



Fire in the Brain: Clinical Tales of Hallucination

Ronald K. Siegel

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A beautiful pianist hears her music drowned out by the voice of God. A young woman calmly watches the gang rape of her girlfriend and herself. A shy schoolboy turns to his invisible best friend to wreak bloody vengeance. In *Fire in the Brain*, Ronald K. Siegel shows how even the sober brain can create the sights and sounds of artificial heavens and hells. Here we find gods and demons, living playmates and dead friends, even UFOs--all astonishingly vivid yet entirely illusory. With the wit and compassion of Oliver Sacks and with psychological detective work worthy of Sherlock Holmes, Siegel reveals the topography of the hallucinatory world through seventeen riveting case histories. Readers will meet a young girl who insists that a dragon named Chopsticks is her frequent companion; a pool shark desperate to discover the trigger for his horrifying LSD flashbacks; and an elderly woman whose doppelganger rescues her from a violent intruder at the eleventh hour. Their stories, and over a dozen more, reveal the commonalities of the hallucinating brain, whether our hallucinations are induced by drugs, dreams, severe trauma, or the delirium of illness. *Omni* magazine said that the author "probably knows more about how drugs work than anyone else alive." In this masterfully orchestrated blend of scientific fact and bizarre yet compelling anecdotes, Siegel demonstrates that his brilliance goes beyond psychopharmacology into the fascinating natural workings--as well as the dark side--of the human mind.

Fire in the Brain: Clinical Tales of Hallucination Details

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From Reader Review Fire in the Brain: Clinical Tales of Hallucination for online ebook

Steve Rueffer says

This book is a must read for anyone interested in the study of anomalous experiences. Siegel does a fantastic job telling of the often chilling experiences of real people dealing with supposed visitations by ghosts, aliens, etc... The science explanations are written in a language most non-academics can understand, and although a little dated, offer some understanding of the conditions from which these people suffer. A fun and insightful read.

Charles says

I have the hardback of this. An excellent book. Really gives you some food for thought concerning dream experiences and how the brain constructs our reality. I use pieces from it in lectures all the time.

James M. Madsen, M.D. says

Very interesting case studies of hallucinations!

Sophy H says

A fantastic book detailing vastly differing clinical cases of hallucinations, be they drug, isolation or trauma induced, or simply due to the chemical occurrences in our sleeping/waking brain. I find ALL psychology books fascinating, particularly those dealing with hallucinations and schizophrenic tendencies. This did not disappoint. The chapters concerning the 2 women who were "date raped" (to put it very fucking mildly when it was horrific!!!) and the guy who was kidnapped in South America, oh my giddy aunt, these chapters are NOT for the faint hearted and for those of a nervous disposition or who may trigger, should read with caution. Ronald K Siegel has clearly been a "psychonaut" himself over the years, trying hallucinogenics himself, which adds some humour, humility and understanding to the writing.

The only paragraph I didn't agree with was when he said night nurses have it much easier in terms of workload whilst getting paid more!!! He clearly hasn't been on a night shift in an NHS hospital during staff crises!! Easy my arse Siegel!! I forgive him though!!

Much recommended.

Kiof says

Oliver sacks on acid.

Thomas Wictor says

For most of my life I wondered if what I experienced was real or a hallucination. Being a sufferer of mental illness myself, I like books that can highlight the absurd, humorous side of having a nonfunctional brain. It never devolves into exploitation. If you want to know what it's like to be unsure if you're rooted in reality, this is a must-read. The writing style is quite entertaining.

Jennifer says

One of the most interesting books I've ever read. Story after amazing story of people who saw and heard what wasn't there: Imaginary friends. Ghosts. Vortexes. Scary symbols on the wall... Some are cute and quirky, others are spooky and disturbing. You won't be bored with this one.

Rebecca Glass says

Really interesting perspective. Lots of short stories about hallucination ranging from dreams to drug trips to hallucination due to pain. A whole new scientific spin on drug usage and dreams. Easy read!

Colleen says

This book slid neatly into my pile of research books for my novel. (It's percolating in the back of my mind right now... the characters speak in my sleep.) Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* began this series, and *Fire in the Brain* was wonderful follow-up.

Sacks's sympathy is extended into empathy in Siegel's work, as he risks mental life and limb to truly see through the eyes of his patients. Siegel submerges himself in a floating capsule for a day to encourage an out of body experience. When he thinks his work with marijuana "psychonauts" has brought forth a disturbing image of disembodied eyes, he travels to Mexico to drop peyote with a local shaman. He deprives himself of sleep to see ghost swastika images imprinted on the bedsheets of a night nurse's patients. I thoroughly enjoyed contemplating the limits of the human mind alongside Siegel. I bet you will, too.

I'll end with a quote I will apply to my daily life:

"In more than one case, Sherlock Holmes amazed Dr. Watson by deducing what he was thinking about from his facial features and the movement of his eyes. While Holmes's talents far exceed any known facts about visual perception, sometimes it is possible to tell if a person is engaged in a fantasy or an actual reminiscence by the shifting of their eyes. Shifts to the left usually indicate that the person is imaginative and prone to vivid fantasies, while shifts to the right indicate that person has the information readily available from a minimal search of memory. (103)"

My uncle, a former CIA agent, divulged this information to me previously. Apparently, lying suspects also tend to physically remove themselves. For instance, they might inch their chair back until they hit the wall. Were this Myspace, I would comment that I'm looking for "someone who tends to shift their eyes to the left."

Gotta love that creativity.

Suzanne says

It's kind of amazing what our brains can do and how little we actually understand them. The most fascinating thing of all in this book, to me, was a study done where basically they hooked up electrodes to folks, flashed lights at them, and then registered the brain perceiving them and what not. In cases where the subject was hallucinating, the person they "saw" was actually blocking the lights as far as their brain was registering, the same way it would register if an actual person stepped in front. It really makes you wonder, if what you see is so real to you, even when it isn't real to anyone else, how do you really know that anything you think is real, is actually really real?

Jeanette Rupel says

A clinic look into hallucinations due to various triggers. Dr. Siegel writes an interesting book that keeps the writer hooked even through clinical explanations. The stories of patients and their hallucinations are written with strong imagery and vivid word choice. The book is educational and fun. It truly is a fascinating read.

Kressel Housman says

Like *Whispers*, this is an often disturbing journey into the world of hallucinations. Whether they were induced by drugs, sleep deprivation, or torture, the exploration into our brains is always fascinating, and I admire Dr. Siegel immensely for his willingness to delve into his own mind and not just to be a cold and professional observer. The chapters on torture, though - sheesh! I almost stopped reading.

For me, the most fascinating chapter was on near-death experiences, even though Dr. Siegel's response disappointed me. He's a true agnostic, stating that the oft-reported "down a tunnel to light" experiences are hallucinations, though he does admit, "just because they're going on in your head doesn't mean they aren't real." (That's a paraphrase of Dumbledore in *Deathly Hallows*, in case you didn't recognize it.) Interestingly enough, a look at the bibliography includes another of Dr. Siegel's academic articles on the subject as well as a comparative article between it and a book on my to-read list, *Life after Life* by Dr. Raymond Moody. I'm bracing myself to be disappointed by the conclusions, but in the interest of truth, I'll go forward and read. I'll keep you posted, too.

Cynde Moya says

A light and interesting read. Sometimes descends into a kind of "true tales of Topanga" as the author details his home visits to druggy people in the Southern California mountains. The chapter where he details his interviews and researches with people who have imaginary friends is the best. He describes meeting the imaginary friend of a young teenager who was articulate, playful and a little reluctant about her dragon friend. A great research problem that he found ways to resolve.

Alissa says

Fire in the Brain is a fascinating look into the human mind through the hallucinations it produces. There are several sections including Visionary Drugs, Dreams etc. that highlight some enlightening, pardon the pun, cases. Siegel actually participated in his own experiments after gathering data and input from subjects which he called Psychonauts. So from ingesting a peyote laced gruel in the desert to smoking marijuana to being locked in a cage in a dark basement for three days, he tried to simulate what his subjects felt or were able to feel with the help of an outside stimulant.

On dying or near fatal accidents Siegel said something that made me pause for a minute. Just an example that clarified some misconceptions that someone may have about hallucinations or the way they are perceived. Here's that passage:

"I asked them to picture a man in his living room, standing at a closed window opposite the fireplace and looking out at the sunset. He is absorbed by the view of the outside world and does not visualize the interior of the room. As darkness falls outside, however, the images of the objects in the room behind him can be seen reflected dimly in the window. With deepening darkness the fire in the fireplace illuminates the room, and the man now sees a vivid reflection of the room, which appears to be outside the window. As the analogy is applied to the near-death experience, the daylight (sensory input) is reduced while the interior illumination (the general level of arousal in the brain) remains bright, so that images originating within the rooms of the brain may be perceived as though they came from outside the windows of the senses."

Highly recommended for someone interested in psychology, hallucinations or even just a good read. Closer to 4 and a 1/2 stars and well worth the read.

Alice says

This guy is crazy! I read this book about a month ago and weird things that happened in it keep popping into my head. Supposedly everything in here is true. Scary stuff. The author tries to sound very scientific, but then he keeps going to South America to eat peyote or staying awake for a week straight with a nurse who sees swastikas marking the patients as Nazis. Really.
