



Book Reviews

Brain food

|Joseph Wilson

MY STROKE OF INSIGHT by Jill Bolte Taylor (Viking), 184 pages, \$27.50 cloth.
Rating: NNN

Jill Bolte Taylor's story is like no other. She was a brain scientist working at Harvard when, at the age of 37, she suffered a massive stroke to her left hemisphere.

[briefbreak][rssbreak]

As a specialist in brain anatomy, she knew exactly what was happening to her at every moment, and describes the chilling experience of feeling her brain close down from within.

The four or five chapters mid-book that describe her stroke are the most gripping. The left hemisphere is in charge of memory, logic, self-awareness and language; as it was shutting off, she describes the feeling of losing the sense of her own self and becoming unaware of the position of her limbs. Taylor spent hours mid-stroke staring at the phone, knowing it could help her but unable to recall what a phone was or how to use it.

The first few chapters take the reader on a brief but obligatory tour of brain anatomy. This section is a little thin and the diagrams weak. Taylor fails to do the subject justice, her writing only coming to life when she's in memoir mode.

The last third of the book explores what her stroke taught her about the brain. Since she basically lost the function of her left hemisphere, Taylor was entirely in the thrall of her right brain, which emphasizes emotion, creativity and sensory input.

She was surprised to feel euphoric in this state. Without the judgmental, ego-obsessed left brain, she repeatedly says, she felt at one with the universe.

It took Taylor more than eight years to build up the left side of her brain again, to reacquire language skills and memory and create a new sense of identity. She claims to be able to tap into the feeling of right-brain euphoria whenever she wants, though, and encourages people to ignore their left brain "inner chatter" more often.

This advice might come across as New Agey and trite, but considering Taylor's unique experience, I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Write Books at susanc@nowtoronto.com

