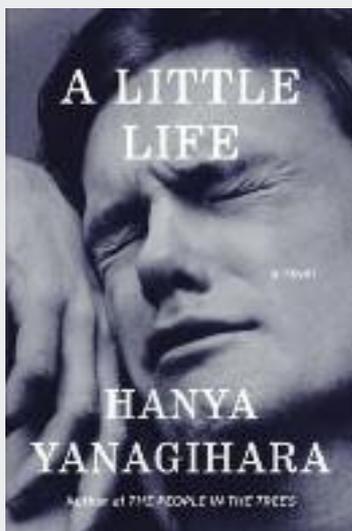


A life less ordinary

Hanya Yanagihara's first novel (*The People in the Trees*) took her years to write, and although well received, sank without trace. Her second, *A Little Life*, was written in an astonishing 18 months (it's over 700 pages long). Critically acclaimed and becoming a best seller, it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and had been expected to win. Its popular success is all the more remarkable when you consider that it has been described as 'harrowing' and 'unrelenting', and many reviews have discussed how upset the book made them. I was in two minds about whether or not I could face reading it. I'm not drawn to misery memoirs or fictionalised 'misery-lit', where any amount of ghoulishness is justified on the basis that it supposedly reveals some inner truth. I did pick it up though. And, cliché though it is, I couldn't put it down.



 A Little Life
Hanya Yanagihara

A Little Life starts gently, as we are introduced to the four main characters – Jude, Willem, Malcolm and JB. They first meet each other at a college much like Harvard, and become each other's firmest and best friends. Jude and Willem are especially close. They graduate, and start to face up to the usual challenges of finding work, accommodation, relationships. So far, so conventional. Others have mentioned the similarities to Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, which followed a larger group of graduate friends. Any resonance with this story arc is no doubt entirely deliberate, and one of Yanagihara's many strengths is her ability to play with convention.

This comfortable middle-class world shifts at about 70 pages in, when we are faced with a dramatic turning point. Jude awakens his roommate Willem to tell him there's been an accident, and is bleeding profusely from his arm. We have been subtly alerted to something about Jude which is different from the other three. Not just his orphan status (Willem too is an orphan), but how reserved he is, and how uncomfortable he is with his body – he walks with a limp, and keeps himself covered up. The bleeding arm is of course a self-harming incident that has gone wrong. It is the first of many, many incidents of self-harm in the book. The descriptions of self-harm are so visceral that they are at times almost impossible to read. Yet they did not seem to me to be ghoulish. Yanagihara is willing to stare right at the source of pain, both physical and mental, and will not turn away.

It is no surprise that behind this self-harm is something truly appalling, although perhaps in a world post-Catholic Church scandal, post-Savile and post-Rotherham, not as difficult to believe as it might once have been. Yanagihara leads us deeper and deeper into this world. We don't want to go there, but we know we must. What I found so remarkable was that I simultaneously dreaded, and was desperate to know, what would come next.

There is much that seems to be wrong with how this book is written. It has an extremely narrow focus, where it's only the lives of the characters we hear about, and there are no contemporaneous references. It's hard to believe there could be a novel largely set in Manhattan that passes through 2001 without a single person mentioning 9/11. But this is that book. It can only be a deliberate choice by the author, and it should detract from believability. The characters also shouldn't work. Although written by a woman, it is almost entirely populated by men, most of whom are gay: another challenge to credibility. Some characters are pushed to the background and only allowed back in to further a plot point. Others, such as Willem, are too good to be true. The effect is a form of heightened reality. Yet given the subject matter, hyper-reality seems completely appropriate.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this novel for a psychologist is having to consider the limitations of what we can do to fix a broken mind. As Jude's story unfolds, we have to stand watching on the sidelines, desperate to help. We share the frustration and occasional anger of Jude's friends, who also feel powerless. The question is whether we would be able to help in the real world.

This is, without a shadow of a doubt, a deeply upsetting book, and it is not for everyone. But if you feel up to it, and want to read a novel about love, hate, compassion, cruelty, friendship and survival, it is unmissable.

| Picador; 2015; Hb £16.99

Reviewed by Kate Johnstone who is Associate Editor (Reviews)

Fear the pseudo-science



The Fear-Free Organization
Paul Brown, Joan Kingsley & Sue Paterson

This book annoyed me from page 1. Had I picked it up in a bookshop I would have frowned and put it down. I persevered, because the title promised much, those 'vital insights from neuroscience' that I could use with my clients to 'transform business culture'.

I hope that most of you would not recognise the bleak picture painted of corporate culture here. They present numerous case studies of dysfunctional people and relationships, all trying to demonstrate their fundamental premise that '[f]ear...is what an overwhelming majority of bosses use, deliberately or mindlessly, to keep order'. I would not want to pretend that all is sweetness and light where I work, or in the client organisations I support, but their negative tone, and description of 'greedy, performance-driven models' was off-putting for me.

And what of the 'neuro-science' offered? An introduction to the limbic system, amygdala, oxytocin, and an updated Hebbian learning theory to say 'the cells that flow together, grow together'. How do these findings relate to the business world? The authors then rely on the work of others – David Rock's popular SCARF model and Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence.

I did not feel that the authors' 10-point plan for a fear-free organisation would have much credibility with my clients – the first point suggests that we must 'have a leader who is good-hearted'. I cannot disagree with this point, but I don't think this book offered me any 'vital insights' into shaping such leaders or transforming business culture.

| Kogan Page; 2015; Pb £26.99

Reviewed by Alison Gregory,
who is a management consultant



Into the future

Ai Weiwei
Royal Academy of Arts

Ai Weiwei: is he an artist, a political activist, a celebrity or a self-publicist? Or perhaps he is all of these?

Ai Weiwei's artistic family background and early negative experiences with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shaped him into the artist he is today. In China, given names are created by parents who often choose words that are significant or aspirational for them. *Wei* means 'future'. When growing up, how salient was his name in making him want to change the future or leave a mark on the future of art or the politics of China?

Ai's view of art is that it is a means of awakening people to the need for change rather than to beauty. He wants to use art to make his fellow Chinese citizens aware of their lack of freedom, particularly freedom of speech, though he knows that many Chinese people would rather concentrate on earning money, buying a house and a car, and getting a good education for their children. Ai demands transparency and accountability from the state. He makes great use of the web and social media, particularly Twitter, to call for this. Chinese characters are more like words than letters, so with 140 it is possible to say quite a lot. Twitter and Facebook are theoretically banned in China but many people can get round this.

At one point, Ai was spending most of

his time writing blogs and micro-blogs. Although his dissent was mostly online rather than offline activity, unsurprisingly the CCP did not like his activities and he was placed under arrest. When he became aware that he was being watched by the authorities who had surveillance cameras all around the outside of his home, in a clever and witty response, he set up web cams in every room and broadcast his own reality show 24/7, until he was told to close the site down. Several of the installations in



Free Speech Puzzle, 2014

the exhibition refer to this, such as the carved marble CCTV camera, and the peep show boxes showing his imprisonment.

(I dare say all this takes place under the surveillance of cameras at the Royal Academy for our 'safety' as the trains and stations put it.)

Ai uses a range of materials to put across his message – timber, glass, marble, tea, sand, bones and metal. Some other Chinese artists think he wastes materials, such as the lovely antique tables he has sawn up and the old pottery jars he has overpainted, but as he grew up he must have seen the Red Guards destroying every traditional Chinese art object they could find during the Cultural Revolution. Some artists

admire the vast size of his installations, reminiscent of ancient installations like the Terracotta Army. For example, one hall is filled with rusty iron rods removed from the rubble after the Sichuan earthquake in Wenchuan in 2008. China has a history of terrible tragedies. In the past the government tried to keep them quiet in a way that is no longer possible with modern communication technology. After the earthquake many volunteers poured in to help, including Ai Weiwei and his team, who wanted to highlight the poor building practices and corruption that made many of the buildings unsafe. They collected the twisted iron bars from the substandard buildings, straightened them and laid them out in a pattern. They also made lists of the names of all the thousands of children killed in the earthquake and these have been placed on the surrounding walls.

In one area is a huge jumbled up pile of ceramic crabs (or *he xie* which is a homophone for 'harmonious'). The CCP is always exhorting a harmonious society. In the corner, one single crab seems to be starting to climb alone up the wall. I wonder, does Ai see himself as this crab leading the harmonious masses into a freer future?

| The exhibition runs until 13 December at the Royal Academy of Arts

Reviewed by Louise T. Higgins who is Emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of Chester

Heed these words



Mental – the vacuum cleaner
Freud Museum, London

The Metropolitan Police call him a Domestic Extremist. The NHS have described him as 'highly disturbed' and labelled him with Borderline Personality Disorder. 'A real and present threat to the safe running of our lawful business' is how E.ON described him at the Royal Courts of Justice.

He prefers the term Mental.

After 10 years of being an outlaw and inpatient, artist activist 'the vacuum cleaner' presents an autobiographical performance told through his psychiatric records, police intelligence files and corporate injunctions collected through the Data Protection Act. (from www.thevacuumcleaner.co.uk)

There we sat, around 25 of us on Sigmund Freud's bedroom floor with 'the vacuum cleaner' – aka James Leadbitter – who lay deep under his duvet in our midst. Surrounded by piles of case notes, his medical records, so many they seemed to swallow him as much as the duvet did. Freud, in shadow across the screen, cast across the bedroom walls, observing from a distance.

On the occasion of the Philadelphia Association's 50th anniversary we revisited the radical ideas of Ronnie D. Laing and colleagues: in short to listen to and talk to people in distress. Hardly radical and yet in our time-poor, CBT yourself back to work in just six sessions, slap on a label and medicate it, production-line era, this message was an ironic reminder of the fundamental importance of person-centred care and how it seems to have been forgotten in the mental health system being cut in the name of efficiencies.

I, a former mental health professional, experienced toe-curling culpability as I witnessed the vacuum cleaner's patient and personal testimony. He rose up from under the duvet and illustrated using his case notes on OHP, the (important) points highlighted – many sweeping and generalised attempts at diagnosis, and often contradictory reports. Such is the difficulty with prescriptive accounts of mental distress. Yet all the agents involved – police, doctors, nurses, security services and therapists, conspired to monitor, contain and categorise the man lying before us on the bed. He was a person to us, but a domestic terrorist to the authorities. He was variously described as: a diagnosis unstable PD, schizophrenic, high scorer on the GHQ, anxious, suicidal, self-harming, manipulative and dangerous. On and on it went. Personal trauma, absurdity and cruelty enacted.

The performance evoked powerful bodily surges of empathy. His pain that words can't describe hung heavy in the intimate space as the audience sat in stillness and silence. I winced as the vacuum cleaner described various failed suicide attempts. When it began to feel unbearable, and visitors were advised at the outset that it was OK to walk out, the vacuum cleaner played his favourite tunes on vinyl and introduced the purest black humour. On his attempt to hang himself the flex broke, ahhh, this is not my method he wryly concluded. The stocky ICD 1 male referred to in a police report: I call him Gavin. Towards the end he emptied a large cardboard box onto his bed. Out came hundreds of boxes of psychotropic and other mood stabilising drugs, plus drugs to counteract the drugs, etc., etc. The weight of the treatment regime left physical and metaphorical scars. On his back, scratched deep into his skin, a message to his tormentors.



This was an important albeit hard to swallow performance. The simple truths of Maslow's hierarchy shone through. We all require our basic needs to be met in order to grow. We need shelter, safety, food and relationships to sustain us. Only then we can heal and recover. All those concerned about the care of those who experience mental distress should heed the words of the vacuum cleaner and the Philadelphia Association: especially those responsible for cutting mental health services.

I Reviewed by Victoria Tischler PhD CPsychol *who is an independent research consultant*



Fascinating and salutary

Love and Mercy
Bill Pohld (Director)

Those of us of a certain age were lucky enough to live out our adolescence in the 1960s against a backdrop of some of the most exciting and creative periods of modern music. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Kinks, the Who and from America the Beach Boys provided us with a never-ending stream of what proved to be classic pop. The Beach Boys originally emerged singing jolly ditties about surf sunshine and girls in distinctive high falsetto harmonies, but in 1969 they changed tack and produced a much more serious collection of songs in a ground-breaking album, *Pet Sounds*. The record was critically acclaimed sold well in the UK but failed to sell in the USA.

This film is an account of the life of the creative force behind the group, Brian Wilson. It is set in two periods of his life. First around the

time of the making of *Pet Sounds* when the part of Brian is played by Paul Deno and 20 years later when his life is changed by meeting the woman who was to become his wife, when the part is played by John Cusack. It is this second period that forms the core of the film. After the lukewarm sales of *Pet Sounds* and despite the success of their greatest hit 'Good Vibrations' Brian Wilson spent more and more time isolated in the studio trying to produce a follow-up record 'Smile'. By this time he has become increasingly dependent on the drugs readily available in California at the time and reached a state when he had an inevitable mental breakdown to the extent that his paranoia led him to destroy the tapes of 'Smile'.

We meet him again in the 1980s when he is a pale



Creative ways to be less sad

How to Be Happy (or At Least Less Sad)
Lee Crutchley

You have to be severely myopic to have missed people's current insatiable appetite for wanting to feel good. People are hungry for happiness, ravenous in fact. It is no coincidence that rates of depression and general dissatisfaction with life are going through the proverbial roof. So, another self-help book that claims in the title to show us all how to be happy may be greeted with rolled eyes. However, Crutchley, an artist and author, has developed this 'creative workbook' not to be more happy, but rather less sad.

The book is a practical, light-hearted, fill-in-the-gaps approach, which does not overwhelm at first glance. He includes many common CBT, mindfulness and values-based exercises within the number-less pages (encouraging us to deal with uncertainty perhaps?), and bite-size chapters introduced by his own personal experiences of depression. The sparkle of this book comes from its being

peppered with unique, rather humorous exercises, challenging people to switch off the internet for the day and find analog versions of websites/apps e.g. Google = go to the library, do something spontaneous by only turning left on a walk, listen to an album you hate all day and find something that resonates with you.

Overall, this book brings a unique and creative angle on established techniques that may even inspire the most experienced clinician. However, this book leans more towards the internet generation, and as with any self-help book, it requires a level of self-motivation in order to 'dive in'. Nonetheless, it is a nice light twist to support people out of a seemingly dark hole.

I Ebury Press; 2015; Pb £8.99
Reviewed by Eleanor Parker who is a clinical psychologist with Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust

contribute

Sample titles just in:

Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource

Clay Routledge

The Science Inside the Child Play and the Human Condition

Thomas S. Hendricks

Art, Aesthetics and the Brain Joseph P. Huston, Marcos Nadal, Francisco Mora et al. (Eds.)

Children in Society: Politics, Policies and Interventions Craig Newnes (Ed.)

Psychology for Sustainability Britain A. Scott et al (Eds.)

Murdered Father, Dead Father: Revisiting the Oedipus Complex Rosine Jozef Perelberg

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jon.sutton@bps.org.uk **or on Twitter** @psychmag



shadow of his former self, heavily dependent on medication provided for him by his personal psychologist Dr Eugene Landy, played by Paul Giamatti. Dr Landy it appears controls all aspects of his life, provides him with bodyguards who monitor all aspects of his life, even to extent of vetting and ultimately intimidating the young woman, Malinda Ledbetter played by

Elizabeth Banks who he meets while buying a car. She immediately recognises that Brian is totally dependent upon and controlled by Landy. The film is essentially about their relationship and how she attempts to release Brian from the all-pervading influence of Landy whose role as psychologist appears to encompass, manager, financial

adviser and record producer.

The film successfully captures the hedonistic nature of the 1960s. The sequences recreating the recording of the music are fascinating and sound every bit as good as the original. In fact some of the scenes of the recording of *Pet Sounds* were filmed in the original studio.

To put it mildly, psychology does not come out of this film well. Dr Landy is portrayed as an evil genius who went to almost any length to manipulate and control his client. He appears motivated by sheer greed, be devoid of any ethical or professional standards whatsoever and was only exposed when he changed his client's will in his favour. We find out at the end of the film that Landy lost his licence to

practise as a psychologist in California once he was exposed. After seeing the film one wonders how on earth he continued to practise anywhere in the world, but apparently he did continue to work in New Mexico and Hawaii.

Films in which psychologists are depicted in a positive light are many: *Sixth Sense* (1999) and *Good Will Hunting* (1997) come to mind. It is rare to see our profession portrayed as such an evil influence as Landy. What makes it even more shocking is of course that the film is biographical. Dr Landy is not a monster created by Hammer House of Horror, but a real-life psychologist like you and me. It is salutary for us to acknowledge that for all the good that we perceive that we may bring to our work with clients young and old, members of our profession are capable of using their psychological skills for such evil means.

I Reviewed by Dr Jeremy Swinson who is an Educational Psychologist from Liverpool



Generous, genuine humour

The Brain Show
Robert Newman



You might remember Robert Newman as one quarter of *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* in the 1980s, or one half of *Baddiel & Newman* in the 90s – the first stand-up act to pack Wembley Stadium when comedy became the new rock'n'roll. He has been out of the limelight for a while, writing novels and becoming politically active in publicising concerns over climate change. Now he's back on Radio 4 with *Robert Newman's Entirely Accurate Encyclopaedia of Evolution*. The similarly titled book, *The Entirely Accurate Encyclopaedia of Evolution*, is published by Freight. He is currently touring his one man performance, *The Brain Show*.

A fast and furious journey, *The Brain Show* opens with an account of Robert Newman's experience as a research subject at University College London. He posits that the failure of the genome project to find direct correlates of human behaviour in our DNA has resulted in a shift of focus in this century, to bridging the gap between the physical hardware of the brain and the subjective experiences of our conscious mind. He skilfully takes apart the outlandish claims of researchers, for example, to have discovered particular

gender biases in macaques, and intelligently questions the experimental paradigms of neuroscience, appropriately sceptical about whether neuroimaging data can accurately correlate with subjective experiences such as love, guilt or wisdom.

A mesmerising storyteller, the point at which factual reporting blends into funny fairytale fiction is not always clear. His erudite and splenetic critiques of key neuroscientific papers had the audience spellbound in silence, until, acutely aware of the need to navigate away from the dangerous rocks of pomposity, he burst his own balloon with a self-deprecating punchline, a song, or a delightfully silly prop. Robert Newman would definitely jump on the clumsily mixed metaphors of this paragraph, and find a joke lurking there.

Riffing on Ramachandran and Baudelaire, we meet many of 'the greats' in this show – a thoroughly researched reverence for Charles Darwin is matched by a hilarious satire on Richard Dawkins's less charitable view of evolution. We are regaled with wicked impersonations of a raft of

celebrities including Brian Cox, Paul McCartney and Winston Churchill;

a story about Isaac Newton at the Fair; and a delightful set piece in which he personifies the Gulf Stream as an old girl getting pissed in a pub, grumbling about climate change. Even Sigmund Freud makes a brief cameo appearance, as do many wondrous creatures from the natural world, for example the Peruvian spider who fashions decoy spiders out of the debris of her prey.

A particularly rich seam was his retelling of the story of Phineas Gage, the case example beloved of many undergraduate psychologists. Shifting the perspective to Gage's own point of view, Newman cleverly mocked the scientific establishment's interpretation of his foul language as ensuing from frontal lobe damage, and constructed a much funnier, more down-to-earth, but equally plausible, version of why Gage behaved as he did. [Editor's note: For another hilarious take on Phineas Gage's day-to-day travails, see the chapter in comedian Rich Hall's *Things Snowball*.]

The threads of all these and more are woven into the rich

texture of the first half of Newman's set, which broadens out in the second half to concerns beyond the individual brain to critique the ideology of the selfish gene and make a case for cooperation and group selection. He pulls these torrents of ideas together with a couple of winsome songs accompanied by his ukulele, and a very funny personal anecdote for an encore.

Although the show is thick with complex ideas and wide-ranging references, the lucid delivery meant that my teenaged son enjoyed it as much as I did. Robert Newman strikes the perfect balance between scalpel-sharp analysis, romantic optimism and generous, genuine humour.

I *The Brain Show is touring until mid-December 2015, plays at the Soho Theatre in London from 11 to 23 January 2016, and then tours again throughout February – see www.robnewman.com/live.html Reviewed by Jenny Doe who is a clinical psychologist with East London Foundation Trust. See the online version of this review (<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/scalpel-sharp-analysis-brain-and-more>) for a Q+A with Robert Newman.*



And we all lived happily ever after?

The Happiness Illusion: How the Media Sold Us a Fairytale
Luke Hockley & Nadi Fadina (Eds.)

This slim, but densely packed volume is a collection of articles from the fields of media studies and psychotherapy. The authors argue that the media has tried to sell us the illusion of gaining happiness by acquiring products reputed to transform our lives. Yet in the West, antidepressant use is on the increase. The mass media have transformed the symbolism of fairytales into commodities to be sold. This has resulted in the loss of their ability to entertain and educate.

And even 'retail therapy' no longer holds a spell over us.

Given this situation, the book explores what actual sources of happiness are, in our societies. Focusing on different fairytales and their common themes (e.g. Snow White, the 'Happily Ever After' endings), the chapters discuss topics such as age, gender, marriage, reality TV and therapy, and how these are portrayed in the media, particularly on television. The conclusion is that we should just

be ourselves – 'warts and all' – to be truly happy, and not fall under the allure of the fanciful promises of modern-day television and advertising.

The book was indeed interesting, but at times I struggled with the complexity of the flow of narrative, and the terminology used. The in-depth focus on symbolism in some chapters could also be overwhelming. This may be more the failing of the reader, than the writers, with my own

limited background in media studies and analysis. With this in mind, I would recommend the book to academics and students in media studies. Those with a background in psychotherapy may also find it of interest. Overall, this is a very thought-provoking book, but perhaps not for those expecting a bit of a light read!

I *Routledge; 2015; Pb £29.99 Reviewed by Dr Kate Sparks who is a Chartered Psychologist*



An informative detailed summary

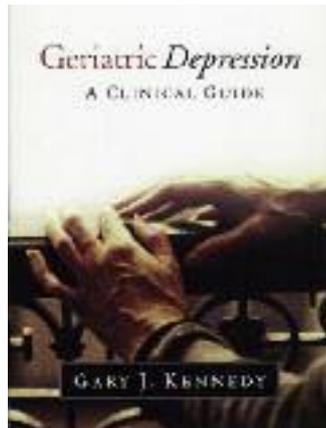
Geriatric Depression: A Clinical Guide
Gary J. Kennedy

When planning my review of this book I first asked myself what I would hope to gain from reading a book about geriatric depression. I settled on: an improved understanding of what is different about the aetiology of depression, response to psychotherapeutic interventions and impact of living with depression in this client population compare to others. I have to say I got all this and more!

There is indeed a comprehensive chapter entitled 'What Causes Depression in Late Life and What Makes It Difficult to Treat', which as well as acknowledging for example that older people are more likely to be living with a chronic physical illness and loss, also emphasises the possible impact of age-related changes to subcortical white matter that can both predispose an individual to depression in later life and make that depression harder to treat. Another chapter, 'Effective Psychotherapies', considers a range of therapies, provides a summary table of their distinguishing attributes and weighs the evidence supporting their use in an older adult population.

There is a comprehensive chapter entitled 'Reducing the Risk of Suicide in Later Life', which provides information about risk and

prevention of suicide. However, many studies quoted here are not restricted to a geriatric population and the emphasis on the use of firearms as a means is less pertinent to a UK population.



I found the 'Diet, Supplements, and Exercise' chapter particularly interesting; although psychologists do not traditionally provide advice on these topics, it includes some valuable information which could be usefully delivered as part of an understanding depression group to help participants consider the potential impact of these aspects of their lifestyle.

Regarding limitations of the book, the author is an American psychiatrist, so a chapter on 'Pharmacotherapy' is to be expected; this being of more relevance to prescribers than psychologists. Some UK studies are quoted but the majority are from the USA and at times this may be unhelpful, as previously mentioned. However, overall this is an informative book that is easy to read and provides a detailed summary of current knowledge in this area.

Guilford Press; 2015; Hb £26.99

Reviewed by Dr Claire Pond who is a clinical psychologist with South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust

See <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk> for more reviews, including *Spectre*; *The Father*; Professor Green's BBC3 documentary *Suicide and Me* with Professor Rory O'Connor; and Professor Mary Aiken on how her work inspired the major series *CSI: Cyber*.