

BOOK REVIEW

Tales from Both Sides of the Brain

By Michael S. Gazzaniga

2014 Ecco/HarperCollins 428 pages

Reviewed by Ian A. Harrington

Department of Psychology and Program in Neuroscience, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL 61201.

This is a big book about a big life in neuroscience. You get a sense for what's in store early in the book, as Gazzaniga prefaces the first chapter with the following line from the physicist, Richard Feynman, "Physics is like sex: sure, it may give some practical results, but that's not why we do it." As it is in physics, so it is in neuroscience.

In hindsight, I came to Gazzaniga's book for the stories about split-brain patients, but I ended up staying for much more, much of it unexpected. Throughout the book Gazzaniga somehow manages to acknowledge all he and his colleagues have contributed to the field of cognitive neuroscience, and to do so with humility. Consider the following comment from the second chapter, "As I look back on those early days, it may have been good for human split-brain research to begin coming of age in the hands of the simplest of researchers: me. I didn't know anything" (p. 41). But he certainly appreciated what the split-brain patients afforded him through the study of disconnections that the clinical tool of lesions did not, "...we could study the *presence* of mental capacities. It was a whole new ball game" (emphasis in the original, p. 54). Throughout much of the remainder of the book we get a front row seat to the details of the experiments, the reasoning that led to them, the process of their interpretation, and the other characters who round out the cast. I expect most readers who would be directed to a book like this from a review in *JUNE* will appreciate the experimental detail he provides for these studies. (It appears, however, that not all reviewers share this assessment. Apparently, the readers of *Entertainment Weekly* might find such details tedious. I suppose that the fact that *EW* was reviewing a book like this at all just goes to show the way this work reaches out beyond the academy.)

In his writing he strikes a balance in his treatment of both aspects of his subtitle: life and neuroscience. From the tone of the book you get the feeling that for someone like him it would be hard to separate the one from the other. Among the more candid moments in the book was when he discussed his relationship with his graduate mentor, Roger Sperry, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for his split-brain research. Despite the tensions that had emerged between them, which Gazzaniga suggests might have stemmed from Gazzaniga's continued work with split-brain patients, he agreed to write the appreciation for Sperry that appeared in the journal *Science* to celebrate his Nobel prize. Gazzaniga's letter and Sperry's personal response are included in the Appendix. It can't get much more candid than that. He shows us that science is a social enterprise and that social relationships can be

difficult. Another particularly personal moment can be found as Gazzaniga confronts his own mortality following a health scare. He writes:

"My views are nothing out of the ordinary. The lights are on and then they are off. When they are off, you won't know it because you are dead. There will be no missing of family and friends because you will be dead, so there is no need to fret about that while you are alive. You will be missed by others, but that is true of them as well should they suddenly die." (p. 334)

And there it is; matter of fact. It's exactly this matter-of-fact delivery throughout the book that makes it so engaging. I think this book will be of particular interest to anyone with an interest in cognitive neuroscience (or who might want to develop such an interest) and, for many of those readers, it may fall into the category of "hard to put down." I also think this book will be of value to students considering graduate school and a career in science. I should say that there was a moment when I hesitated to recommend this book to those at the beginning of their careers because I worried that it might foster unreasonable expectations for what a life in science would be. I don't blame Gazzaniga for this, far from it. In fact, he goes out of his way to warn his readers about how difficult a life in science can be. There are times when he might be a little too self-deprecating, but times have changed, and he's seen it first-hand. But I reconsidered because I realized that if one was going to be successful in science, they might have to embrace the approach to science that Gazzaniga has. They need to be hard-working, diligent, open to new ideas, self-critical, and, perhaps, just a little restless. Maybe the terms diligent and restless are contradictory. But there seems to be a way to make them work. When you have a question, go after it with everything you've got. But if you ever find yourself just going through the motions, maybe it's time for a change. Honestly, if I could recommend an addition for the paperback version of the book, it would be for a map of the United States that showed the travels and layovers of his career. I mean, how many times did he leave and return to Dartmouth College? I lost track. In closing, Gazzaniga has had a remarkable life, and this book is a remarkable account of it.

Received July 13, 2015; accepted July 30, 2015.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Ian A. Harrington, Psychology Department and Program in Neuroscience, Augustana College, 639 38th St., Rock Island, IL 61201. Email: ianharrington@augustana.edu

Copyright © 2015 Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience
www.funjournal.org