



An Alchemy of Mind: The Marvel and Mystery of the Brain

By Diane Ackerman

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Does the mind reflect or dictate what the body sees and feels? What is the language of emotion? Is memory a function of our imaginations? Are we all just out of our minds?

In this ambitious and enlightening work, Diane Ackerman combines an artist's eye with a scientist's erudition to illuminate the magic and mysteries of the human brain. *An Alchemy of Mind*, she offers an unprecedented exploration of the mental fantasia in which we spend our days. In addition to explaining memory, thought, emotion, dreams, and language acquisition, Ackerman reports on the latest discoveries in neuroscience and addresses such controversial subjects as the effects of trauma, nature versus nurture, and male versus female brains. In prose that is not simply accessible but also beautiful and electric, Ackerman distills the hard, objective truths of science in order to yield vivid, anecdotal explanations about a range of existential questions regarding consciousness and the nature of identity.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Ackerman's latest foray (after *Cultivating Delight*) is ostensibly about the "crowded chemistry lab" of the human brain, but fans of her writings on the natural world will find many familiar pleasures. All is not pastoral sweetness; every passage on genteel matters like tending her backyard roses has its rougher counterpart, for example, the recollection of a life-threatening accident during a Japanese bird-watching expedition. By grounding the scientific information firmly in her own experience of discovery, Ackerman invites readers to share in her learning and writing processes. The common thread she spies running through the tangible world of the evolving brain and the intangible world of emotion and memory is the "sleight of mind" that provides us with a self-identity through which we experience the world in a unified yet complexly fragmented way. It's no surprise that the section of the book dealing with language should concentrate so intently on metaphors; they cascade down every page like waterfalls. Ackerman's prose is equally sensuous on the literal plane, enabling her to turn an afternoon snack into a lesson on neurochemistry that swiftly dovetails with a discussion of the varying speeds of thought without ever risking distraction. Even brain buffs used to a more detached approach should be won over by her uniquely personal perspective. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Alchemy, Ackerman explains, seeks to turn metal into gold; so does the human mind, albeit more successfully than alchemy, create a "self." Known as the modern-day poet of the natural world, Ackerman explores nature and human nature from her highly original and literary perspective. Some critics complain that she journeys through well-trodden neuroscience research. Yet there's no doubt that she spins a highly imaginative and sensory book on the brain's vast capabilities. That she writes more as a poet than a scientist is perhaps her greatest contribution; still, she often succumbs to pretty but weak metaphors that "give a reader precisely the wrong idea about how nature works" (*Washington Post*). Yet overall, *Alchemy* is a lucid, fascinating synthesis of the brain and all it creates.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review The human psyche fascinates revered naturalist and poet Ackerman as much as any other aspect of the grand carnival of life, hence this agile, involving, and uniquely far-ranging and insightful inquiry into "how the brain becomes the mind." As always, Ackerman is positively scintillating, thanks to the intensity of her observations, the imaginativeness of her interpretations of both natural phenomena and science, the splendor of her distinctive prose, and her flair for making her discoveries personal, relevant, and resonant. Erudite and playful, Ackerman explores the differences between the right and left brains and the brains of men and women, and cogently explains the chemistry of the "microscopic hubbub" generated inside our heads as neurons speak "an electrochemical lingo all their own." She explicates memory, ponders the jumble of genetics and circumstances that engender personalities, delineates the mechanics and impact of emotions, and reveals how profoundly malleable and adaptive the brain is. Most movingly, Ackerman marvels over our creativity, especially our facilities for language, story, and metaphor. She writes, "One of the most surprising facts about human beings is that we seem to require a poetic version of life," the very gift Ackerman bestows upon her rapt and illuminated readers. *Donna Seaman*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gerard Williams:

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