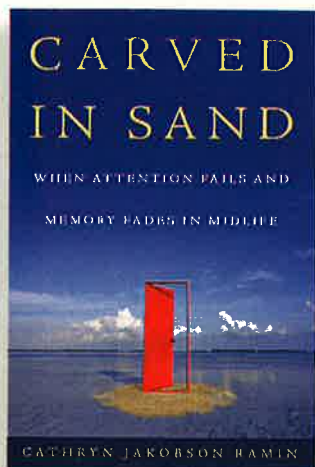


## Senior Moments

### Carved in Sand: When Attention Fails and Memory Fades in Midlife

by Cathryn Jakobson Ramin. HarperCollins, 2007 (\$24.95)

We've all had the experience: the name we can't recall, the face we can't place, the lost keys that once lived in the kitchen drawer. Everyone forgets things. But to Cathryn Jakobson Ramin, a seasoned science journalist, these ordi-



nary incidents became unacceptably common shortly after she "crossed the threshold to middle age," in her mid-40s.

"There was no way around it," she writes. "Something was happening to my mind." She felt foggy and forgetful, losing track of dates, names, faces and directions—and she soon felt alone, alarmed and desperate.

*Carved in Sand* chronicles the quest she embarked on to understand why her memory was fading. Blending personal anecdotes with research literature, Jakobson Ramin delves into such areas as stress, insomnia, diet, menopause, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, attention-deficit disorder and Alzheimer's disease. She also explores why some people remain sharp well into their 90s.

As part of her quest, she subjects herself to a battery of tests, drugs, procedures and studies. She has ECG, MRI and PET scans and undergoes hearing and visual tests. She tries meditating, sleeping, staying awake and exercising. She solves crossword puzzles and plays computer games. She takes antidepressants, stimulants, memory enhancers, hormones and thyroid drugs. She eats more (or less) protein, carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables, meat and fish. She even memorizes poems and goes salsa dancing—activities that reportedly sharpen memory. In short, she tries every strategy that she can think of and that sufferers or professionals recommend.

The result: "People ask me all the time if I'm 'better,' and honestly, I can say that I am." Among other things, she learns that a mild traumatic brain injury she suffered early in life (the result of getting whacked on the forehead accidentally by a broom) increased her vulnerability to memory trouble, and she also discovers a thyroid deficiency. Yet, for the most part, she is normal and benefits from a variety of memory-enhancing treatments.

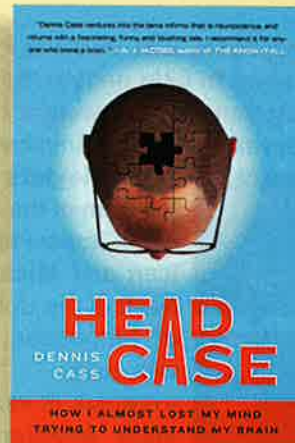
Ultimately, Jakobson Ramin's insightful and well-researched journey through memoryland offers some valuable lessons. For one, forgetfulness is commonplace and need not impair one's life. Moreover, there is no single cause or treatment for forgetfulness, which can arise from a wide variety of biological and psychological causes, ranging from trauma or hormonal imbalances to anxiety or depression. But the good news is that many treatments work. And in her case, "the fog has lifted." —Richard Lipkin

## Scientific Self-Discovery

### Head Case: How I Almost Lost My Mind Trying to Understand My Brain

by Dennis Cass. HarperCollins, 2007 (\$24.95)

During a frightful case of writer's block, Dennis Cass had a sudden insight. A simple, clear thought entered his mind: *How can you expect to live by your wits if you have no idea how your wits work?* Delighted with this question, Cass, a journalist who specializes in writing about popular culture, politics and food (and who avoided any topic approaching science), decided to learn as much as he could about his brain.



In *Head Case*, Cass describes his fumbling attempts to visit with scientists, wiggle his way into research studies, perform mind-numbing experiments and play amateur neuroscientist in his office, which he begins to call his lab. Part of the author's charm is that he does not pretend to be an expert. This book is meant to entertain. But as the story unfolds, Cass begins to grapple with questions that lie at the heart not only of science but also of humanity itself.

Cass had never imagined that learning about the brain might be frustratingly difficult or that it could eventually undermine his view of the world and himself. As he begins to understand the science of fear, attention, stress, addiction and consciousness, he relates his revelations to his own experiences and troubled past. With compassion and humor, Cass examines his strained relationship with his stepfather, whose selfish and grandiose ideas sent his family into financial and emotional hardship. He finds solace in the controversial views of evolutionary psychology, realizing at last that everyone shares the same flawed "prehistoric brain" and that his stepfather's lifelong substance abuse problems were the result of mental illness rather than a weak moral character.

Although Cass has come far in understanding how his wits work, he errs on the side of reductionism by explaining almost all the brain's processes as cascades of biochemical reactions triggered by outside stimuli. In doing so, he largely ignores the nuanced ways in which genes and biology interact with experience to influence brain function. By presenting this simplified picture, however, Cass leaves room to show something even more important: the human side of science.

*Head Case* is a wonderfully entertaining account of Cass's venture into neuroscience, revealing that we all can learn about our brain as long as we put our mind to it.

—Thania Benios