

Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything

By Joshua Foer

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Foer's unlikely journey from chronically forgetful science journalist to U.S. Memory Champion frames a revelatory exploration of the vast, hidden impact of memory on every aspect of our lives.

On average, people squander forty days annually compensating for things they've forgotten. Joshua Foer used to be one of those people. But after a year of memory training, he found himself in the finals of the U.S. Memory Championship. Even more important, Foer found a vital truth we too often forget: In every way that matters, we are the sum of our memories.

Moonwalking with Einstein draws on cutting-edge research, a surprising cultural history of memory, and venerable tricks of the mentalist's trade to transform our understanding of human remembering. Under the tutelage of top "mental athletes," he learns ancient techniques once employed by Cicero to memorize his speeches and by Medieval scholars to memorize entire books. Using methods that have been largely forgotten, Foer discovers that we can all dramatically improve our memories.

Immersing himself obsessively in a quirky subculture of competitive memorizers, Foer learns to apply techniques that call on imagination as much as determination—showing that memorization can be anything but rote. From the PAO system, which converts numbers into lurid images, to the memory palace, in which memories are stored in the rooms of imaginary structures, Foer's experience shows that the World Memory Championships are less a test of memory than of perseverance and creativity.

Foer takes his inquiry well beyond the arena of mental athletes—across the country and deep into his own mind. In San Diego, he meets an affable old man with one of the most severe cases of amnesia on record, where he learns that memory is at once more elusive and more reliable than we might think. In Salt Lake City, he swaps secrets with a savant who claims to have memorized more than nine thousand books. At a high school in the South Bronx, he finds a history teacher using twenty-five-hundred-year-old memory techniques to give his students an

edge in the state Regents exam.

At a time when electronic devices have all but rendered our individual memories obsolete, Foer's bid to resurrect the forgotten art of remembering becomes an urgent quest. *Moonwalking with Einstein* brings Joshua Foer to the apex of the U.S. Memory Championship and readers to a profound appreciation of a gift we all possess but that too often slips our minds.

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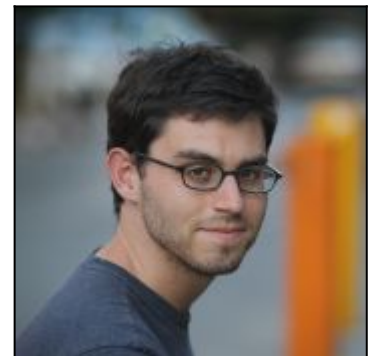
Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, March 2011: *Moonwalking with Einstein* follows Joshua Foer's compelling journey as a participant in the U.S. Memory Championship. As a science journalist covering the competition, Foer became captivated by the secrets of the competitors, like how the current world memory champion, Ben Pridmore, could memorize the exact order of 1,528 digits in an hour. He met with individuals whose memories are truly unique—from one man whose memory only extends back to his most recent thought, to another who can memorize complex mathematical formulas without knowing any math. Brains remember visual imagery but have a harder time with other information, like lists, and so with the help of experts, Foer learned how to transform the kinds of memories he forgot into the kind his brain remembered naturally. The techniques he mastered made it easier to remember information, and Foer's story demonstrates that the tricks of the masters are accessible to anyone.

--Miriam Landis

Author Q&A with Joshua Foer



Q: First, can you explain the title of your book, *Moonwalking with Einstein*?

A: The title refers to a memory device I used in the US Memory Championship—specifically it's a mnemonic that helped me memorize a deck of playing cards. *Moonwalking with Einstein* works as a mnemonic because it's such a goofy image. Things that are weird or colorful are the most memorable. If you try to picture Albert Einstein sliding backwards across a dance floor wearing penny loafers and a diamond glove, that's pretty much unforgettable.

Q: What are the U.S. Memory Championships? How did you become involved?

A: The U.S. Memory Championship is a rather bizarre contest held each spring in New York City, in which people get together to see who can remember the most names of strangers, the most lines of poetry, the most random digits. I went to the event as a science journalist, to cover what I assumed would be the Super Bowl of savants. But when I talked to the competitors, they told me something really interesting. They weren't savants. And they didn't have photographic memories. Rather, they'd trained their memories using ancient techniques. They said anyone could do it. I was skeptical. Frankly, I didn't believe them. I said, well, if anyone can do it, could you teach me? A guy named Ed Cooke, who has one of the best trained memories in

the world, took me under his wing and taught me everything he knew about memory techniques. A year later I came back to the contest, this time to try and compete, as a sort of exercise in participatory journalism. I was curious simply to see how well I'd do, but I ended up winning the contest. That really wasn't supposed to happen.

Q: What was the most surprising thing you found out about yourself competing in the Memory Championships?

A: In the process of studying these techniques, I learned something remarkable: that there's far more potential in our minds than we often give them credit for. I'm not just talking about the fact that it's possible to memorize lots of information using memory techniques. I'm talking about a lesson that is more general, and in a way much bigger: that it's possible, with training and hard work, to teach oneself to do something that might seem really difficult.

Q: Can you explain the "OK Plateau?"

A: The OK Plateau is that place we all get to where we just stop getting better at something. Take typing, for example. You might type and type and type all day long, but once you reach a certain level, you just never get appreciably faster at it. That's because it's become automatic. You've moved it to the back of your mind's filing cabinet. If you want to become a faster typer, it's possible, of course. But you've got to bring the task back under your conscious control. You've got to push yourself past where you're comfortable. You have to watch yourself fail and learn from your mistakes. That's the way to get better at anything. And it's how I improved my memory.

Q: What do you mean by saying there an "art" to memory?

A: The "art of memory" refers to a set of techniques that were invented in ancient Greece. These are the same techniques that Cicero used to memorize his speeches, and that medieval scholars used to memorize entire books. The "art" is in creating imagery in your mind that is so unusual, so colorful, so unlike anything you've ever seen before that it's unlikely to be forgotten. That's why mnemonists like to say that their skills are as much about creativity as memory.

Q: How do you think technology has affected how and what we remember?

A: Once upon a time people invested in their memories, they cultivated them. They studiously furnished their minds. They remembered. Today, of course, we've got books, and computers and smart phones to hold our memories for us. We've outsourced our memories to external devices. The result is that we no longer trust our memories. We see every small forgotten thing as evidence that they're failing us altogether. We've forgotten how to remember.

Q: What is the connection between memory and our sense of time?

A: As we get older, life seems to fly by faster and faster. That's because we structure our experience of time around memories. We remember events in relation to other events. But as we get older, and our experiences become less unique, our memories can blend together. If yesterday's lunch is indistinguishable from the one you ate the day before, it'll end up being forgotten. That's why it's so hard to remember meals. In the same way, if you're not doing things that are unique and different and memorable, this year can come to resemble the last, and end up being just as forgettable as yesterday's lunch. That's why it's so important to pack your life with interesting experiences that make your life memorable, and provide a texture to the passage of time.

Q: How is your memory now?

A: Ironically, not much better than when I started this whole journey. The techniques I learned, and used in the memory contest, are great for remembering structured information like shopping lists or phone numbers, but they don't improve any sort of underlying, generalizable memory ability. Unfortunately, I still misplace my car keys.

(Photo of Joshua Foer © Emil Salman Haaretz)

From [Booklist](#)

If you sometimes can't remember where you put your car keys or, like Foer, the car itself, don't panic. You're not alone, and you can do something about it. In this intriguing look at the nature of memory, Foer reassures us that we don't need to acquire a better memory; we just need to use the one we have more effectively. Foer introduces us to people whose memories are both astonishing, like the man who could memorize 1,528 random digits in order, and frightening, such as a man with such an extreme case of amnesia that he doesn't know his own age and can't remember that he has a memory problem. He explores various ways in which we test our memories, such as the extensive training British cabbies must undergo. He also discusses ways we can train ourselves to have better memories, like the PAO system, in which, for example, every card in a deck is associated with an image of a specific person, action, or object. An engaging, informative, and for the forgetful, encouraging book. --David Pitt

Review

"Absolutely phenomenal... Part of the beauty of this book is that it makes clear how memory and understanding are not two different things. Building up the ability to reason and the ability to retain information go hand in hand... The book reminds us that we all start off with pretty much the same tools for the most part, and we can be intentional about strengthening them, or not."—Bill Gates

"Captivating. . . His narrative is smart and funny and, like the work of Dr. Oliver Sacks, it's informed by a humanism that enables its author to place the mysteries of the brain within a larger philosophical and cultural context."—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"His passionate and deeply engrossing book. . . is a resounding tribute to the muscularity of the mind. . . In the end, *Moonwalking with Einstein* reminds us that though brain science is a wild frontier and the mechanics of memory little understood, our minds are capable of epic achievements."—*The Washington Post*

"Joshua Foer's book. . . is both fun and reassuring. All it takes to have a better memory, he contends, are a few tricks and a good erotic imagination."—Maureen Dowd, *The New York Times*

"Highly entertaining."—Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*

"It's delightful to travel with him on this unlikely journey, and his entertaining treatment of memory as both sport and science is spot on. . . *Moonwalking with Einstein* proves uplifting: It shows that with motivation, focus, and a few clever tricks, our minds can do rather extraordinary things."—*The Wall Street Journal*

"It's a terrific book: sometimes weird but mostly smart, funny, and ultimately a lovely exploration of the ways that we preserve our lives and our world in the golden amber of human memory."—Deborah Blum, *New Scientist*

"Foer's book is relevant and entertaining as he shows us ways we can unlock our own talent to remember more."—*USA Today*

“A fascinating scientific analysis of mnemonic mysteries. What we remember, [Foer] says, defines who we are.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Sprightly, entertaining. . . [Foer] has a gift for communicating fairly complex ideas in a manner that is palatable without being patronizing.”—*Financial Times*

“[An] inspired and well-written debut book about not just memorization, but about what it means to be educated and the best way to become so, about expertise in general, and about the not-so-hidden ‘secrets’ of acquiring skills.”—*The Seattle Times*

“[An] instant bestseller.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Funny, curious, erudite, and full of useful details about ancient techniques of training memory.”—*The Boston Globe*

“With originality, high energy, and an appealing blend of chutzpah and humility, [Foer] writes of his own adventures and probes the history and literature of memory, the science of how the brain functions, and the connections between memory, identity, and culture. . . *Moonwalking with Einstein*. . . is engaging and timely.”—*The Jewish Week*

“A smart, thoughtful, engaging book.”—*The Portland Oregonian*

“Charming. . . The book is part of a grand tradition, the writer as participating athlete, reminiscent of George Plimpton taking up football in *Paper Lion*.”—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“[A] wonderful first book.”—*Newcity*

“Fascinating.”—*Town & Country*

“For one year, Foer tried to attain total recall, extracting secrets from the top researchers, the real Rain Man, and the world’s memory champs. He triumphed, both in his quest and in this lively account, which is, no exaggeration, unforgettable.”—*Parade*

“In recounting his year in training for the USA Memory Championship, journalist Foer delivers a rich history of memory.”—*Discover Magazine*

“Foer’s history of memory is rich with information about the nature of memory and how it makes us who we are.”—*Scientific American*

“A brief and pithy recounting of Foer’s exploration of the fuzzy borders of his brain—a marveling at how and why it’s able to do something quite unexpected. . . *Moonwalking with Einstein* fits handily inline with the recent tradition of ‘big idea’ books.”—*The Millions*

“An original, entertaining exploration about how and why we remember.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“An engaging, informative, and for the forgetful, encouraging book.”—*Booklist*

“Hard to put down. . . The mind is a bigger thing than any of us realize, and Foer reminds us to keep exploring it.”—*Barnes & Noble Review*

“He has thought deeply about memory and his effort yields questions that are well worth reflecting on.”—*The Daily Beast*

“Intriguing. . . Foer does an excellent job of tracing the history of the arts of memory.”—*The Forward*

“The kind of nonfiction work that gets people talking. . . A highly enjoyable read.”—Thirteen.org

“You have to love a writer who employs chick-sexing to help explain human memory. Foer is a charmer, a crackling mind, a fresh wind. He approaches a complex topic with so much humanity, humor, and originality that you don’t realize how much you’re taking in and understanding. It’s kind of miraculous.”—Mary Roach, author of *Packing for Mars*, *Bonk*, *Spook*, and *Stiff*

“*Moonwalking with Einstein* isn’t just a splendid overview of an essential aspect of our humanity—our memory; it is also a witty and engaging account of how Foer went from being a guy with an average memory to winning the USA Memory Championship.”—Dan Ariely, professor of behavioral economics at Duke University and author of *The Upside of Irrationality* and *Predictably Irrational*

“In this marvelous book, Joshua Foer invents a new genre of nonfiction. This is a work of science journalism wrapped around an adventure story, a bildungsroman fused to a vivid investigation of human memory. If you want to understand how we remember, and how we can all learn to remember better, then read this book.”—Jonah Lehrer, contributing editor to *Wired* and author of *How We Decide* and *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*

“Joshua Foer proves what few of us are willing to get our heads around: there’s more room in our brains than we ever imagined. *Moonwalking with Einstein* isn’t a how-to guide to remembering a name or where you put your keys. It’s a riveting exploration of humankind’s centuries-old obsession with memory, and one man’s improbable quest to master his own.”—Stefan Fatsis, author of *A Few Seconds of Panic* and *Word Freak*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nicole Garner:

Throughout other case, little folks like to read book *Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*. You can choose the best book if you want reading a book. Providing we know about how is important a new book *Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*. You can add knowledge and of course you can around the world by way of a book. Absolutely right, mainly because from book you can learn everything! From your country until foreign or abroad you will be known. About simple point until wonderful thing it is possible to know that. In this era, we can easily open a book or even searching by internet gadget. It is called e-book. You can utilize it when you feel bored to go to the library. Let's examine.

Cory Marshall:

Nowadays reading books be a little more than want or need but also turn into a life style. This reading habit give you lot of advantages. Associate programs you got of course the knowledge your information inside the book that improve your knowledge and information. The info you get based on what kind of book you read,

if you want attract knowledge just go with schooling books but if you want experience happy read one together with theme for entertaining for example comic or novel. Often the Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything is kind of guide which is giving the reader unpredictable experience.

Jeffrey Diaz:

A lot of people always spent their own free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them family or their friend. Were you aware? Many a lot of people spent many people free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. If you need to try to find a new activity honestly, that is look different you can read any book. It is really fun for yourself. If you enjoy the book that you simply read you can spent 24 hours a day to reading a book. The book Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything it is rather good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. These people were enjoying reading this book. Should you did not have enough space to deliver this book you can buy often the e-book. You can m0ore easily to read this book from your smart phone. The price is not to fund but this book features high quality.

Lorraine Stark:

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