



# Brainworks: The Mind-bending Science of How You See, What You Think, and Who You Are

By Michael S. Sweeney

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**Brainworks: The Mind-bending Science of How You See, What You Think, and Who You Are** By Michael S. Sweeney

Admit it. When you hear the word "neuroscience," you expect something abstract and remote, very complex, of little practical value. But this time...it's personal.

In a highly anticipated, three-part series airing on the National Geographic Channel in Fall 2011, National Geographic's *Brainworks* makes YOU the test subject in an array of astonishing challenges and experiments. Your brain will be stimulated, fooled, and ultimately amazed, as scientists and other experts show you how this three-pound blob of gray matter effectively makes you, you.

The television program brings together a crack team of scientists and researchers from a wide range of fields, including neurology, psychology, and ophthalmology. Awareness expert Dan Simons and memory expert Elizabeth Loftus are just two of the notables who lend their considerable brainpower to this unprecedented project. The program also draws on the know-how of those who traffic in brain tricks—illusionists such as David Copperfield and Apollo Robbins and artists such as color expert Beau Lotto—to bring each mind-bending illusion to life.

The captivating companion book further messes with your head through the visual illusions discovered and perfected by masters of fine art as well as through deceptively simple illustrations that are finely crafted by psychologists to highlight the way we take in and process the world around us.

In three sections—"Seeing," "Thinking," and "Being"—you'll see for yourself why these visual illusions and experiments hoodwink the brain. You'll find out how the structure of the eye influences what you see. And you'll think of events that may not have actually happened, in order to learn how the mind can create a false memory.

Rather than simply displaying a collection of puzzlers or visual illusions, each chapter guides you through a series of perceptual and thought experiments firsthand and then walks you through your brain's reaction in clear, user-friendly

language—providing every reader with a compelling personal interest in finding out why his or her mind acts the way it does.

Smart, exciting, and deeply engaging, *Brainworks* pulls you in, manipulates your mind, and leaves you with a better understanding—as well as a richer appreciation—of the mental marvels that we take for granted.

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Michael Sweeney, a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, received his Ph.D. in Journalism from Ohio University's E.W. Scripps School of Journalism and his Master's in Journalism at the University of North Texas. He reported for [nationalgeographic.com](http://nationalgeographic.com) on Dr. Robert Ballard's Titanic expedition. Sweeney's numerous books include *The Ultimate Survival Book*, *Peace: The Biography of a Symbol*, *God Grew Tired of Us*, and *Mind: The Complete Brain*.

A member of the exclusive club of world-famous magicians, David Copperfield is known for staging whopper illusions, including making the Statue of Liberty disappear before a live audience and millions of TV viewers. In addition to performing worldwide, he has had a hit on Broadway (*Dreams and Nightmares*), founded an organization to help rehabilitate disabled people (Project Magic), and published books (*Beyond Imagination* and *David Copperfield's Tales of the Impossible*).

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Good misdirection is mostly psychological, with the magician tricking different parts of the audience's brain. With good misdirection, the viewers don't even know that they've missed anything or been deceived; they just experience the magic. If I take an envelope and lick the flap and seal it, the viewers will assume the envelope is sealed and nothing can be slipped into it. It might be completely open on one side, but because I casually show it and close it, the assumption is that the envelope is undoctored. But if I picked it up and said, "This is an ordinary envelope, nothing fake about this," I'm casting suspicion on it by calling attention to it, by making it a part of the viewer's focus.

Science is now labeling and analyzing things that magicians have known for centuries. For instance, some of the most deceiving moments involve what scientists refer to as change blindness, as demonstrated in illusions where audience members don't notice obvious changes in their visual field when their focus is narrowed to a specific scope or task. Sometimes, the closer you look, the less you see. And that is what makes magic so fun.

Then, too, there are straight-up optical illusions that deceive the eye and, therefore, the brain. Hundreds of years ago, magicians discovered, for example, that if a stage is draped in black, anything on the stage that's also black can't be seen by the naked eye. This principle, which magicians call black art, delighted and perplexed me as a kid when I first encountered it in the form of a mouse with an Italian accent on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Topo Gigio, the mouse puppet, was unlike any puppet I'd seen: He had no visible means of support. He stood on his own two paws and often crawled up Sullivan's sleeve to give him a good-night peck on the cheek. Topo Gigio was like a cartoon come to life.

What I didn't know, and wouldn't learn until I checked a book on magic out of the library in the sixth grade, is that Topo did have handlers, but they were invisible because they were dressed entirely in black, with black hoods and black gloves. Topo was brought to life by puppeteers in plain view and yet completely invisible to the camera and the studio audience.

Optical illusions like that are well understood. But one of the most fascinating features of this book and the companion television special, *Brain Games*, is their exploration of illusions and brain processes that magicians have known and exploited but never completely understood. Reading these explanations of why a

certain perceptual manipulation works has deepened my appreciation for what we illusionists do and sharpened my use of the tools we keep in our toolbox.

As an illusionist, I help people recapture their sense of wonder by creating amazing things they've never seen before—what actors call the illusion of the first time. Except, for my audience, it's no illusion. It's a real feeling of awe and raw astonishment. A sense of enchantment—that's what so many of us are missing, particularly now that we have so much wonderful technology at our fingertips. We can create near miracles with our laptops and our tablets and our smart phones. When I can unplug the audience for an hour or two and give them back that sense of total enchantment, it's the greatest feeling. It's the reason why I became an illusionist, and it's what gets me on stage day after day, year after year.

This book is an extraordinarily powerful and fun tool for enriching your knowledge of perception and capacity to wonder. You will learn not only to look closer but to see and experience more. I'm honored to be a part of this project, which confirmed many things I had come to know through my work but couldn't quite articulate and which taught me things that are both useful and entirely fascinating. I'm delighted to be on this journey with you.

--David Copperfield

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