



Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired, and Sudden Savant

Darold A. Treffert

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* Gold Medal Winner in the Psychology / Mental Health Category of the 2011 IPPY Awards *

* Silver Medal Winner in the 2010 BOTYA Awards Psychology Category *

Savant syndrome is a rare condition in which individuals with developmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorders, have one or more areas of expertise, ability, or brilliance - "islands of genius" - that exist in contrast with their overall limitations. In this fascinating book, Dr. Darold Treffert looks at what we know about this remarkable condition, and at new discoveries that raise interesting questions about the hidden brain potential within us all.

Dr. Treffert explores the phenomena of genetic memory - instances in which individuals somehow "know" things they never learned - and sudden genius or "acquired savantism" - where a neuro-typical person unexpectedly and spectacularly develops savant-like abilities following a head injury or stroke. Showing that these phenomena point convincingly towards a reservoir of untapped potential - an inner savant capacity - within us all, he looks both at how savant skills can be nurtured, and how they can help the person who has them, particularly if that person is on the autism spectrum. A central colour section contains the extraordinary artwork of some of the savants who are mentioned in the book.

Islands of Genius will intrigue anyone who has ever wondered what makes the mind of a savant tick, as well as clinicians, parents, teachers, therapists, and others who care for, and about, individuals with savant syndrome.

Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired, and Sudden Savant Details

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population available for study, explains some of the current theories about the savant's special abilities and offers a few of his own.

He then spends a significant amount of time showcasing a number of savants, summarizing their personal stories, emphasizing repeatedly the importance of nurturing their special gift rather than simply trying to address the disability, which his extensive work performed over a lifetime has convinced him is the best approach. He repeatedly claims that in the savants he has dealt with strengthening the ability almost always leads to an improvement in the disability but not necessarily the other way around.

He finishes by further exploring the implications of having savants among us, not just those who were "born" that way, but also those who later acquire their abilities. Like the man who suddenly develops prodigious calendar abilities after getting hit on the head, enabling him to remember dates in the past along with a detailed description of the weather, or the individual who becomes an accomplished artist/musician despite no formal training after the onset of dementia, or the woman who suffers a concussion and awakes to find she now speaks with an accent from a country she's never visited. All these bizarre stories suggest we have amazing abilities that exist in us all, except we don't know how to tap into them.

Each section and chapter reads as if a stand alone piece, some actually contributed by other authors, and thus accounts for some of the repetition that others have commented on negatively. Personally, it didn't bother me because I find that in books like this, it's not uncommon.

And there's so much more.

What I enjoyed most: The savant phenomena further confirms the complex nature of our brain and suggests our potential is unknown even to us. Viewed in conjunction with a slew of other brain books/brain science, I found much of the book and commentary to be extremely thought-provoking and intriguing. What if??? and If...then how???

He also mentions the different types of intelligence vs. just I.Q. and goes on to discuss how the brain is not a clean slate at birth. Instead, he suggests as others have that we are born with many inherited capabilities that include a proclivity and, in some cases, an intuition and natural set of skills for things like music, art, and math.

It seems to me his position on "training the talent" has a universal application and isn't limited to the autistic or savant individual. I've often wondered if in our attempts to "standardize" and "mass educate" we don't sometimes by default ignore the special talents we are all born with, ultimately weakening those abilities and maybe even causing us to lose them.

Lots of fascinating stuff here that goes way beyond the savant/autistic individual.

My final thoughts: We continue to learn more about the brain, how it functions, and its capabilities by studying what happens when a brain is thought to be diseased or otherwise damaged. In the case of the savant, the damage seems to unlock some amazing hidden potential.

Ultimately the presence of savants among us begs the questions, "Are these talents latent in all of us?" and if so, "Can we access/tap into them without losing something?"

Would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the savant syndrome specifically or brain science in general. Like most books that discuss topics in the infancy of their understanding, they ultimately ask more questions than they answer, which only make them more exciting.

As a plus, the author goes out of his way to provide additional links and sources, including the savantsyndrome.com site, for those interested in the ideas and topics being discussed. Makes me wish I had Kim Peek's (the famous savant who inspired Rainman), incredible ability to read with both my left and right eyes simultaneously (8-10 pages/minute) and memorize over 12,000 books.

Paula says

I learned of this book from a fiction book I read about a man who acquires savant abilities after an incident involving an MRI and an earthquake... I'll put the title in once I remember it.

THIS book was interesting, but took me a long time to read as it wasn't particularly exciting.

Not that you'd expect a book like this to be exciting. It's just that the other books I kept reading instead were a lot more mentally stimulating.

Really comprehensive coverage of savant syndrome, with heaps of fascinating case studies, which were good to just pick up and read one at a time.

It was quite astonishing to learn just what the human brain is capable of.

My biggest gripe would be that the author would just quote the medical descriptions verbatim as though the reader suddenly had acquired the ability to recognise all the parts of the brain and their functions. Would have been fine if it had been summarised afterwards, but that happened only once or twice.

Loads of references to websites etc that I will look into further.

SundayAtDusk says

After reading an ARC of *Islands of Genius* three times, I went to my local library to request they get a copy of the book. All public libraries should have a copy of this book. Because it is an education. It is also an inspiration. And it is one of the most fascinating books I have ever, ever read.

What Dr. Treffert does primarily in *Islands of Genius* is explore the world of savants. He has worked with and researched savants since 1962. Not only does he share his 48 years of interaction, observations and research with the reader, he also tells the individual stories of over 15 well known savants--including Kim Peek, who was the inspiration for the *Rain Man*. (The book is dedicated to Kim Peek, who died in December 2009, and his father, Fran Peek.) Moreover, there are three chapters in the book written by teachers of special needs children, describing their methods for teaching art, music and math. Also, there is an appendix listing 15 books about savant syndrome and specific savants, as well as 11 books written by savants.

Next, Dr. Treffert explores acquired savant behavior, sudden savant behavior, and "neurotypical persons with savant-like skills". I must confess, I found those topics even more interesting than the savants. Individuals who acquire savant like behavior do so after an illness or injury that affects the central nervous system. He tells the story of a 10-year-old boy hit in the head by a baseball, who wakes up knowing how to perform calendar calculations. (If you don't know what calendar calculation is, as I did not, you are in for a wild read.) Plus, the stories of people who, after acquiring "fronto-temporal dementia", suddenly, for the first time in their life, develop an intense interest in art, and start creating extraordinary paintings. Or individuals

who, after having strokes or head injuries, start writing poetry or composing music, or start talking with a foreign accent, or speaking in a foreign language, from a country they have never even visited. The latter is known as "xenoglossy". (Those who have read Dr. Ian Stevenson's work are familiar with that topic.)

Then, there are those individuals, who have no disabilities, or have had no CNS illness or injury, who can do astounding things. For example, people who have "hyperthymestic syndrome" can remember what happened almost every day of their life. And some individuals can read backwards. Or they can write with both hands at the same time, in two different languages. Or, there are those with "synesthesia", who "see" words or sounds, "taste" music, or "smell" colors. Others can do astonishing things with all the letters in the conversations they hear, or with numbers. In addition, some individuals mentioned in the book, who were beginner students in music, suddenly fully understood music, as if they have been studying it their whole life, and then started playing and composing complex works of music.

How is it the savants and the non-savants can do all those beyond belief things? According to Dr. Treffert, they can because of "genetic memory". He proposes that "stored in each of us" is "a generous amount of genetically inherited, factory-installed software for certain skills and abilities, along with considerable genetically transferred knowledge itself, unconsciously remembered". He further states that his description of genetic memory "does not include reincarnation, mysticism, existential ruminations, transcendentalism or paranormal phenomena".

When one thinks about it, however, genetic memory is just a theory. Savants no more prove there is such a thing as genetic memory, than they prove there is such a thing as reincarnation. Of course, many who believe in reincarnation do see savants as souls who are remembering their past life skills in art, math, music, etc. And it's interesting to note that it is often at the ages of 3-4 that savant skills suddenly manifest themselves in children, which are also the ages that children often start talking about past life memories, according to those who have studied past life memories of children. Yet what would be the reason for incarnating as a savant? They have extraordinary talents, but also terrible disabilities that keep most of them from living independent lives. Is it possibly just karma? If so, what type of karma would get one the life of a savant?

For those who firmly believe in reincarnation, don't let Dr. Treffert's disbelief in your beliefs stop you from reading this book. He does not appear to be spitting out the word "reincarnation". In fact, at one point in *Islands of Genius*, he told how he was harshly criticized for once reporting in a journal article that parents and other observers of savants had reported paranormal abilities, including ESP. He stated: "Thus my merely reporting that there were such reports engendered censure from the scientific community". There is plenty in this book to feed your mind with all sorts of ideas about savants and reincarnation. Although, if you are not secure in your beliefs, then watch out--you might start believing in genetic memory instead. :)

One more metaphysical topic I couldn't help thinking about while reading *Islands of Genius* was near-death experiences. Those individuals who suddenly acquire intense interest in music or art or writing, after having a CNS illness or injury, remind me so much of the experiences of some individuals who have had NDEs. After seeing what's on the other side of the tunnel when they were medically dead, they often return to life desperately wanting to describe or recreate what they saw and heard, but find it verbally hard to do so. Thus, they passionately turn to music or art or poetry. One of the people who acquired savant skills mentioned in Dr. Treffert's book was a surgeon who was struck by lightning, and had an "intense near-death experience", after which he became obsessed with playing and composing classical music. Also, those who have had NDEs sometimes say they "knew everything", while on "the other side". And they often come back with psychic abilities.

This poses the interesting question: Are all the wonderful memories and skills Dr. Treffert believes are stored in the brain, compliments of genetic memory, actually instead stored in the soul? Or are they stored in both? Does the brain, due to illness or injury, rewire itself in a way that brings up stored soul skills and memories? Or does the soul rewire the brain so stored skills and memories come up, in order to make life better or more

interesting for the soul during a given lifetime? Is it possible a savant's soul may find itself so bored or so distressed due to the disabilities in that lifetime, that the soul goes searching for either past life or "spirit world" skills in order to have something to excel in, or simply something interesting to do to pass the time?

See, even if you're way more metaphysically inclined, instead of scientifically inclined, *Islands of Genius* can still create all kinds of interesting thoughts in your mind . . . or brain . . . or soul . . . or wherever thoughts are actually created and stored. The book is as extraordinary as the people in it. It is also easy to read and easy to understand; has interesting paintings, pictures and poems; has over 200 references; a subject index and an author index. You've also got to love a guy who says things like: "It has been said that when an old person dies, it is as if a library just burned down. Gone are all the collective knowledge, wisdom and recollections of that person." Moreover, you must admire a man who cares so deeply and fights so hard for individuals who cannot fight for themselves.

(Note: I received a free ARC of this book from Amazon Vine.)

Mary Foster says

Read this after reading *Born on Blue Day*. Fascinating.

Weavre says

(Written in November, 2010, several months after finishing the book) An interesting mix of solid, supported insights and ideas that wandered too far into what I consider "The Land of Woo" for my taste. The two are fairly easy to distinguish, though, and I did enjoy the book well enough.

(Written shortly after beginning the book, on May 10, 2010)

2010) Fascinating! I needed something lighter and simpler after my venture into history, and Treffert's latest offering seems perfect. I love anything that helps me understand how people, in all our glorious mental diversity, learn and interact with data about the world around us. It makes me a better teacher, but more the point--it's just plain fun!

Daena says

redundant redundant redundant. but full of interesting tidbits. epigenetics particularly.

Shaima Almarzooqi says

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bayan aljuhani says

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Yasmin Ward says

Islands of Genius is an enlightening journey into the breadth and depth of Savant Syndrome through scientific evidence and case studies from the authors wealth of experience as a psychiatrist specialising in the epidemiology of Savant syndrome in autism.

Treffert presents an intriguing argument that the evidenced existence of unlearned knowledge in music, art, mathematical ability, literature and so on, in people with Savant Syndrome or a prodigious ability, is indicative of genetic memory that is present in us all.

The author goes on to ask if people with a learning disability, CNS injury, dementia or other condition that inhibits left-brain function and stimulates right-brain function (a common factor in Savant syndrome cases), can access a reservoir of information stored in their DNA, is it possible for neurotypical people to access the same through conscious right-brain stimulus?

Genetic memory and epigenetics are complicated fields of study and Treffert introduces us to the lived examples of this in an accessible way. Meeting people in the book, like Kim Peek, Alonzo Clemons and the larger than life Temple Grandin, is an enriching experience. There are plenty of references to direct you to films about the people you are introduced to in the case studies, making this book a very interactive tool and bringing the pages to life.

The content is greater than the written style. Many parts of the book are repetitive. It could be a lot more concise and would probably be more powerful if it were edited down.

The case histories are integral to introduce you to some very important people, but they are all approached with the same success story formula which becomes predictable and, unfortunately, less impactful. They tend to reduce the people they describe to their savant ability and the positive effect of that skill in their life, always with the support of a loving family. It gives the impression that the author is extracting the information they need to convey a strongly-held belief or argument, rather than letting the information speak for itself.

Because of this, the book is a little too prescribed. After the first five cases, you hear the author's message loud and clear but you do not get to know the individuals themselves in any other way, which keeps you at a distance from the person behind the condition.

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