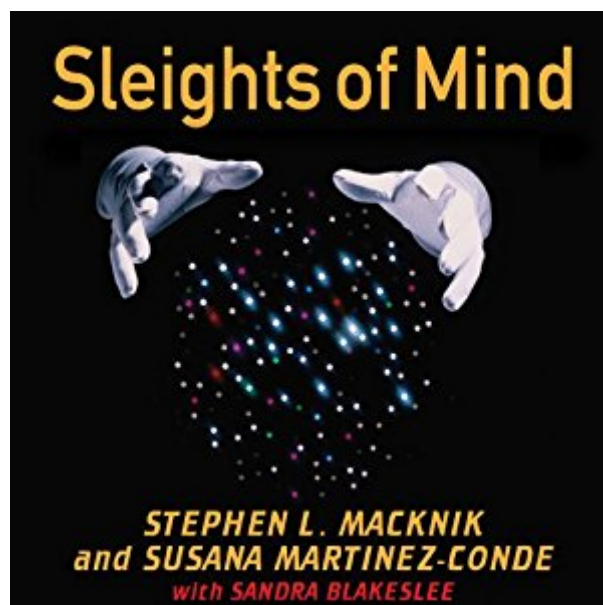


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# Sleights Of Mind: What The Neuroscience Of Magic Reveals About Our Everyday Deceptions



## Synopsis

Have you ever wondered how a magician saws a woman in half? Or makes coins materialize out of thin air? Or reads your mind? Magic tricks work because humans have a hardwired process of attention and awareness that is hackable. A good magician uses your mind's intrinsic properties against you in a form of mental jujitsu, to fool you every time, even when you know full well that you are being tricked. Now Stephen L. Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde, the founders of the exciting new discipline of neuromagic, have convinced some of the world's greatest magicians to reveal their techniques for tricking the brain. This fascinating book is the result of the authors' worldwide exploration of magic and how its ancient principles can now be explained using the latest discoveries of cognitive neuroscience. The secrets behind magic tricks reveal how your brain works not just when watching a magic show but in everyday situations. For instance, if you've ever found yourself paying for an expensive item you'd sworn you'd never buy, the salesperson was probably a master at creating the "illusion of choice," a core technique of magic. By popping the hood on your brain as you are suckered in by sleights of hand, Macknik and Martinez-Conde unveil the key connections between magic and the mind, and along the way make neuroscience more exciting and accessible than ever before.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 10 hours and 6 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: November 9, 2010

Language: English

ASIN: B004BDQIRQ

Best Sellers Rank: #97 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Arts & Entertainment > Games #116 in Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Magic & Illusion #139 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Magic

## Customer Reviews

It is hard not to pay attention to optical illusions, and wonder how can it be that one line is not really longer than the other or one circle is not really darker than the other or all the other varieties that tell us our eyes lie to us. It was only a few decades ago that neuroscientists realized that the

mistakes in visual processing were tools to examine how the eyes and brain process information. (It was also a reminder of the wonderful and mysterious lesson that our brains do not make perfect inner models of reality, but only use the tricks and shortcuts descended from their evolution to make useful, rather than exact, models.) In a way, magicians perform optical illusions and even behavioral illusions. You enjoy a magician's performance because although it looks as if he makes coins manifest from the air or makes a ball vanish when he throws it up, you know that such things cannot really be and yet you cannot figure out how the impression the magician makes is so strong. If we can get neurological understanding of the visual system from optical illusions, perhaps the illusions performed by magicians would offer an even broader range of tools to evaluate brain function. This was the insight of Stephen L. Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde. They are both directors of neuroscience labs and they are married. Because they had done research on visual illusions, they hosted a conference in 2005 in Las Vegas, and were reminded that it was headquarters for some of the best magicians in the world. They got the insight that magic could be studied to gain understanding of perception and even consciousness. They even became certified magicians. You might not be able to get through any of their scientific papers on the subject, but here (written with Sandra Blakeslee) is *Sleights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals About Our Everyday Deceptions* (Henry Holt), a delightful and illuminating book about how magicians in many ways take advantage of our brains' imperfect modeling of reality and what this tells us about how the brains work. The immediate attraction to this book for many people will be that it gives magic secrets away. The authors have conscientiously marked all such explanations with a "Spoiler Alert," so that if you still want to be baffled you can skip the explanation. Of course you will be missing all the fun and insight, and it is hard to imagine anyone that would resist looking at the spoilers. Even more important is that knowing the trick doesn't make it any less of a trick; the authors still go to magic shows and still are fooled. The hardwired processes of paying attention cannot be overcome, but they can be hacked, and this is what magicians do. A magician who produces a live dove, for instance, knows that you cannot help but pay attention to the flapping of the dove. While the spotlight of that attention is on the dove, who knows what might be manipulated outside the spotlight? The authors describe with good humor and charm their attempts to become full-fledged performing magicians, and the difficulties involved. Skill with the hands is important, but not as important as you might think. "Pulling off these simple sleights requires about as much dexterity as you need when learning how to shuffle a deck of cards for the first time." The reason that a magician can so easily take your attention away from the mechanics of the trick is that we are so bad at multitasking. There has been a decade of research on multitasking, long before the authors

got interested in magic. Multitaskers just don't get all the tasks done as well as those who are doing one thing at a time. Those who couple the task of driving with the task of talking on a cell phone, even if the phone is hands-free, are able to pay as little attention to the road as drunks do. There are wonderful examples in the book of magicians (or psychologists doing experiments) who do such things as literally riding around on a unicycle in a clown suit without being noticed because attention is elsewhere. Remember, too, that a good patter is not just the mark of a smooth performance; the magician who tells jokes, witty or corny, is counting on your mind to be occupied with the humor so that it can't do much else. The authors have no concern that pushing scientific investigation of magical feats will make them any less magical, any more than Copernicus diminished the beauties of sunsets. In fact, they are doing what magicians have been doing all along: "Magicians basically do cognitive science experiments for audiences all night long, and they may be even more effective than we scientists are in the lab." And it may well be that armed with better understanding of how magic works, the authors can improve the effectiveness of their own tricks and those of other magicians. Their book reads well as a summary of a personal quest for scientific and magical understanding, and one of the best things about it is that it refers repeatedly to their website where you can see the specific magic effects themselves. Their book is a delightful tour of magic techniques; but in showing the techniques this way, *abracadabra*, the authors have induced the reader to learn some serious neuroscience as well.

If you are the type who is interested in how the mind perceives its world, this is an essential book. It was written by two psychologists who venture to find out how magic works from a neurological point of view. Through the explanation of several artful magic illusions, it describes how our brains process our sensory information, and how those senses can be deceived by very simple artifices. As one who both professionally and personally has great interest in our ability to properly perceive what is going on around us, I was fascinated. If epistemology is your interest, then this book is a Must Have. It was as paradigm changing as Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, albeit in a more direct and to the point fashion.

If you are familiar with the prior writings of Sandra Blakeslee and her son Michael, who provided the writing talent for "Sleights of Mind" and co wrote her last book "The Body Has a Mind of Its Own" you will love this latest product of a very talented mother and son science writing team. Though dated, her prior book "On Intelligence" with Jeff Hawkins, was a quick and concise read that is still one of the best sources on the topic of reverse engineering of the neocortex. I was hoping that this

latest project would stand up to the standards of her two prior books, and I wasn't disappointed with the quality of this project - it's just as good. Major insights are offered from a fresh perspective, and it's a speedy read that you can recommend to others. The contributions of Macknik and Martinez-Conde are far from stuffy. They obviously have had a great time as a couple exploring their areas of expertise through the lens of magic performance, and with the kind help of experts who bring a powerful sense of depth and history to the presentation. The material is original and it's been presented in a clear and easy to follow format with illustrations provided when needed. This book overcomes one of the objections that I had to Blakeslee's last book, which was the lack of references. I find it interesting to see that Blakeslee has returned to the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix for this new project, which was also the source of some of the best materials in *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own*. For more on this back story, you may wish to refer to two interviews of Blakeslee by Ginger Campbell see [brainsciencepodcast.com](http://brainsciencepodcast.com) episodes 21 and 23 for more on that project. My take on the chicanery that can take place in the brain comes from experiences with handedness reversals, as discussed in "Hidden Handedness" which provides yet another illustration of the principle that our brains are the true virtuoso virtual reality machines, the place where the best magic shows are always happening. My thanks to all of the team members who worked together to produce this important book. Samuel Randolph

I'm an amateur magician and a scientist and found this book to be fascinating from both perspectives. It is fun to read and interesting and informative for both magicians and non-magicians. Much of the discussion about perception, attention, memory etc. magicians have learned to exploit as have salespeople, con artists etc. (as pointed out in this book). Besides being a very interesting and entertaining book to read, the observations and insights are important and useful in many non-magical contexts. I've recommended this book to many of my friends whether or not they are magicians or scientists.

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