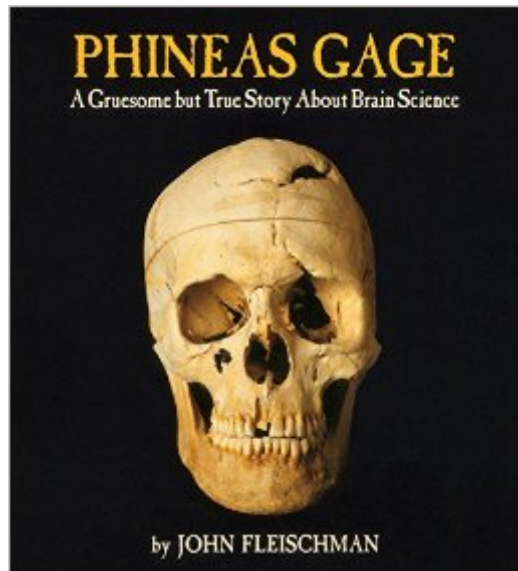


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# Phineas Gage: A Gruesome But True Story About Brain Science



## Synopsis

Phineas Gage was truly a man with a hole in his head. Phineas, a railroad construction foreman, was blasting rock near Cavendish, Vermont, in 1848 when a thirteen-pound iron rod was shot through his brain. Miraculously, he survived to live another eleven years and become a textbook case in brain science. At the time, Phineas Gage seemed to completely recover from his accident. He could walk, talk, work, and travel, but he was changed. Gage "was no longer Gage," said his Vermont doctor, meaning that the old Phineas was dependable and well liked, and the new Phineas was crude and unpredictable. His case astonished doctors in his day and still fascinates doctors today. What happened and what didn't happen inside the brain of Phineas Gage will tell you a lot about how your brain works and how you act human.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 12 years

Grade Level: 5 - 7

## Customer Reviews

Well, that will teach me not to read the entire review of a book before sending for it! Not that I'm complaining about the book...I thought it was for adults. It's not really, though I can see using it for reading and science literacy for deaf adults. This is a great book. The explanations concerning what happened to Mr. Gage, and the science behind his medical recovery and subsequent personality problems is fairly well covered. There is a great glossary in the back with more information concerning terminology used in 'brain science' such as abscess and neurotransmitters that can be

used as a jumping point for students to do their own research into areas that interest them, whether on the Internet or in libraries. I kind of skimmed through the text. Most of it was stuff I've had over exposure to. The text is well written, just more simple than I am used to reading. Fleischman writes very tongue-in-cheek (come to think of it, Gage couldn't do that for a while on one side!). I appreciate Fleischman's humor, and I am sure most teachers and students will find it refreshing from boring textbooks written by professors or publishing houses. The science is correct in this book, which I am finding is often NOT the case in textbooks...so maybe teachers should stop using textbooks and use books such as this, journals and the Internet! My favorite part of this book, of course, are the pictures, the MRI scans, the reconstitution of his brain within his skull using modern techniques. Very fun to see all this together. Gage is learned about in every neuroscience class I had from an undergrad to graduate level. We talk about the fact that he survived this stunning blow, about his personality changes in neuropsychiatric classes, about possible relations between other disorders such as autism and what happened in lobotomies (ugh!...). Everyone in Neuroscience knows about Gage. He is fascinating to the point of remembering his name when we can't remember names of past acquaintances. Fun book, good science, great pictures, a good introduction for kids to neuroscience. Karen Sadler, Science Education, University of Pittsburgh

As a children's librarian, I do a lot of booktalks in area schools. In a typical booktalk I will stand up with a pile of books at my side and try by any means necessary to get kids interested in reading. Such an effort can cause a librarian a fair amount of strain and sometimes we'll stoop mighty low to get children hooked. Enter "Phineas Gage". By and large, non-fiction titles are the hardest ones to sell to kids. You tell a ten-year-old that you have a story about a boy who finds a mysterious dragon's egg and you'll probably have a convert before you've uttered so much as ten sentences. But if you hold in your hot little hand an item that contains actual FACTS.... usually you're up a creek. Not in the case of Phineas. This book is so chock full of blood, splattered brains, busted skulls, and other goopy beginnings that your intended audience, whatever the age, will be hanging on your every word. For the parent that wants their child to someday become a high priced neurologist, I highly suggest that you give them a little taste of "Phineas Gage" for a starter. Now imagine that you are Mr. Gage himself. The year is 1848 and you're just an average railroad construction foreman. Your job consists of blasting rock out of the way of the construction, allowing further tracks to be laid. You're good at your job, and you've a custom-made tamping iron (thirteen-pound rod with a pointed end) to help you out. Then, on September 13, 1848, you mess up. It could happen to anyone. One moment you're putting the highly combustible blasting powder down a hole. The next

minute you've turned your head in distraction and you've dropped your tamping iron down that selfsame hole. The iron hits a piece of granite, produces a spark, and suddenly the iron has ripped through your left cheek, gone behind your left eyeball, and come up through the top of your head. There's blood everywhere, brains on the iron, and a very surprised Phineas Gage sitting in the midst of it all. You'd think a blast like that would kill a man, right? Wrong. Phineas not only is fine, he's making entries into his time book as he goes to town for the doctor. When the doctor isn't around, he then sits on the front steps of a nearby hotel and has a lengthy conversation with his landlord. All the while there's blood everywhere and a clear view into Phineas's head to his brains. And is Phineas completely unchanged by the experience? Not quite. Though he lives for quite some time after the accident, Phineas suddenly is bereft of all his social skills. Why is this? What does it mean about the brain itself? And why did Phineas live? Like I said, there's gore galore in this puppy. But better yet, there's a lot of sound scientific information for questioning young minds. For those kids more interested in the accident itself, Phineas's skull is displayed throughout the book. You can clearly make out where the hole once was, as well as how it healed over time. Digitally rendered graphs show exactly how the tamping iron entered Mr. Gage's head and how it excited. Historical information about the state of brain science in the late 1800's is coupled with what we know (and still do not know) now. The book is filled with interesting photographs, graphs, and illustrations. For further information there's a great list of resources, as well as a fabulous glossary, and a complete index. Now the author of this book is not a children's non-fiction author. In fact, he's a science writer for the American Society for Cell Biology at the Harvard Medical School. So how well does he write for young `uns? The answer is pretty darn well. Overall, Fleischman's text is tight and interesting. He never launches into a speculation without making it very clear what the facts behind each and every matter are. Unfortunately, the book does have an occasional dull moment. Not being particularly thrilled with neuroscience myself, I found my eyes slipping over a page or two of brain facts that I didn't feel the need to backtrack and read. Still, for the most part the book is a fascinating journey into a weird moment in history. So if your kid has been told in school that they MUST read and write about a non--fiction title of some sort, I highly recommend dear old "Phineas Gage" to you. Never has any moment so gross rendered so great a discovery.

I just finished reading this book with a 12-year old middle schooler. Both of us loved every page of this book and the incredible story of Phineas Gage. As a undergrad student majoring in psychology, I also found this book to be quite fascinating, as it goes into more depth over the life of this extraordinary man who survived such a freak accident. The book is perfect for young adults as it is a

work of non-fiction of the highest quality. It seems like there aren't enough non-fiction books out there today that are geared towards young readers. It is a great introduction to major topics in biology including bacteria, organization of cells, as well as an in-depth discussion of the brain. Definitely a great book for psychology and biology students alike!

This is one compelling and very entertaining read, albeit not for the squeamish. While aimed at kids, adults will find it equally fascinating. It has all the elements of a wild work of fiction, yet it's an eyepoppingly true story--just try and put it down once you've opened it. It's great to see factual science presented in such a winning, approachable style. After ordering a copy for my biology-minded kids, we thought so highly of it that we got a copy to donate to our local library as well. Highly recommended.

I picked up John Fleischman's Phineas Gage for two reasons: first, I knew a little about his case and wanted to know more, and secondly, I was looking for an attention-getting non-fiction piece to share with my students in literature circle. Fleischman shares the details of Gage's lucky/unlucky accident and the life he lived in the aftermath, but carefully interweaves the history of brain medicine as well as brain anatomy. This book is an easy read that can satisfy the fascination with Gage's somewhat morbid tale and educate at the same time.

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