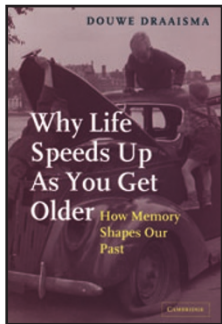


Bad memory



Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past

by Douwe Draaisma, Arnold Pomerans (Translator), Erica Pomerans (Translator)

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Reviewed by Juan Carlos López

There is no shortage of books about our mental abilities, and publications on memory arguably constitute the lion's share. As scientific breakthroughs on memory have been hard to come by in recent years, it is difficult for any author of a book aimed at the nonspecialist to say something about memory that has not been said before. Douwe Draaisma's book *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older* is an honest attempt at transcending this limitation, introducing us to uncharted waters in the study of memory. But despite its clarity and accessibility for a general audience, the book falls short of raising the priority that the hidden side of our mnemonic processes currently has in the research agenda.

Draaisma, professor of history of psychology at the University of Groningen (Netherlands), starts by identifying two traditions in the study of memory, the origins of which he traces back to the nineteenth century. One is the study of memory in the controlled conditions of the laboratory, a practice that, according to many scholars, originated with Hermann Ebbinghaus and his own memorization of nonsense syllables. The other is the study of memory in natural situations, an approach that Draaisma tracks down to Francis Galton and the analysis of his own personal memory.

At the crossroads of these two traditions, most books on memory follow Ebbinghaus' track. In fact, we are seldom even told about the existence of the other route. Draaisma chooses to guide us down the road of memory 'in the wild,' a field in which progress has been much slower and that has many more questions than answers. But soon after embarking on this less trodden path, Draaisma takes another detour to explore even more mysterious facets of memory, asking questions such as why we have a particularly good memory for humiliations, why life seems to speed up as we age, what underlies the feeling of *déjà vu* and why we see our life flash before us moments before we die.

Some of these subjects might seem out of place in a book on memory, but Draaisma does a good job of justifying their inclusion. His presentation strategy is consistent throughout the book: he puts the problem in perspective, drawing from literary or historical circumstances, identifies the question he wants to ask and diligently reviews the different ideas

that others have offered as possible explanations. However, his good writing technique does not make it any easier for him to find satisfactory accounts (or even glimpses of possible explanations) for the phenomena he discusses. This is the key problem of the book.

Déjà vu, for instance, can be construed as a memory of sorts, but current understanding of this phenomenon is so limited that, to account for it, Draaisma has to refer to ideas as disparate as memories from a former life and 'depersonalization.' Similarly, to say that the near-death experience of seeing our life flash before our eyes might be the subconscious taking over to protect us from the imminence of our passing can be reassuring, but does not have much explanatory value.

Even the chapters in which Draaisma discusses topics that have been investigated in more detail seem to lack in depth. For example, the relationship between trauma and memory has been intensely researched, and there is some neurobiological insight on how our emotions color our memories. Draaisma frames the problem around the identification in court of the Nazi war criminal John Demjanjuk. Although his account is fascinating to read, it tells us little more about the workings of memory than reasserting that our emotions affect our recollections and that memory is very susceptible to bias.

Although Draaisma leads us down the less traveled road, the cast of characters we encounter is not entirely different from what we find in more conventional books on memory. In addition to Ebbinghaus, we meet Shereshevskii and his infallible memory, the autistic patients who are geniuses at music or numbers, and the literary references *de rigueur*. To Marcel Proust and the madeleine that prompted his *À la recherche du temps perdu*. To Jorge Luis Borges and his *Funes, el memorioso*, the man with more memories "than all men have had since the world is a world." And being Dutch, Draaisma also cites his countryman Cees Nooteboom, who referred to memory as "a dog that lies where it pleases."

But despite this overlap with other introductory books on the topic, I doubt that *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older* will be particularly useful to familiarize the nonspecialist to the current understanding of our mnemonic abilities. The experimental tradition has taught us too much about the localization and organization of memory that has fallen outside the scope of this book. And for those already versed on these basic concepts, the book will likely be disappointing, as it does not do full justice to the study of memory under natural conditions.

In all fairness, the shortcomings of the book are not at all Draaisma's fault. He is a terrific writer, whose erudition and passion for the topic are apparent in every page. The true problem is that we know so little about the phenomena he discusses that there is not much to say about them; we can simply gaze at them in astonishment, marveling at their sheer existence. Draaisma acknowledges our ignorance, and argues that we either push such phenomena to one side or we seek their explanation outside the realm of experimentation. But for a discipline like cognitive science, which has tried so hard to lose its tag of 'soft science,' the perspective of leaving the experimental sphere has little appeal. After reading *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older*, those memory researchers who forged the field's progress might experience an unwelcome feeling of *déjà vu*; they have been there before, and may not necessarily want to go back.

Juan Carlos López is the Chief Editor of *Nature Medicine*.