomous spider."

Pinker speculates that Jewish dietary laws — and probably most others — started as weapons to keep potential defectors in. "Food taboos often prohibit a favorite food of a neighboring tribe."

At one point, Pinker advances an interesting but unproved explanation for why motion or gravity imbalance makes us nauseous: the organism mistakes the symptoms for nervous-system upsets caused by ingested toxins, and makes us try to get rid of the toxins by vomiting. He follows up that discussion with this:

"Space-sickness is measured in *garns*, a unit named after the Republican senator from Utah, Jake Garn, who parlayed his position on the NASA appropriations subcommittee into the ultimate junket, a trip into space. Space Cadet Garn made history as the all-time champion upchucker."

"The anthropologist Donald Brown was puzzled to learn that over the millennia the Hindus of India produced virtually no histories, while the neighboring Chinese had produced libraries full. He suspected that the potentates of a hereditary caste society realized that no good could come from a scholar nosing around in records of the past where he might stumble upon evidence undermining their claims to have descended from heroes and gods. Brown looked at twenty-five civilizations and compared the ones organized by hereditary castes with the others. None of the caste societies had developed a tradition of writing accurate depiction of the past; instead of history they had myth and legend. The caste societies were also distinguished by an absence of political science, social science, natural science, biography, realistic portraiture, and uniform education."

"In his book *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, named after a fuzzy grammatical category in an Australian language, the linguist George Lakoff argues that pristine categories are fictions."

"When it comes to more complicated motions, even perception fails us. The psychologists Dennis Proffitt and David Gilden have asked people simple questions about spinning tops, wheels rolling down ramps, colliding balls, and Archimedes-in-the-bathtub displacements. Even physics professors guess the wrong outcome if they are not allowed to fiddle with equations on paper. (If they are, they spend a quarter of an hour working it out and then announce that the problem is 'trivial.')

"[Geniuses] are mindful of the esteem of others and of their place in history ... Richard Feynman wrote two books describing how brilliant, irreverent, and admired he was and called one of them *What Do You Care What Other People Think?*"

This discussion is way too long already, and I haven't even *got* to the book's revelations about the mental processes involved in anger, love, art, and religion ...

Planning on reading at least one nonfiction book this year? *How the Mind Works* should be it. If you don't glom onto it immediately, you're out of your you-know-what.

FlimFan

Here are my totally subjective takes on movies seen since last time.

Bug Repellent

A Special

(meaning longer than usual)

Report on

Starship Troopers

It's often said that Robert Anson Heinlein, though the "dean of science fiction" from the 1940s through the 1980s and the beloved favorite of many fans, including me, for much of that time, was, upon mature reflection (ours, not his) ... a fascist. OK, an anarcho-fascist militiasocratic-libertarian. This long-awaited movie is based on the book many critics count as proof: the 1959 novel that ended Heinlein's run of successful juveniles (when Scribner's took one look and declared it unfit for young minds).

Well, this flick won't be changing any opinions. It sticks fairly faithfully to the bones of one of the great man's greatest stories. But it strips away lots of lectures on "moral philosophy" and all softening and complexity, reducing RAH's beautifully told *bildungsroman* and warm paean to military service to a horrifying glimpse of a society — in fact a universe — where violence isn't just inevitable, it's enjoyable.

It shows us Heinlein bare.

The hero's school instructor (Michael Ironside) may even be intended as a portrait of Heinlein himself: short, balding, gamecock tough, and totally committed to bloody-knuckled social Darwinism. Yes, I believe there's more to Heinlein than this. But there's no denying the movie catches much that's unpleasant in his spirit.

Starship Troopers tells the story of young Juan (Johnny) Rico, who enlists because his girlfriend does; only she becomes a starship pilot in training, while our less talented hero is posted to the Mobile Infantry. We see extended sequences of both kids undergoing training, which ends just as conflict commences with the Bugs, giant arachnoids from another planet. By intercutting propaganda newsflashes about the Bug War plus recruiting commercials throughout, and presenting the story in a flat, distancing, mock-heroic style, the whole movie becomes a slightly campy recruiting film itself.

An ultraviolet recruiting film: when during the first engagement on a Bug planet you see a pretty young trooperette writhing screaming on the ground, spraying blood, impaled by the chitinous fighting spine of an 8-foot-high arachnoid, you know you're not in Kansas City anymore.

In fact, though the hero's from Buenos Aires and though Earth's worldwide Federation is clearly multiracial, this world feels creepily akin to a futuristic Deutschweltrepublik. A stylized eagle flag, gray trooper uniforms, an officer in a long black leather topcoat, a blond hero with a jaw of gigantic Teutonic jut: it's like the Nazis won.

Although you'd think Nazis would at least be better soldiers. These guys' tactics suck. Against a fast-moving, numerous enemy with formidable exoskeletal armor, the Earth forces deploy in big formless clots and slog forward almost shoulder-to-shoulder. One favored maneuver in the plentiful battle scenes is for 5 or 10 soldiers to surround a Bug and all pour fire from dinky little machine guns toward the center. Good thing they all have such magic immunity from friendly fire.

Listen, if the filmmakers had to scrap Heinlein's flying powered armor suits because early prototypes were busting the SFX budget and still wouldn't work, did they have to can the military advisor too?

The big, luscious space battles are beautiful, though. And speaking of special effects, the Bugs are spectacular. There seem zillions of them, and the boys 'n' girls of the MI have a great time gunning them down while losing scads of their own side. I guess there's the usual musical score on the soundtrack, but what I remember most are symphonies of sickening crunches and squishes, screams and squirts ...

Because of missed release dates and stories of troubles on the set, I've been predicting for months that *Starship Troopers* would be a mess, a failure on every count.

I was wrong.

This movie is a work of art, with an individual look on the screen and an artist's vision. Albeit a repellent one. George Orwell famously said, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — forever."

This cheery view about suits director Paul Verhoeven, who as a boy during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands was one of the stompees. That's the way the world is, he says. Face up.

Because maybe there are worse alternatives: like the future is a *mandible munching* on a human face ...

Good:

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control — And now for something completely different. This is a vivid, poetic, extravagant documentary by Errol Morris, creator of *The Thin Blue Line*, *A Brief History of Time*, and the earlier classics *Gates of Heaven* and *Vernon, Florida*. What's this one about? Gulp. Well, I'll try. The film shows the work of four men: a scientist who studies African naked mole rats (mammals with insectile social habits); another who builds robots; a topiary gardener; and a circus lion tamer. It's pretty obvious that its subjects include obsession, childhood dreams coming true, evolution, succession, the similarities of animal to animal, the similarities of animal to man, and those old favorites life and death. What's a little less apparent is what Morris is actually saying about all this. You (almost) never hear his voice; there's no narrator, only voices of the four interviewees, ambient sound, and music. You never see his face; there's only the interviews, shots of the subjects at work in their different arenas, and stuff from old black-and-white cliffhanger serials such as *Zombies of the Stratosphere*. Of course, I have my own ideas about what Morris is doing. The two youngish scientists are interested in multiplicity, in what mobs of robots or mole

rats can accomplish or become. The older topiarist and lion tamer focus on individuality: shaping this particular bush into its optimum form, watching and knowing each specific lion well enough to become its master instead of its dinner. But this film is not a debate between young and old, hive and solitary, bad and good. It's a meditation. On how a woman and a pony both place a foot with the same powerful grace. How primordial a giraffe-shaped tree looks wrapped in fog during a midnight rainstorm. How kids at a mole rat exhibit seem a tad on the scurry-and-twitch side themselves. And how all four men are unique, creative, driven individuals. Look, this movie is several times more interesting than most of the celluloid sludge overslopping our mall cineplexes. The only reason I don't rate it as "Excellent" is because it seemed less accessible — and, I feel, not quite as strong — as Morris' other works, and you've got to leave some room at the top.

Decent:

A Life Less Ordinary — When director Danny Boyle and other Scottish guys who created the delightfully gruesome *Shallow Grave* and the beautifully heedless *Trainspotting* announce their first made-in-America movie, I'm first in line. But frankly, it's kind of a mess. Ewan McGregor's a janitor/novelist, Carmen Diaz's a rich girl, so naturally he's forced to kidnap her. Whereupon two angels (Delroy Lindo and Holly Hunter) assigned to make the humans fall in love select the time-honored angelic means of doing so. You know, posing as sleazy private detectives and getting hired to rescue her and kill him. Huh? There are some big laughs here and there amidst the shambles. Carmen Diaz shows nice comic gifts, sobbing and screaming shamelessly into the phone during a faked ransom call. Ewan McGregor acts Bad Brit Boy charming yet naive, like a member of Herman's

Hermits with some priors on his juvie sheet. Delroy Lindo creates the screen's definitive performance as a hit angel. And as ever, Holly Hunter throws herself into her part with lunatic determination. She goes absolutely ovaries-out. But even she can't force this movie to make much sense. Look, the performers, the music, and some of the comic bits were enough for me to enjoy myself anyway. But if you're at all resistant to eccentric excess with attitude — well, remember earlier gentle angel comedies like *Heaven Can Wait?* This one is more like *Heaven Can Go Fuck Itself*.

The Devil's Advocate — My responsibility as a serious critic prevent me from blurting out the secret identity of Al Pacino's character in the dark fantasy/comedy *The Devil's Advocate*; except that the film clips already give it away. Let's just say the movie drops big hints early on, like the guy — John Milton, head of a powerful New York law firm — always travels by subway, makes everybody very tempting offers, never sleeps, and really approves of sex. (Do I have to draw you a pentagram?) Screenwriters Jonathan Lemkin and Tony Gilroy must have had a lot of fun writing lines for him, and Pacino has a helluva time delivering them. He easily steals the movie from Keanu Reeves, who nevertheless is less wooden than usual playing Kevin Lomax, a young Florida lawyer on the make who's never lost a case. Lomax is recruited by Milton's firm and moves to New York, where despite Fifth Avenue's being paved with good intentions he's soon spending long hours defending guilty millionaires and neglecting his wife. The whole thing is kinda *The Firm* meets *Rosemary's Baby*. As the wife, Charlize Theron's role gets more and more thankless until she could just kill herself. Taylor Hackford (*Officer and a Gentleman*, *Dolores Claiborne*) does a smooth job directing this odd throwback of a film. It's really an old-fashioned, straight dark fantasy — as though more complex, multilayered,

modern stories such as *Jacob's Ladder* or *Angel Heart* had never existed. Nevertheless, *The Devil's Advocate* gets excellent word-of-mouth. The other people I know who've seen it all also found it devilishly satisfying.

To all

On the *Today* show one morning this month, George Lucas said that the first of his three *Star Wars* prequels has already finished shooting. But don't hold your breath, Vaderites: he estimates post-production should take 18 months. So I make it an April 1999 release.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #329, October 1997

To Nomi Burstein

Thanks for another interesting glimpse inside the observant Jewish life. How do you handle “holiday envy” from non-Jewish coworkers who are jealous you have more days off? Take them as vacation? Or do you, say, work Christmas, Easter, etc. to balance things out?

To Tom Endrey

When you mention a “crazy alternative future” where learning Chinese might come in handy, I think immediately of Maureen McHugh's novel *China Mountain Zhang*. Have you read it? Really excellent book.

Enjoyed your Hungarian homecoming travel journal muchly; who else could tell us this stuff?

Nice phrasing: “Archaeology is one of the least useful and therefore most poorly financed sciences.” Sad, but, it seems, true.

To Tony Lewis

Nice little bit of comparison on Kurds vs. Celts. Yes, dipping into the numbers just a little seems to indicate there are more of the former around.

Estimates are for 15-20 million Kurds scattered about in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and to some extent Syria and Armenia. Whereas Celts would come to at most 3 million in Ireland, maybe 1 million in the Scottish Hebrides and Highlands, at most 300,000 in Cornwall, 70,000 in the Isle of Man, at most another 2 millions Bretons in France, for a total of maybe 7 million. (Man, are these figures rough.)

Even allowing for double that in Celtic descendants in the U.S. and Australia, the Kurds edge us blue-painted wild men out.

To Mark Hertel

So the latest Godzilla movie is entitled *Godzilla vs. Destroyah*. Is that Destroyer but with a Massachusetts accent?

To Michael Burstein

If it's easier for a short-story writer to win a Campbell Award than for a novelist because it's easier to read a short than a novel and readers are lazy, maybe you should try to become a master of the short-short form.

You know, like one of my favorites from *F&SF* in the 60s:

"The last man in the world sat in a room.

"The door was locked."

Here, let me try one.

"Michael Burstein sat in a room.

"By the way, did he ever mention he went to Clarion?"

To Ray Bowie

I too was a fan of Howard Johnson's frozen mac and cheese for many years. Then I discovered Stouffer's, and now I'd never go back. Try it. Especially a little overcooked, so the top blackens crisply around the edges and the noodles attain that paradigmatic rubberoidal consistency. Muy muy yum yum.

To Mark Olson

Missed you at the Oct Other Meeting. Hope your Midwest trip was fun, and produces a lovely con report this ish.

If you'd only paid more obsessive attention to your *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, you would have known about the Chiltern Hundreds years ago, instead of having to find out in Durant's book. As well as such (until 1838) counterpart offices as the Escheatorships of Munster and Ulster.

Like you, I quite enjoy public TV's Sister Wendy and her examinations of great artworks. Especially the way she'll approach some sexual element in the work, toying with our slight shock at hearing such topics discussed by a nun.

Reminds me of my freshman composition teacher at Boston College, Father Arthur McGillivray, S.J.

Who once told my class, gesturing broadly: "You're not appreciating the intensity behind this poem at all. Don't you people realize what love is?"

"Love is when the welfare of the beloved becomes the most important thing in the universe. Love is a mad fury that dances like little bubbles in your veins. Love is such sweet intoxication that your very senses are swept away entire.

"And do you know how I KNOW?"

He paused dramatically. Thirty 18-year-old voyeurs leaned forward as one, eager for some sordid personal revelation.

The priest stood tall and threw his arms wide with ecstasy.

"I read BOOKS!"

To Anna Hillier

There's something rather Chinese about your nice dragon cover artwork. Have you ever been there, or are you just a fan of chinoiserie?

To George Flynn

I like your bit about "the migratory nation of Fandom was on the move."

Although talk about army ants that will devour anything in their path ...

To Leslie Turek

Thanks for the delightful extended excerpt from Patrick O'Brian's *The Unknown Shore*. Re the domestic scene you quoted, easy to see why some fans feel O'Brian may be channeling Jane Austen.

One of the few things I disliked about growing up and leaving home was that I no longer had my sister Liz at hand on whom to inflict readings from whatever book I was conning. She shared most of my tastes, laughed at all the right jokes, and generally helped intensify the pleasure by participating in the experience. Glad that you and Alex have that relationship.

Carrington WAS distressing; and I couldn't quite understand Strachey's and Carrington's relationship, either. But it seemed mysterious in quite a realistic way, so I decided that was to the movie's credit.

To Joe Ross

You say that "fans familiar with *Star Trek* will know where 'Tiberias' comes from." I always thought he came from Rome, and later Capri. Or do I recall *I, Claudius* incorrectly? ... (I know, I know, it's James Tiberias Kirk. But I at least have the grace to be ashamed that I know.)

To Elisabeth Carey

Still thinking good thoughts about your job hunt.

To Paul Giguere

Man, you're not scairt of tackling the Big Project, are you?

First the 100 best SF books, now plowing through all the works in Harold Bloom's Western Canon. Relieved to find I've read at least one work by each of the 26 authors (although truth to tell I didn't exactly *finish* *Don Quixote* or *Remembrance of Things Past*). With one exception: Pessoa. What tha—?

Never even *heard* of the guy. For anyone in similar straits, my encyclopedia says he's Fernando Pessoa (PESS-wah), dates 1888-1935, Portuguese poet who bridged classicism with symbolism and wrote under 44 different names. Why don't you start with him, Paul, and enlighten us all?

Loved your little syllogism on why all writers are prostitutes. Of course, as an advertising writer, hooking would be a big step UP for me.