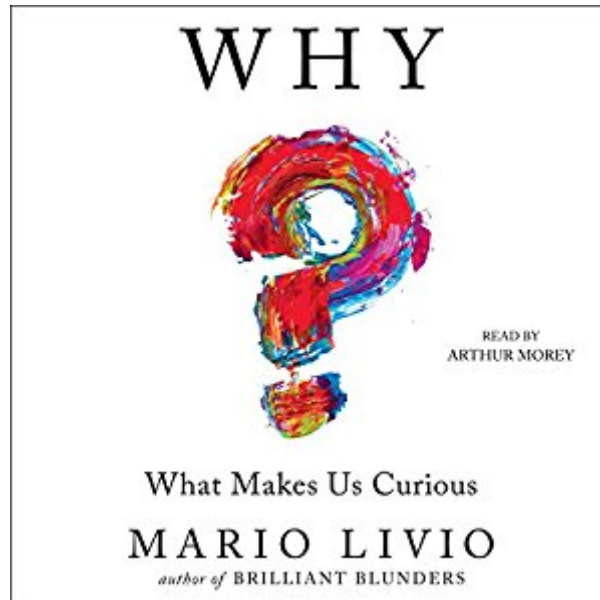




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Why?: What Makes Us Curious



Synopsis

Astrophysicist and author Mario Livio investigates perhaps the most human of all our characteristics - curiosity - as he explores our innate desire to know why. Experiments demonstrate that people are more distracted when they overhear a phone conversation - where they can know only one side of the dialogue - than when they overhear two people talking and know both sides. Why does half a conversation make us more curious than a whole conversation? In the ever-fascinating *Why?* Mario Livio interviewed scientists in several fields to explore the nature of curiosity. He examined the lives of two of history's most curious geniuses, Leonardo da Vinci and Richard Feynman. He also talked to people with boundless curiosity: a superstar rock guitarist who is also an astrophysicist; an astronaut with degrees in computer science, biology, literature, and medicine. What drives these people to be curious about so many subjects? Curiosity is at the heart of mystery and suspense novels. It is essential to other forms of art, from painting to sculpture to music. It is the principal driver of basic scientific research. Even so, there is still no definitive scientific consensus about why we humans are so curious or about the mechanisms in our brains that are responsible for curiosity. Mario Livio - an astrophysicist who has written about mathematics, biology, and now psychology and neuroscience - explores this irresistible subject in a lucid, entertaining way that will captivate anyone who is curious about curiosity.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book deals with various questions related to curiosity: What is curiosity according psychology?

What are its neurological correlates? How can we improve curiosity? What was the roll of curiosity during the scientific revolution in the 17th century? The book also lists many famous examples of curios polymath scientists (and though he doesn't mention it, Mario Livio himself is an excellent example of a polymath). Still, I enjoyed Livio's previous books much more.

Mario Livio is a quite well-known scientist, an astrophysicist. He is intrigued by the mysterious factor that has driven the great scientists throughout the ages "curiosity. Curiosity does not correlate extremely strongly with any other particular skill. Livio points out that two of the most curious people of all time, Leonardo da Vinci and Charles Darwin, were by their own admission not very mathematically gifted. On the other hand Einstein, Richard Feynman and Isaac Newton were mathematical prodigies. One common thread that he points to is the ability to visualize a problem. Leonardo's curiosity arose out of his work as an artist. He wanted to depict the human body, water, waves and light accurately. To do so he pursued an insatiable curiosity about the factors that influence their appearance. Richard Feynman was not a skilled artist, but he was an inveterate doodler, renowned for his "Feynman diagrams" to explain what was going on in the world of subatomic particles. A second common thread was that they were curious about everything. Feynman's colleague Murray Gell Mann was exasperated because Feynman would let himself go off on so many tangents that he seemed not to focus on his work. They make delightful reading in his biographies. He learned to play the frigidora so he could march in the carnival band in Rio de Janeiro. He learned how to crack safes so he could get his hands on classified documents when he was working on the Manhattan project. He taught himself and obscure Asian language, Tavu if memory serves, from the inaccessible heart of the Soviet Union simply because he was fascinated by the people and wanted to travel there. This is the third book I have read on related themes just in the past couple of months. It is worth mentioning the other two because they are so unique. "The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World - and Us" talks about bird evolution, and then delves into human evolution through sexual selection. Sexual selection, in turn, was driven, as the title suggests, by our sense of beauty. In particular, women exercise a great deal of choice, it appears, in our evolution and their preferences may have led us to become artists, musicians, and ultimately to develop the power of speech. The second one, even more closely related, is "The Evolution of Imagination. Although neither author delves into the relationship, imagination and curiosity are intricately connected. Both authors talk about fMRI imaging to see what was going on in the brain. Both discuss psychological tests designed to tease out the brain functions behind imagination and curiosity, respectively. The author of the imagination

book has some satisfying material on the evolutionary explanation of imagination. I recommend all three books highly. Each of them has very useful insights into how we have evolved to be the way we are, how unique we are in the animal kingdom, and how recently we came into these magnificent faculties.

Having been a curious scientist all of my long life and having just completed reading Mario Livio's "Brilliant Blunders," I thought his "Why?" book would be a pleasant and relaxed exploration of one of my favorite subjects. I am glad that I read it and I would recommend it to anybody who would like to factually know more about the subject. It is not an easy read, however, but his two books that I have now completed have given me a measuring tool for calibrating when an "easy" read is perhaps in your hands. The book was on my Kindle and I love the feature where I can glance to the bottom of the page and learn how many more minutes will pass before I complete a chapter and what percent of the total book I have now completed. In both books I was at 62% completion when the last words of the text had been viewed. The remainder of the book consists of academic notes and bibliography, all of great value if I now want to put out a sequel, but also a good explanation of why I felt a bit tired from it all. Felt like I had just sat in on the defense of a Ph.D. thesis. The use of Richard Feynman and Leonardo as models for what the curious human is all about is clever, but lesser examples did not do right as far as I was concerned in answering the questions "Why are you curious?" or "Could you please explain what curiosity is?" Hmmmmm, I am now curious whether there is an author-scientist out there who could help me better understand what this fabulous thing called curiosity is really all about.

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