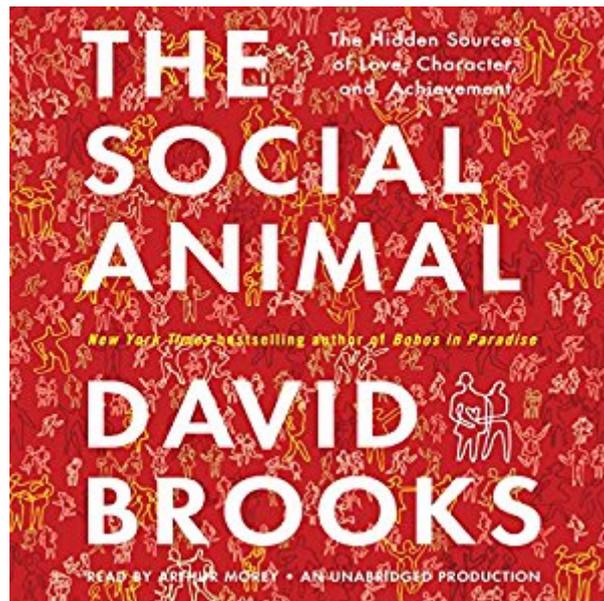


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The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources Of Love, Character, And Achievement



Synopsis

With unequalled insight and brio, David Brooks, the New York Times columnist and best-selling author of *Bobos in Paradise*, has long explored and explained the way we live. Now, with the intellectual curiosity and emotional wisdom that make his columns among the most read in the nation, Brooks turns to the building blocks of human flourishing in a multilayered, profoundly illuminating work grounded in everyday life. This is the story of how success happens. It is told through the lives of one composite American couple, Harold and Erica - how they grow, push forward, are pulled back, fail, and succeed. Distilling a vast array of information into these two vividly realized characters, Brooks illustrates a fundamental new understanding of human nature. A scientific revolution has occurred - we have learned more about the human brain in the last 30 years than we had in the previous 3,000. The unconscious mind, it turns out, is most of the mind - not a dark, vestigial place but a creative and enchanted one, where most of the brain's work gets done. This is the realm of emotions, intuitions, biases, longings, genetic predispositions, personality traits, and social norms: the realm where character is formed and where our most important life decisions are made. The natural habitat of *The Social Animal*. Drawing on a wealth of current research from numerous disciplines, Brooks takes Harold and Erica from infancy to school; from the "odyssey years" that have come to define young adulthood to the high walls of poverty; from the nature of attachment, love, and commitment, to the nature of effective leadership. He reveals the deeply social aspect of our very minds and exposes the bias in modern culture that overemphasizes rationalism, individualism, and IQ. Along the way, he demolishes conventional definitions of success while looking toward a culture based on trust and humility.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this book, New York Times columnist David Brooks takes on the audacious endeavor of weaving together a unified picture of the human mind through various discoveries from the sciences. Oh ya, and it's all presented in the context of a story about two fictional characters, Harold and Erica. You can get a good feel for the topics he covers from the chapter titles: 1 - Decision Making 2 - The Map Meld 3 - Mindsight 4 - Mapmaking 5 - Attachment 6 - Learning 7 - Norms 8 - Self-Control 9 - Culture 10 - Intelligence 11 - Choice Architecture 12 - Freedom and Commitment 13 - Limerence 14 - The Grand Narrative 15 - Metis 16 - The Insurgency 17 - Getting Older 18 - Morality 19 - The Leader 20 - The Soft Side 21 - The Other Education 22 - Meaning

If you think that's a lot of chapters, you're right on target. It's a pretty thick book at 450 pages, but it's easy to move through (not quite novel easy, but much more so than typical nonfiction). Book's strengths: - If you are familiar with Brook's social commentary (and like it) you won't be disappointed, but this isn't the real strength of this book. - In a style that's reminiscent of Malcolm Gladwell, Brooks offers a pop view of experimental psychology that is downright fascinating. The studies he explores are the real meat and merit of this book, and they expose many fallacies in the way we think that we think. Here are a few of the topics: * The hidden role emotions play in making decisions. * How mirror neurons in the brain are wired to mimic the person we're talking to.

I wanted to enjoy this book -- a grand idea to integrate disparate threads of human research by a smart writer I enjoy reading in the New York Times, a book profiled over two pages in Newsweek and featured by the Scientific American Book Club -- but unfortunately I found it ultimately unsatisfying. For someone who hasn't read about modern psychology advances, this may be a good primer. But for most people the wide range and added space of a narrative device results in too shallow a depth to be fulfilling. It's not that Brooks has things wrong or couldn't go deeper if he tried; it's that there is not room. In the introduction Brooks explains "I'm writing this story, first, because while researchers in a wide variety of fields have shone their flashlights into different parts of the cave of the unconscious, illuminating different corners and openings, much of their work is done in academic silos. I'm going to try and synthesize their findings into one narrative." This is exactly what he does, combining the wide expanses of psychology from neuroscience to social groups and behavioral economics, using a literary device used by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1760

for the book "Emile". We follow two fictional characters through their life, seeing how recent scientific findings shape them and their inner life. Some of this fiction is witty and insightful, all of it is well-written, but as fiction it is not enough. It does not work as literature that shows not tells. The science is fascinating, and fully referenced, but the sketches are too fast and pass too quickly. The insights and implications of human connection, friendship and love are illuminating and sometimes exhilarating, but somehow it doesn't quite gel.

I must be the ideal audience for this book because I found it to be a wonderful mix of great writing, new ideas, and interesting information. The goals of Brooks' book are "to synthesize [recent scientific] findings into one narrative... to describe how this research influences the way we understand human nature... to draw out the social, political, and moral implications of these findings." He achieves the goal of aggregating the research admirably. I don't consider myself well read on brain and cognitive sciences but I read several science blogs and had encountered many of the info-bites he introduces, many of which are extremely recent. A random sampling of research results he mentions: "six-month-old babies can spot the different facial features of different monkeyse, even though, to adults, [the monkeys] all look the same." "Anthropologists tell us that all cultures distinguish colors. When they do, all cultures begin with words for white and black. If the culture adds a word for a third color, it is always red." Brooks uses a device of narrating the lives of 2 invented people, Erica and Harold. For example, to illustrate ideas on decision making, he introduces Erica's coworker Raymond whose "knowledge of his own shortcomings was encyclopedic. He knew he had trouble comparing more than two options at a time... so he would build brackets and move from one binary comparison to the next. He knew he liked hearing evidence that confirmed his opinions, so he asked Erica and others to give him the counterevidence first," etc. After describing a situation within the context of the narrative, Brooks jumps in to elaborate with more information. I feared this tactic would be too forced and would thereby fall on its face but he actually pulls it off!

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