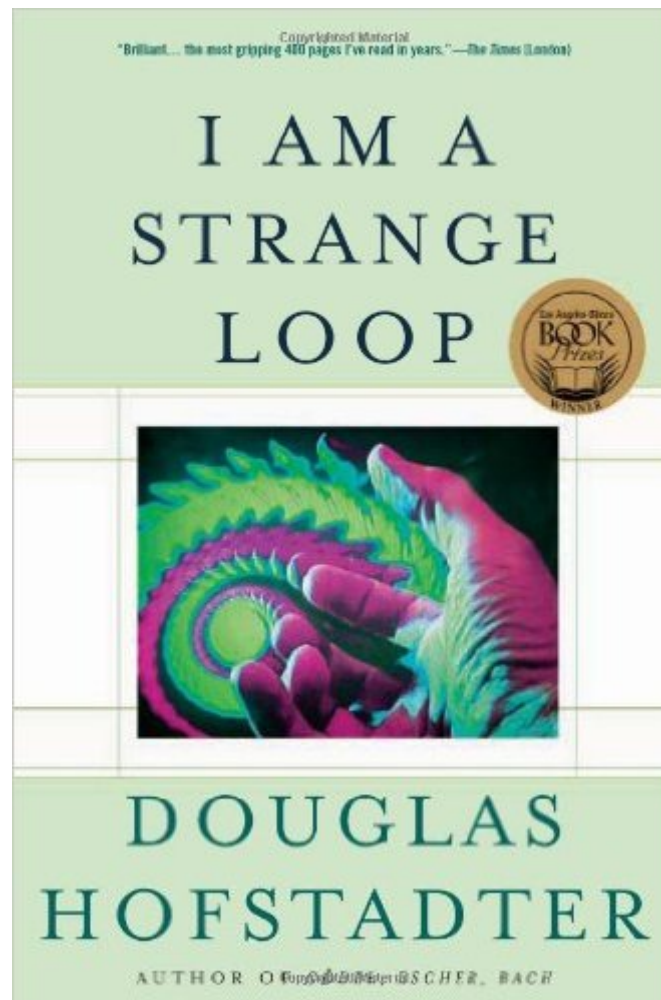


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I Am A Strange Loop



Synopsis

Can thought arise out of matter? Can self, soul, consciousness, “lâ • arise out of mere matter? If it cannot, then how can you or I be here? I Am a Strange Loop argues that the key to understanding selves and consciousness is the “strange loopâ •—a special kind of abstract feedback loop inhabiting our brains. The most central and complex symbol in your brain is the one called “l.â • The “l.â • is the nexus in our brain, one of many symbols seeming to have free will and to have gained the paradoxical ability to push particles around, rather than the reverse. How can a mysterious abstraction be real—or is our “l.â • merely a convenient fiction? Does an “l.â • exert genuine power over the particles in our brain, or is it helplessly pushed around by the laws of physics? These are the mysteries tackled in I Am a Strange Loop, Douglas Hofstadterâ™s first book-length journey into philosophy since GÃ¶del, Escher, Bach. Compulsively readable and endlessly thought-provoking, this is a moving and profound inquiry into the nature of mind.

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Customer Reviews

Douglas Hofstadter is an exceptionally bright and witty man, with a gift for analogy. This no doubt makes him entertaining company and a pleasure to have as a teacher, but at the same time it sometimes gets in the way of the message he's trying to convey- the allegories and metaphors become the dominant message, and the core gets lost in translation. This is of course exactly what happened with Hofstadter's 1979 tour-de-force "Godel, Escher and Bach"; it was roundly praised to the heavens by scores of reviewers, none of whom seemed to notice that it was in fact a very clever

way of presenting a theory of consciousness and intelligence. This bothered Hofstadter as well, as he tells us in the introduction to "I Am a Strange Loop", and so he set out to tell the story again, this time in a more straightforward manner. I'm not so sure he succeeded. The bulk of "I Am a Strange Loop" is devoted to explaining Godel's Incompleteness Theorem, with a minimum of math and a lot of allegory and allusion. Much of it seems repetitious, and all of it is, I think, wasted, as the end product of all this attempted explanation seems to be simply one more metaphor- that what's going on in the brain/mind is something very much like what's going on in Godel's theory: That a theory, or a formula, or a sentence, or a "thing," can contain within it a complete representation of itself. Hofstadter calls this a "strange loop", and believes that, combined with input from outside that adds to this (and other) loops is the wellspring from which consciousness springs. I first heard this notion expressed in the following manner (although I don't recall who wrote it): Every living thing has in it some representation of the outside world. A plant has in some sense a representation of the sun, that allows it to bend towards it. A bacterium moving along a gradient of nutrients contains within it a representation of this source of nutrition. A bee has representations of hive, flower, sun, and other concepts that guide its goal-seeking behavior. And so on, up the evolutionary line. When that representation becomes complete and complex enough to include itself, that is the birth of consciousness. This is not a particularly original notion, although when Hofstadter wrote GEB back in the 70s it wasn't a particularly widely held idea in psychology. At the same time, it wasn't a completely alien idea, either. In the last few chapters Hofstadter toys with some more or less current ideas in the philosophy of mind, like Chalmers's "zombie", and presents us with a few more allegories and clever tales, none of which, I think, end up clarifying this position terribly well. One is left with the feeling that Hofstadter has a very strong intuitive sense of how consciousness evolves from these strange loops of self-representation, and what he's struggling to do is to let us share his intuitions. I find that I share some of these intuitions with him, particularly with his notions of where the self is represented, and representations of others alongside the self, and I think there's a germ of some powerful explanation hiding in there, but I can't seem to provide any more illumination than can Hofstadter. And that in turn reminds me of something I was told at the beginning of my teaching career: If you can't explain something clearly and simply to another person, then you don't fully understand it. I think that's where Hofstadter is with respect to consciousness: He has a lot of intuitions and parallels he can pull out, but in the end, he doesn't really have a theory of consciousness.

You have certainly enjoyed the sensation of looking into a mirror that itself reflected a mirror, making

a tunnel of reflections that went as deep as you could see. The same sort of thing happens when you take a television camera and turn it onto a monitor that is showing what the television camera is taking a picture of. But there is something spooky about such a loop. In fact, when young Doug Hofstadter's family was looking to purchase its first video camera, Hofstadter (showing in youth the sort of interest in self-reference that he would turn into a writing career) wondered what would happen if he showed the camera a monitor that itself showed the camera's own output. He remembers with some shame that he was hesitant to close the loop, as if he were crossing into forbidden territory. So he asked the salesman for permission to do so. "No, no, _no_!" came the reply from the salesman, who obviously shared the same fears, "Don't do _that_ - you'll break the camera." And young Hofstadter, unsure of himself, refrained from the experiment. Afterwards he thought about it on the drive home, and could see no danger to the system, and of course he tried it when they got home. And he tried it again many times; video feedback is one of the themes in Hofstadter's monumental and delightful *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (known by millions as GEB) from 1979, and it comes back for further discussion (with more advanced hardware) in Hofstadter's new *I Am a Strange Loop* (Basic Books). As in his other books, Hofstadter has written a deeply personal work, even though he is taking on the eternal philosophical bogey of consciousness, and has written once again with a smoothness and a sense of fun that will entrance even casual readers with no particular interest in philosophy or consciousness or mathematics into deep and rewarding thought. Hofstadter's theme here is consciousness, or "I" or (and he shuns religious connections to the word) the soul. Humans have consciousness. Dogs seem to have some ability to understand what other dogs (and humans) are feeling, some way of representing themselves and others within their own brains. Goldfish, well that's pretty iffy. Mosquitoes have no capacity for self-knowledge. And go further down that scale. How about the neuron itself? Is there any consciousness there? After all, mosquito neurons aren't really much different from human ones, they are just more numerous and tangled in humans. Further down: DNA molecules - conscious or not? Further: carbon atoms - wait a minute, there's not even the possibility that an inanimate atom could have consciousness. Thus the great paradox, looked at repeatedly from different viewpoints here: inanimate matter, properly organized, yields consciousness. We take it all for granted, but it is all profoundly puzzling. Every human brain working at the symbol level (but very much dependent on neural and chemical foundations) "perceives its very own 'I' as a pusher and a mover, never entertaining for a moment the idea that its star player might merely be a useful shorthand standing for a myriad infinitesimal entities and the invisible chemical transactions taking place among them." The "I" is an illusion, an effective one that has great survival value for its possessors. This could be

dense stuff, but Hofstadter's analogies are brilliant, as are many of his puns; he reminds us, "Just as we need our eyes in order to see, we need our "I"s in order to be!" Hofstadter is fun to read. Hofstadter's last book, Le Ton beau de Marot, was a long meditation on language and translation, and contained many reflections about his wife Carol, who sadly and suddenly died of a brain tumor in 1993 before she was 43. Carol reappears many times in the current work; it is clear that she and Hofstadter had an unusually deep and affectionate marriage, "one individual with two bodies". He is able to write movingly of what he has learned from the loss, how Carol's mind, her "Carolness" or "Carol-consciousness" has been incorporated into his own "I". He isn't Carol, and carries only an imperfect copy of Carol's soul within his own soul, but he shows how her strange loop has been incorporated into his, and just how strong and loving such an incorporation must be. It is a deeply humanistic vision of empathy, the sort of generous personal insight that shows that though souls might be merely the product of atoms and neurons interacting, might be merely illusory, they can still be grand and fully empathetic. Hofstadter has written another book to increase our wonder over the workings of our wonderworking brains.

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