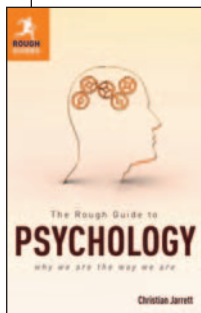


books

QUICK PSYCHOLOGY



The Rough Guide to Psychology

by Christian Jarrett. Rough Guides, 2011 (\$18.99)

In the U.S., the ubiquitous For Dummies book series got its start with computer manuals and has since expanded to thousands of titles on everything from com-

posing to composting. In England, a company called Rough Guides made its name selling travel books but has now branched out with about 70 reference books with titles such as The Rough Guide to the Beatles. Its latest entry is a 376-page, paperback-size book called The Rough Guide to Psychology, written by Christian Jarrett, a journalist who works for the British Psychological Society.

"We're all psychologists at heart," Jarrett writes, in the sense that we all want to understand human behavior. But real research psychologists, he says, are different from the rest of us "because they know what they don't know." They are skeptics, relying heavily on the methods of the natural sciences to find truth. An educator might believe, for example, that the best way to deal with troublemakers is with punishment; a researcher would test that idea by compar-

ing the effects of teachers who punish with those of teachers who do not.

With this idea as its foundation, Jarrett takes us on a research-driven journey through intriguing topics: how memory is organized, why people make bad decisions, how genes set limits on intelligence, what science says about love, where prejudice comes from, and much more. Throughout, he describes experiments or surveys that support every point.

The range of topics is similar to that of an introductory textbook in college, but this volume is about a tenth the size and the writing is consistently lively. In effect, Jarrett has given us a book of psychological nuggets, often delivered in shaded blue boxes that tell us things such as: yes, people overestimate both their driving skills and head size; no, women do not talk more than men, but they do use kisses to size up potential mates more than men do; yes, the brain lights up in distinctive ways when people are experiencing religious feelings, but a "God spot" probably does not exist.

Having taught introductory psychology classes for many years, I was prepared to nitpick this admittedly rough look at the field, but the book holds up. It is accurate, up-to-date and easy to read. My only gripe is that it contains no references; if a passage on sleepwalking or autistic savants grabs your attention and you want to know more, you are on your own. That said, for a rough guide, this book is smooth.

—Robert Epstein

INNATE JOYS

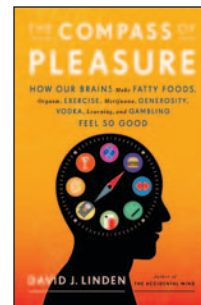
The Compass of Pleasure

by David J. Linden. Viking Press, 2011 (\$26.95)

The dog masturbating, the bird scouring for berries, the porcupine hunting for hallucinogenic plants, the human slamming quarter after quarter into a slot machine. Sure enough, animals are hardwired to seek pleasure. But when taken too far, this innate inclination can become an addiction.

In his book The Compass of Pleasure, David J. Linden draws on recent scientific findings to explain how pleasure manifests in the brain. Linden, a professor of neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University, provides a primer on the brain's pleasure circuit, walking the reader through examples of how highly addictive behaviors, such as gambling and doing drugs, as well as more mundane activities, such as exercising and playing video games, exploit reward pathways in the brain. In a strange twist of fate, the exact same brain circuits that allow us to enjoy life also fuel bad habits.

But addicts derive little pleasure from their vices. For them, Linden explains, it is the hunt for these experiences that becomes more pleasurable than the high itself. The intensity of the craving remodels those pleasure circuits,



Roundup: Morality, Hypocrisy and Consciousness

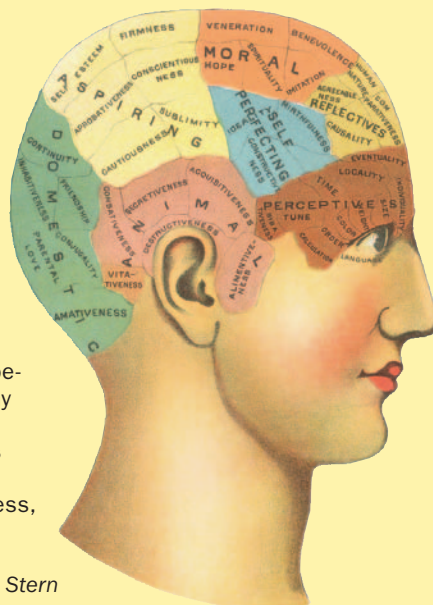
Three books explore these innate human traits.

What is morality? Where does it come from? According to neurophilosopher Patricia S. Churchland in her book Braintrust (Princeton University Press, 2011), morality originates in the brain. She argues that over time the human brain evolved to feel social pain and pleasure. As humans evolved to care about the well-being of others, they also developed a sense of morality.

Robert Kurzban believes that we are all hypocrites. But not to worry, he explains, hypocrisy is the natural state of the human mind. In his book Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind (Princeton University Press, 2011), Kurzban asserts that the human mind consists of many specialized units, which do not always work together seamlessly. When this harmony breaks down, people often develop contradictory beliefs.

How is consciousness possible? In Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness (Princeton University Press, 2011), psychologist Nicholas Humphrey, a leading figure in consciousness research, proposes a startling new theory. Consciousness, he argues, is merely a magic show we stage inside our heads. This show has allowed humans to become aware of themselves and their surroundings.

—Victoria Stern



ALAMY