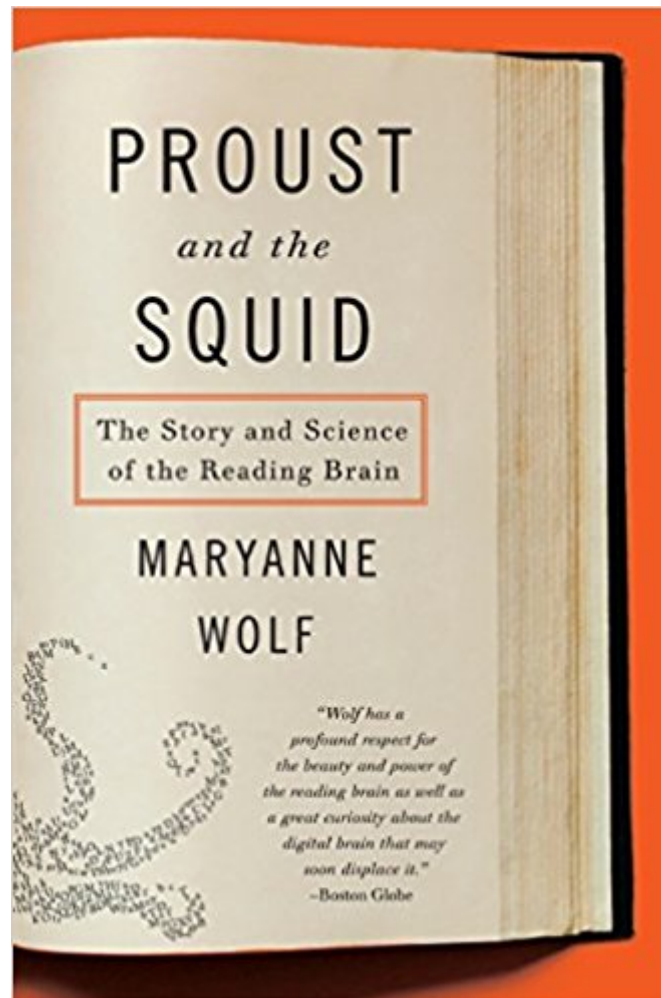




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Proust And The Squid: The Story And Science Of The Reading Brain



Synopsis

"Human beings were never born to read," writes Tufts University cognitive neuroscientist and child development expert Maryanne Wolf. Reading is a human invention that reflects how the brain rearranges itself to learn something new. In this ambitious, provocative book, Wolf chronicles the remarkable journey of the reading brain not only over the past five thousand years, since writing began, but also over the course of a single child's life, showing in the process why children with dyslexia have reading difficulties and singular gifts. Lively, erudite, and rich with examples, *Proust and the Squid* asserts that the brain that examined the tiny clay tablets of the Sumerians was a very different brain from the one that is immersed in today's technology-driven literacy. The potential transformations in this changed reading brain, Wolf argues, have profound implications for every child and for the intellectual development of our species.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Wolf, a professor of child development at Tufts University, integrates psychology and archaeology, linguistics and education, history and neuroscience in a truly path-breaking look at the development of the reading brain—a complicated phenomenon that Wolf seeks to chronicle from both the early history of humanity and the early stages of an individual's development ("unlike its component parts such as vision and speech... reading has no direct genetic program passing it on to future generations"). Along the way, Wolf introduces concepts like "word poverty," the situation in which children, by age five, have heard 32 million less words than their counterparts (with chilling

long-term effects), and makes time for amusing and affecting anecdotes, like the only child she knew to fake a reading disorder (attempting to get back into his beloved literacy training program). Though it could probably command a book of its own, the sizable third section of the book covers the complex topic of dyslexia, explaining clearly and expertly "what happens when the brain can't learn to read." One of those rare books that synthesizes cutting edge, interdisciplinary research with the inviting tone of a curious, erudite friend (think Malcolm Gladwell), Wolf's first book for a general audience is an eye-opening winner, and deserves a wide readership. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

“[Maryanne Wolf] displays extraordinary passion and perceptiveness concerning the reading brain, its miraculous achievements and tragic dysfunctions.”

(BookForum) “Everything Wolf says makes sense....She clearly knows her stuff.”

(Washington Post Book World) “Brilliant and eye-opening.” (Philadelphia

Inquirer) “...intriguing...” (New Scientist) “Brilliant and eye-opening.”

(Albany Times Union) “Fascinating....Wolf restores our awe of the human brain.”

(Associated Press) “[Wolf’s] conversational style, reflective comments and insights from work with children...create a narrative flow and bright tone.” (Minneapolis Star

Tribune) “The squid of Wolf’s title represents the neurobiological approach to the study of reading....Given the panic that takes hold of humanists when the decline of reading is

discussed, her cold-blooded perspective is opportune.” (The New Yorker) “A book

worth talking about.” (U.S. News & World Report) “Enjoyable....Wolf, with remarkable agility in a relatively compact book (intended for both aficionados and the uninitiated), transitions

seamlessly between disciplines as diverse as linguistics, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and archeology, among others. Her voice comes through clearly; she is fascinated by reading and

shares that energy.” (New England Journal of Medicine) “Wolf’s alarm

about the spread of semi-literacy among the young is obviously justified, and her book provokes thought about it as only reading can.” (Sunday Times (London)) “This humane and

fascinating book...is a paean to what Proust, the reader, called “that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude,” to all that has been and can be achieved for

individuals and for mankind through literacy.” (The Evening Standard

(London)) “Blindingly fascinating...detailed and scholarly....There’s a lot of difficult

material in here. But it’s worth the effort....For people interested in language, this is a must.

You'll find yourself focusing on words in new ways. Read it slowly--it will take time to sink in. (The Sunday Telegraph) "Proust and the Squid is an inspiring celebration of the science of reading....Wolf's insights are fascinating....Proust and the Squid has much to offer on this important--perhaps the most important--subject" (The Guardian (London))

Maryanne Wolf has written a richly informative work, which covered a number of areas that I had very limited knowledge of. She is an academic who has made numerous complex subjects and concepts accessible to the non-specialist, yet has not trivialized the material. She never explains when and how she had the inspiration for a very memorable title, which would nag with the question: What could Marcel Proust and a Squid possibly have in common? Ah, like so much in the book, and in real life, it is the connections that our neuro-pathways make. The author has covered three principal topics. As she explains in the first chapter: "This book consists of three areas of knowledge: the early history of how our species learned to read, from the time of the Sumerians to Socrates; the developmental life cycle of humans as they learn to read in ever more sophisticated ways over time; and the story and science of what happens when the brain can't learn to read." Admittedly, rather late in life, I finally read *The Odyssey*. The version was a new one by Barry B. Powell. In his introduction, he posits the theory that the Greek alphabet was invented around 800 B.C., in order to record the poetic rhythm of Homer's epic tale. Thus I was particularly attentive to Wolf's account of how writing systems evolved, starting with the "bird tracks," of the Sumerians through the Akkadians (a language I have only recently become aware of - apparently there are a few hundred people in the world still trying to keep the language alive) and on to the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians. Each of these languages contained a pictorial element. It was only when the Greeks invented their language, which was largely and directly related to the phonetics of the language, that a true alphabet was established. In human evolution the ability to read has developed only recently. Wolf makes the point that we are not "hard-wired" to read. For each of us, we must learn - sometimes painfully, and with limited success - to develop those neurological pathways that make sense of the small, repetitive shapes on a piece of paper - or now, increasingly, on a digital screen. I found this section fascinating too. For example, she cites the work of three Chinese neurologists in the 1930's who studied the case of a bi-lingual businessman who had a severe stroke. He had completely lost his ability to read Chinese, but could still read English. It required completely different sections of the brain to read a more pictorial based alphabet as opposed to the limited characters in the alphabet used to write English. Another section that strongly resonated concerned re-reading books at different periods in one's life, deriving different meanings

depending on the evolving experiences in one's own life. Wolf specifically mentioned George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (Penguin Classics) which she had read several times, which was precisely the theme of Rebecca Mead's recently published *My Life in Middlemarch*. I too have been re-reading a number of works first read 30-40 years ago, finding new meaning, and re-assessing. The last third of the book dealt with those who have difficulties reading, and are often labeled dyslexic, a term that Wolf says has no real meaning. She does cover the number of areas in which individuals may have deficiencies in their ability to read fluently. These deficiencies can be unique, or overlapping. And it seems that the brains of these individuals are simply different, with more equality between the left and right hemispheres. And "dyslexics" seem to be more creative. She names numerous historical individuals who appear to have had that problem, and whose names are definitely remembered today, like Einstein. She also reveals it is a personal issue, since her son has had reading problems. I did have some problems with this book. First and foremost, Wolf repeatedly makes the point that Socrates was opposed to the transition from the oral to written medium for conveying knowledge, and attempts to connect that to the transition from knowledge obtained through books to that obtained from the Internet. But she never really develops this theme; she just raises it repeatedly. I felt particular unease - though I admit doing it myself, in deciding a book of Diane Arbus' photographs was not suitable viewing material for my once-upon-a-time seven year old daughter - to Wolf's theme that access to knowledge should be "guided." That concept is right out of the playbook of many a totalitarian state... or, increasingly, wantabees. Who does the "guiding" and with what criteria was another topic she did not address. I also felt she succumbed to a congenital weakness of academics: "plugging" the work of colleagues for no particular purpose, other than, the "plug." Finally, and it is a particular concern of mine. With all the effort that is expended on learning how to read - to obtain that "eureka" moment that Wolf beautifully described in one case, why do so very few people continue to read serious works once the school assignments are finished? Also, unaddressed. Overall, for Wolf's work, a very informative 4-star rating.

Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid* describes the journey of how the human brain learns to read. Wolf's informative narrative is interspersed with detailed diagrams of the neurosystem and literary quotes from a range of authors such as Sartre and J.M Barrie. Although Wolf's book presents a large amount of research, its engaging narrative and prevalent use of anecdotes keeps the information accessible to most readers; however to fully enjoy the book, it is helpful for readers to have some literary background. In this review, I hope to provide a short guide to the content of the

book as well as some recommendations for potential readers. Organization of the BookWolf is a fan of subdivisions. Overall the book is broken up into three sections: "How the Brain Learned to Read", "How the Brain Learns to Read Over Time", and "When the Brain Can't Learn to Read". Each section is broken up into three chapters, and each chapter is broken up into a number of subsections. In general the subsections in the book help with processing the large amount of information presented, however they can also seem disruptive to the flow of the book. In the section "How the brain learned to Read", Wolf explores how we as a species learned to read and the genesis of writing in the chapters, "Reading Lessons from Proust and the Squid", "How the Brain Adapted Itself to Read: The First Writing Systems", and "The Birth of an Alphabet and Socrates' Protests". The author examines the components of early writing systems from around the world covering Sumerian Cuneiform, Egyptian Hieroglyphics, Maya, Incan quipus, Greek Linear B, and Japanese kanji and kana among others. Wolf describes how the invention of reading repurposes the neural networks we were born with in a great feat of plasticity and stresses that we as a species were never designed to read. After reading this section, it is difficult to not be in complete awe of the feat of reading and how seamlessly and rapidly the brain is able to process words on a page. In addition to impressing a great respect for the brain's cognitive ability, the author also addresses a fear of Socrates that knowledge and true understanding will be lost as we move into different formats (oral to written in Socrates' time, and reading to digital now). Wolf writes, "Socrates' perspective on the pursuit of information in our culture haunts me every day as I watch my two sons use the Internet to finish a homework assignment, and then tell me they `know all about it.'" She goes on to explain, "Socrates' enemy never really was the writing down of words, as Plato realized. Rather, Socrates fought against failures to examine the protean capacities of our language and to use them `with all our intelligence.'" I thought the story of Socrates' opposition to written language was an interesting anecdote to tie the history of reading with the issues that we are currently grappling with in an increasingly digital society. In the section "How the Brain Learns to Read Over Time", Wolf explains how children learn how to read. She breaks down this section into the chapters, "The Beginnings of Reading Development, or Not", "The `Natural History' of Reading Development: Connecting the Parts of the Young Reading Brain", and "The Unending Story of Reading's Development". In this section, she explores the importance of exposure to language and picture books in early childhood development and quotes a study on "word poverty" stating that in some communities children have heard 32 million words less than their peers by age five. These staggering statistics clearly the disparity between some children's learning experiences and provides insight into why our education system may not be the most ideal for teaching children to

read. Wolf also shares her own experience learning to read in a small schoolhouse in Eldorado, Illinois. Through her anecdotes and presentation of research, Wolf argues that it is unreasonable to expect all children to be able to read by third grade and difficulties reading are not indicative of low intelligence. In her final section, Wolf explores dyslexia and its possible causes of reading impairment. Her three chapters are, "Dyslexia's Puzzle and the Brain's Design", "Genes, Gifts, and Dyslexia", and "Conclusions: From the Reading Brain to What Comes Next". In these chapters Wolf, explores the idea that dyslexic subject have stronger right brain connections and the genetics of dyslexia. She opens her second chapter of this section with, "Thomas Edison, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Albert Einstein are three of the most famous people said to have had dyslexia." This sentence provides a productive introduction to a discussion about how some deficits can ultimately be beneficial in other aspects. She also reinforces this point with her own experience with her son who also suffers from dyslexia. Overall I think that book provides a good overview of the neurological processes of reading and the development of written language. Wolf also provides an extensive "Notes" section with 228 references for further reading on the breath of subjects that she described. While this book was intended for a general audience, it is by no means an easy read. Wolf's constantly intersperses anecdotes to keep the mood light, however overall the content is extremely dense- which is to be expected as she is covering a few thousand years of human history as well as a neural level explanation of a rigorous learning process. Also her writing style is not the most accessible to all readers. The chapters tend to seem like they go on forever, and there are not very many good stopping points even though there are many subsections in the book. This is not a book that I would pick up at an airport to read over a plane ride nor would I read this book as my first introduction to neuroscience. However I would like to emphasize that it is an enjoyable read, if you have some background on the brain and an interest in the development of language. It also doesn't hurt if you are a little bit of a bookworm either.

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