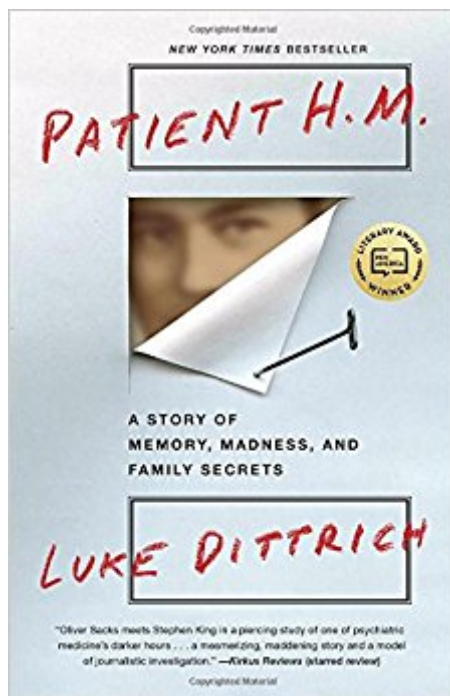


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Patient H.M.: A Story Of Memory, Madness, And Family Secrets



Synopsis

“Oliver Sacks meets Stephen King” in this propulsive, haunting journey into the life of the most studied human research subject of all time, the amnesic known as Patient H.M. For readers of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* comes a story that has much to teach us about our relentless pursuit of knowledge. Winner of the PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award

Los Angeles Times Book Prize Winner NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY The Washington Post New York Post NPR The Economist New York Wired Kirkus Reviews BookPage

In 1953, a twenty-seven-year-old factory worker named Henry Molaison—who suffered from severe epilepsy—received a radical new version of the then-common lobotomy, targeting the most mysterious structures in the brain. The operation failed to eliminate Henry’s seizures, but it did have an unintended effect: Henry was left profoundly amnesic, unable to create long-term memories. Over the next sixty years, Patient H.M., as Henry was known, became the most studied individual in the history of neuroscience, a human guinea pig who would teach us much of what we know about memory today. Patient H.M. is, at times, a deeply personal journey. Dittrich’s grandfather was the brilliant, morally complex surgeon who operated on Molaison—and thousands of other patients. The author’s investigation into the dark roots of modern memory science ultimately forces him to confront unsettling secrets in his own family history, and to reveal the tragedy that fueled his grandfather’s relentless experimentation—experimentation that would revolutionize our understanding of ourselves.

Dittrich uses the case of Patient H.M. as a starting point for a kaleidoscopic journey, one that moves from the first recorded brain surgeries in ancient Egypt to the cutting-edge laboratories of MIT. He takes readers inside the old asylums and operating theaters where psychosurgeons, as they called themselves, conducted their human experiments, and behind the scenes of a bitter custody battle over the ownership of the most important brain in the world. Patient H.M. combines the best of biography, memoir, and science journalism to create a haunting, endlessly fascinating story, one that reveals the wondrous and devastating things that can happen when hubris, ambition, and human imperfection collide.

Praise for Patient H.M.

“An exciting, artful blend of family and medical history.” —The New York Times

“In prose both elegant and intimate, and often thrilling, Patient H.M. is an important book about the wages not of sin but of science.” —The Washington Post

“Spellbinding . . . The fact that Dittrich looks critically at the actual process of scientific investigation is just one of the things to admire about Patient H.M.” —The New York Times Book Review

“Patient H.M. tells one of

the most fascinating and disturbing stories in the annals of medicine, weaving in ethics, philosophy, a personal saga, the history of neurosurgery, the mysteries of human memory, and an exploration of human ego. — Sheri Fink, M.D., Pulitzer Prize winner and author of *Five Days at Memorial* — “This is classic reporting and myth-making at the same time.” — Colum McCann, author of *Let the Great World Spin* *Kirkus Reviews — (starred review)

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

— “An exciting, artful blend of family and medical history.” — The New York Times — “In prose both elegant and intimate, and often thrilling, *Patient H.M.* is an important book about the wages not of sin but of science. It is deeply reported and surprisingly emotional, at times poignant, at others shocking. . . . A scintillating book, infused with humanity.” — The Washington Post — “Spellbinding . . . The fact that Dittrich looks critically at the actual process of scientific investigation is just one of the things to admire about *Patient H.M.*” — The New York Times Book Review — “Astonishingly insightful . . . A fascinating story in its own right to anyone interested in the history of modern science —,s attempts to understand the causes of mental illness along with the many botched attempts to treat it . . . [*Patient H.M.*] is indeed about memory, madness, and family secrets and, in that sense, about the paths that shape the core of the self, in each and every one of us.” — Psychology Today — “Beautifully told . . . a book that will rank with

Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in the realm of outstanding medical ethics narratives. •Associated Press "Dittrich's account raises entirely new questions about the way in which the research on H.M. was conducted and about the conclusions that have long been incorporated into our understanding of memory. •New York Magazine "Remarkable. •Wired "Oliver Sacks meets Stephen King in a piercing study of one of psychiatric medicine's darker hours. . . . A mesmerizing, maddening story and a model of journalistic investigation. •Kirkus Reviews (starred review) "At the heart of this breathtaking work . . . is [Luke] Dittrich's story of his complicated grandfather, his mentally ill grandmother, and a long-held family secret, with Molaison stranded somewhere the past and the future were nothing but indistinct blurs. •Publisher's Weekly, starred review "The machinations of scientists and researchers—their personality and ambition, power and hubris—are of equally vital (and cautionary) importance in Dittrich's unusual and compelling mix of science and family history. •Booklist, starred review "Patient H.M. tells one of the most fascinating and disturbing stories in the annals of medicine, weaving in ethics, philosophy, a personal saga, the history of neurosurgery, the mysteries of human memory, and an exploration of human ego. A monumental contribution to our understanding of medical research, and of ourselves, Patient H.M. is sweeping, meticulous, and seamless—with an ending that, like the best of scientific investigations, challenges everything that came before it. •Sheri Fink, M.D., Pulitzer Prize winner and author of *Five Days at Memorial* "In Patient H.M., Luke Dittrich explores the limits of science and the mind. In the process, he rescues an iconic life from oblivion. Dittrich is well aware that while we are the sum of what we may remember, we're also at the mercy of what we can forget. This is classic reporting and myth-making at the same time. •Colum McCann, author of *Let the Great World Spin* "Luke Dittrich has achieved something remarkable in Patient H.M. This book succeeds on every level: as a fresh look at the most famous patient in medical history, as an exposé of our dark history of psychiatry and neurosurgery, and, most powerfully, as a deeply personal investigation into the author's past. And yet it's still a page-turner that reads like a thriller. It deserves a spot next to the great medical histories *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, *The Ghost Map*, and *The Emperor of All Maladies*. •Susannah Cahalan, author of *Brain on Fire* "It felt as if I read this book in one breath. Patient H.M. is a fascinating, powerful investigation, a matryoshka doll

of nested stories about the past and present, remembering and forgetting. Luke Dittrich's quest to understand the amnesic patient who taught the world so much about memory leads him to the shoals of his own family tragedy and an ending that will break your heart. But it's his beautiful unfolding of the story, the art of his sentences and reportage, that you'll never forget.

•Michael Paterniti, author of *The Telling Room* From the Hardcover edition.

Luke Dittrich is a National Magazine Award-winning journalist, and a contributing editor at *Esquire*. This is his first book. From the Hardcover edition.

I was picked up on the wave of the first paragraph and swept along for the rest of this amazing book. Besides the excellent writing and a fascinating topic, this author has an amazing ability to draw you in and make you feel as if you know each of the people he writes about. I did not find the details too complex to follow, and I think he was more than fair in how he handled the illumination of some individuals that were obviously flawed (but aren't we all?) I highly recommend it.

After an okay career in adventure journalism for popular magazines, Luke Dittrich has produced his first book, the story he was born to write. Dittrich comes from an aristocratic American family that had some dark secrets. His grandfather Scoville was an evangelistic exponent and practitioner of prefrontal lobotomies during the 1950s; his grandmother was a remarkably independent woman before she married her dashing, philandering husband. The quiet "Bam Bam," as Luke and his siblings called her, had a breakdown early in her marriage to Scoville; after various forms of shock treatment she was lobotomized, perhaps by Scoville himself. Scoville's biggest case, Dittrich learned, was a lobotomy on the epileptic Henry Moulaison. His drill went too far, and Moulaison, known in brain literature as Patient H.M., lost all his present-tense memory. He was studied by many people, especially by Suzanne Corkle, who coincidentally lived across the street from Dittrich's family when they were children. Yes, Dittrich had a story to tell, but Corkle would not share her notes on Patient H.M. with him; she was writing her own book. Anger, anger, anger. It drives Dittrich's story. This book is a great read.

This is an in-depth (and provocative) account of arguably the most studied brain in neuroscience with the brains of Lenin and Einstein running a close 2nd and 3rd, respectively. (Personal plug - Einstein's brain is one of my areas of research ... but I digress). Dittrich recounts the possibly avoidable "neurotragedy" of Henry Molaison (H.M.), and provides the reader with a lucid account of

the neuroscience of memory in which the bilateral hippocampi are the linchpins of registering the longterm memories that very much determine who we are. With bilateral hippocampal lesions H.M. was unable to consolidate new memories and was consigned to live in the eternal present. Why would a neurosurgeon deliberately extirpate H.M.'s hippocampi? And thereby hangs a tale. Where Dittrich departs from a standard account of neuroscience history is that H.M.'s neurosurgeon, Willam Scoville, was Dittrich's grandfather. We come to understand what drove Scoville to surgically gamble with H.M.'s brain ... with devastating neuropsychological results. This is not a hagiography of movers and shakers in neuroscience. Dittrich's account of his grandfathers' embrace of the now obsolete techniques of lobotomy lights up one of the darkest corners of experimental neurosurgery. Academicians will nod knowingly at Dittrich's honest account of academic politics which should not obstruct the mission of scientific research ... but which most certainly does. The account of the legal wranglings over the ownership of H.M.'s brain underscores the complexity and occasional pettiness of modern neuroscience. In particular, the (late) neuropsychologist Suzanne Corkin who sustained her formidable academic career on studies of H.M. draws fire for her staggering admission that she destroyed decades' worth of raw neuropsychological data she amassed on H.M. Corkin's colleagues at MIT accused Dittrich of false reporting in the pages of the New York Times (and were rebutted by Dittrich's recorded interviews with the (usually) unforthcoming Corkin). The reader of "Patient H.M. ..." will be thoroughly introduced to one of the landmarks in 20th Century neuroscience and will enjoy (or be dismayed) by a compellingly honest account of the wrong turns taken along the way to neurosurgical practice and neuroscience research.

A good review of the history of psychosurgery. Engaging. I found the ending puzzling. The events were well researched. Recommended reading for any one with an interest in brain function.

What strikes me, as I finish this book is the exploitation H.M. experienced at the hands of Science. He was a treasured specimen, unique and valuable and yet lived a meager life style with no enrichments offered him. Dittrich does a great job of putting together many puzzle pieces of research to create a great narrative. He illuminates some sad times for the mentally ill in America. It's not one of those books you "just can't put down" but it is really worth reading.

An absolutely fascinating look at so many aspects of our mental health and medical practices history. It's sometimes hard to believe that the events took place in the United States of America in the

recent past. Thankfully practices are more ethical today. However our human tendencies and prejudices are still easy to see and this book is a must read on many levels.

This was beautifully written and told far more than the tale of Patient H. M. Dittrich gives a great overview of the recent history of neurosurgery alongside how our knowledge of the brain developed as well as his family's own place in this history. The story is told from a scientific yet personal perspective, never losing a grip on either the scientific or human side of things.

This book was a great read. Very well-written without any overly long scientific explanation, though necessary ones are easily understood. I particularly liked the personal connection of the author (grandson-grandfather) to the doctor who performed HM's operation.

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