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DEC 18, 2017 @ 01:18 AM 10,741

The Must-Read Brain Books Of 2017



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The must-read brain books of 2017 featured persuasion, compulsion, popularity, fear, technology, distraction, and the reasons why we're capable of so much good and so much evil. The eight books on this list all reveal important, timely insights about who we are, what we do and why we do it.



The must-read brain books of 2017

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The Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths and Everyone In-Between

By Abigail Marsh (Basic Books)

Though we're all riddled with contradictions, certain principles help explain who we are. Those principles are rooted in neuro-chemical realities, not just of the human brain but also the brains of other species with which we share more than we realize. Look a little deeper, and you'll see how we're all connected. *The Fear Factor* is a fine example of a book that looks deeper, showing how an ancient part of the brain—central to our emotional lives—plays a pivotal role in who we are and what we do. It's a sharp analysis sprinkled with relatable examples, and an excellent brain book to kick off this list. (You can read an interview with the author, Dr. Abigail Marsh, [right here](#).)

Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment

By Robert Wright (Simon & Schuster)

Though the title might lead you to think otherwise, this is one of the most insightful and accessible brain books of the year. Wright masterfully unpacks the struggle for dominance we're all hosting in our minds—between “modules” that drive our behavior. If you read this book in earnest, you won't think about your decisions, drives and actions the same way again, and you'll gain appreciation for why the

author believes Buddhism (not as a religious practice, but as a mind management practice) is so well suited to change us—especially in our present moment. You'll also understand "mindfulness" more fully. If the title was keeping you from picking it up, don't be dissuaded. This book does not disappoint.

Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst

By Robert Sapolsky (Penguin Press)

I'm still marveling at the expanse of Sapolsky's *Behave*, a book that cuts across neuroscience, behavioral science, psychology, sociology and a dozen more disciplines to say more about the human condition than any other single book I've come across in recent memory (it feels like much more than a "single" book). If you've watched his lectures on YouTube, you already know Sapolsky is a fantastic communicator (and if you haven't, I recommend you do as a sampling before diving in). This is his magnum opus. It's a hefty read, but engaging all the way through, and it will change how you think. I can't offer a higher recommendation than that.

Can't Just Stop: An Investigation of Compulsions

By Sharon Begley (Simon & Schuster)

The words "addiction" and "compulsion" are batted around pop media with little concern for accuracy. Begley's book takes the opposite approach, deep diving into the research to find out what we really know about what drives compulsive behavior, and not only at the extremes. Her chapters on video games, smartphones and the web are especially instructive, and (surprise) the findings she uncovers don't always jibe with sensationalist headlines. This feels like one of the right books to be reading right now.

The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others

By Tali Sharot (Henry Holt and Company)

Another timely read, *The Influential Mind* is a book that will help you understand how persuasion works, and why it so frequently doesn't. Along the way neuroscientist Tali Sharot knocks down some clichéd assumptions (i.e. "the wisdom of crowds" – guess what, the crowd isn't always so wise), reveals why some tendencies prevail despite all efforts (i.e. willing embrace of ignorance over embrace of knowledge), and provides a few clues as to how we can be better persuaders in our everyday lives (i.e. it's occasionally valuable to know how to persuade your boss). A readable, grounded book that's on point for our era of persuasion.

Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow

By Yuval Harari (Harper)

Filling out the epic category, we have *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari's follow up to his remarkable and equally epic, *Sapiens*. While this is more than a "brain book" (it defies simple categories), I'm including it because Harari's work is about what we are and what we are becoming, and that's largely a story about the brains we wield. In *Homo Deus*, the questions explored include: what will be the result of our ever-quickenning merger with technology? What kind of humans will giving ourselves over to our digitally powered, fiction-fashioning tendencies produce? We need books that hold up a mirror and ask hard questions, while providing a framework for understanding how we got here. Between *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, Harari has given us two of the best.

Born Anxious: The Lifelong Impact of Early Life Adversity, And How To Break the Cycle

By Daniel P. Keating (St. Martin's Press)

I admit to some skepticism when I picked up this book. I've become accustomed to books on anxiety that claim to offer solutions, but end up being just another retread. This book is different in a few ways, notably that it addresses new research on the epigenetics of anxiety that I haven't seen grappled with so well elsewhere. I'm putting it on this list for that reason – it's a credible, readable attempt to work through new findings and make sense of a condition that plagues millions. If you suffer from anxiety, and you've felt the hopelessness that often accompanies it, this book is worth your time. And if you love someone who suffers from anxiety, it will further your understanding in important ways.

Hit Makers: The Science of Popularity in an Age of Distraction

By Derek Thompson (Penguin Press)

What makes one show an explosive hit while another, featuring just as many great actors and maybe even better writing and directing, never takes off? Unraveling the calculus of those situations requires more than a foray into economics and marketing – it's a mind game with a lot of moving pieces. *Hit Makers* is as incisive an exploration of what drives popularity as you'll find, and, like other titles on this list, it's an excellent book to make sense of the times we're living in. One tidbit to tempt your appetite: all the chatter about "going viral" says very little about what *really* drives popularity.

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