THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE IS ME

A Memoir of Amnesia

DAVID STUART MACLEAN
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Discussion Questions

If you experienced a blackout similar to Maclean’s, what would be the best place you could possibly “come to?” What would be the worst?

Were you surprised to read that Maclean recognized things like English, what a passport was, that he should look for one, that he was in a foreign country, etc, when he first came to? What types of recollections are these, and how are they different from the things he did not know, like his identity or what had happened to him before he came to on the platform?

Maclean uses many descriptive elements from the world around him to mirror what is happening to him on the inside. After he comes to in the train station, he is led up a dizzying flight of stairs. How does this image reflect what was happening for him psychologically? What about the episode he describes on pages 23-25 where he is an old man in a house and he needs to say a line in order for his family to come out, but he can’t remember the line?

“It was like a phone number you’ve known your whole life. Get the first couple of digits, and everything else comes out like a train pulling freight.” What was Maclean hoping for when he thought about this? Many of Maclean’s hallucinations involved needing to say something or recite something. What do you think he was hoping he could do? Why was it so important for him to say something rather than do something?

Are there parts of your personality that you feel have been a part of you since birth? If you lost your memory tomorrow, would you still exhibit those personality traits? What traits would those inherent ones be? Are there other parts of you that you feel have been learned from life experience? What traits would those learned ones be?
Book review: ‘The Answer to the Riddle Is Me’ by David Stuart MacLean

By Lisa Bonos January 23, 2014

Lisa Bonos is Outlook’s assistant editor.

David Stuart MacLean’s troubles began about a decade ago on a train platform in India. “I have no idea who I am,” the 28-year-old MacLean said to a police officer. He couldn’t recall his name or even what country he was in.

The officer tried to calm MacLean, saying he saw this kind of thing all the time. “You foreigners come to my country and do your drugs and get confused. It will be all right, my friend.”

MacLean wasn’t on illicit drugs but rather a legal one prescribed by a doctor: an antimalarial medication called Lariam. He was having a rare adverse reaction — severe memory loss — and because he had no idea what was going on, he believed that this officer was right. “I didn’t have a name, but I now knew what kind of person I was,” MacLean writes in his harrowing memoir of forgetting, “The Answer to the Riddle Is Me.”

While he was at a police guesthouse, images of events that never happened sprang to his mind: He saw himself doing heroin and “whatever else we could find” in a dingy apartment with a redhead named Christina. At the officer’s urging, MacLean e-mailed his parents, apologizing for taking drugs and promising to “be a better son and earn your respect back.”

"The Answer to the Riddle is Me" by David S. MacLean. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

Then he was admitted to a mental institution, where he was strapped down and doped up. He hallucinated that Jim Henson was in his room, offering him a riddle that held the key to getting out of this mess. A little later, his parents arrived from Ohio and tried to help their son fill in the gaps in his memory: You’re not an addict but a writer, they told him, and you’re in India on a Fulbright, doing research for a novel. They were going to take him home, where Sally and Anne would be excited to see him. He would be excited to see them, too, he said, “whoever the hell they were”; the names of his dog and his girlfriend failed to ring a bell.
Later, back at his apartment in India, which felt foreign to him, he tried not just to recover the past but also to keep the present from slipping away. Obsessively snapping photos, he figured that “if I lost everything again, I’d be up-to-date.”

This fear of relapse persists throughout the book and is perhaps the most frightening part of MacLean’s predicament. What if, after all this work to cobble himself back together, he would have to do it all over again? “Each moment of happiness was now prey to melancholy,” he writes. “What use was a specific moment of happiness if it couldn’t be recalled, exhumed from the gray matter of the brain to relive the happiness?”

As MacLean returns to India to finish up his Fulbright and then moves back to New Mexico to finish grad school, his memory does get progressively better, but in fragments rather than as a panorama. For example, when his father gives him a CD of a country show that MacLean had hosted on a student radio station, MacLean feels no kinship with his on-air persona — “It was this person who was supposed to be me”— but he can remember the lyrics of songs he played. Similarly, he doesn’t recognize a picture of a close friend he once lived with but can vividly remember the two of them dancing at a wedding.

In much of his reconstructed life, he seems to be an actor in a play in which everybody else knows the lines but him. He tells his girlfriend, Anne, he loves her — not because he feels deeply connected to her, but because she seems to love him and he gathers that, before his memory loss, he felt similarly. Rather than recognizing people when he sees them, he has to “learn to recognize people recognizing me.”

While much of MacLean’s writing is piercing in its directness and economy, it occasionally veers into metaphor overload: At one point MacLean fancies himself a “wood-glued piñata,” at another a “newly stitched-together doll of myself”; later he’s “scooped out like a jack-o-lantern” and so on. It’s no surprise that he seeks solace in cigarettes and alcohol, and feels suicidal as early as Page 18.

But this is more than the tale of one man’s depression. MacLean deftly weaves in a history of malaria, the drugs developed to treat it and their wrenching side effects — from hallucinations to anxiety and depression. He notes that Lariam (or its generic, mefloquine) has been given to detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, an area not prone to malaria, in a tactic that has been called “pharmaceutical waterboarding.” A former Army epidemiologist has said that it’s “becoming the ‘Agent Orange’ of this generation.” And even though the U.S. Army has stopped prescribing mefloquine for Special Forces troops in malaria-prone areas, a recent news report says it’s the third-choice option for other parts of the military.

However dark at points, MacLean’s account of his struggle to piece his life back together brings up a host of questions: How much of your sense of self stems from your experiences, and how much is it influenced by others’ ideas of who you are? And if pieces of your past started to disappear, how would that change your future?

Lisa Bonos is Outlook’s assistant editor.

A Writer Recalls His Amnesia

‘The Answer to the Riddle Is Me,’ a Debut, Takes On Memory Loss

FEB. 17, 2014

David Stuart MacLean’s first book, “The Answer to the Riddle Is Me,” opens with a scene out of Robert Ludlum: The protagonist wakes from a blackout to find himself on a crowded train platform in India, with no idea who he is or what he’s doing in a foreign country.

The catch is that the protagonist is Mr. MacLean himself, and his book isn’t an international thriller but a “memoir of amnesia,” as his agreeably paradoxical subtitle puts it — the true story of how his memory was wiped clean and how that condition has subsequently affected his life. It is all the more thrilling for that.

In 2002, Mr. MacLean was a 28-year-old Fulbright scholar visiting India to research a novel. It wasn’t his first trip; he had gone a few years earlier and stayed for months. But this time around, his anti-malaria medication touched off a break with reality as sudden as it was severe.

For David Stuart MacLean, anti-malaria medication touched off a break with reality. Credit: Heather Eidson Photography
He hallucinated angels and demons, and felt his thoughts “puddling in the carpet near the doorway and sloshing down the hall.” Delirious, he agreed with the police officer who surmised he must be a drug addict, and apologized profusely for misdeeds he had never committed. At the hospital, a nurse called him “the most entertaining psychotic that they’d ever had.”

As harrowing as this territory is, Mr. MacLean makes an affable, sure-footed guide. In his descriptions, you can recognize the good fiction writer he must have been even before amnesia forced him to view the world anew; if the writer’s task is to “make it new,” then losing your memory turns out to be an unexpected boon.

An avid drinker before his breakdown, he recoils the first time he tries Scotch again, thinking it smells “like Band-Aids.” He can’t remember his girlfriend of a year, but her voice is “faintly familiar, like the smell of the car heater the first time you turn it on in the fall.” He grasps at hope when his parents arrive to take him home: “I still didn’t have my memory, but I now had an outline of myself, like a tin form waiting for batter.”

Such flourishes can seem overly articulate — with unbalanced narrators as with child narrators, too much sophistication risks sounding inauthentic. But you give Mr. MacLean the benefit of the doubt, both because he is writing long after his faculties have returned and because that nurse was right: He is an exceedingly entertaining psychotic.

He proves to be a gifted science writer as well, although he dwells more on the brute mechanics of his amnesia than its implications. We get a lot of interesting, and scary, information about the anti-malaria drug Lariam, but not much about how memory works, or its role in self-identity.

Is personality innate or shaped by experience, or both? If by experience, whom do we become when our memories of that experience are stripped away? And how might amnesia itself alter one’s identity going forward? Mr. MacLean raises these questions mostly by inference, and then only as they relate to his specific case.

But the inference is enough. As he recovers at his childhood home in Ohio, then returns to India, he tries to fill in that outline of himself, and the effort becomes his central story. He pores through old photos, and reads the notes he jotted in books he doesn’t remember reading. “It appeared that I was always trying to decipher something,” he discovers, “even before I was insane.”

He rereads his emails leading up to the blackout, and like an Alzheimer’s patient or con man, he fakes familiarity with people on the street. “I still felt like I was chasing myself,” he says, “hoping that I could reconstruct enough of a working resemblance to that old self to slip back into. It was like building a plane while flying it.”

Some of what he learns is disconcerting. Old friends and professors assume he has staged his amnesia as a hoax; apparently, he was known for hiding his emotions behind elaborate pranks.

Meanwhile, he realizes he has no strong feelings for the girlfriend who shows up to dote on him. “It seemed like I was always pulling away from women who liked me,” he says, before vowing to change. But reinventing yourself turns out to be not so easy, even with a seemingly blank slate.
Gradually, he does regain his identity, although the amnesia haunts him like a hangover long afterward. He has suicidal thoughts and deals with his anxiety by smoking and drinking too much. “Continuing on in the world of the sane,” he writes, “is harder than you thought.”

Near the end of the book, Mr. MacLean acknowledges with amused resignation that his story “was most real to others when I talked about pop culture.” His experience was not like that of Geena Davis in “The Long Kiss Goodnight,” discovering a secret talent for cooking, or Guy Pearce in “Memento,” deciphering tattoos to solve the riddle of himself, he says, adding, “It’s not like Matt Damon in ‘The Bourne Identity’ waking up in an ocean, either.”

The riff is funny, but this late in the narrative it’s also unnecessary: Thanks to his raw, honest and beautiful memoir, readers will already have a clear idea what his experience was like. We can be grateful Mr. MacLean has remembered so much, and so well.


http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/18/health/the-answer-to-the-riddle-is-me-a-debut-takes-on-memory-loss.html
Where Was I? ‘The Answer to the Riddle Is Me’ and ‘I Forgot to Remember’

New York Times Sunday Book Review

By SALLY L. SATEL, M.D. FEB. 14, 2014

A memoir of amnesia is a paradox. To write an autobiography, one must be able to consult one’s past. But what happens when that history is obliterated? The experience of such loss and the hard-won reclamation of identity form the bases of two new books. One is by a young man whose amnesia was a side effect of a prescribed medication. The other is by a young woman who sustained a devastating head wound.

On Oct. 17, 2002, David Stuart MacLean, an American graduate student on a Fulbright fellowship, wandered dazed and frightened on a train platform in Hyderabad, India. “I couldn’t even think of what name would have been on a passport if I had one or what foreign country I was currently in,” he writes. A police officer helped get him to a hospital, where he was treated for psychosis. Only after being discharged did he learn that he was suffering from a disastrous reaction to the anti-malaria pill Lariam.

Most people can take the medication without a problem, but some experience disturbing nightmares or depression. MacLean, however, suffered weeks of persecutory delusions, hallucinations and bizarre sensory distortions. “The Answer to the Riddle Is Me” is his vivid reflection on the 10 years following the Lariam-induced break with reality and the memory problems that persisted in its wake.

Credit Jon Krause
Thankfully, the author could take in and store new information, but his cache of pre-Larium memories was depleted for many months. There were a handful of exceptions: When his frantic parents rushed to his bedside in India from their home in Ohio, he knew who they were. “Some motor in my brain spun and sparked a blue arc of electricity between two exiled neurons and pow: recognition. . . . They were my parents. They looked like hell.”

For the most part, though, MacLean reconstituted himself by interviewing family and friends about his former self. He learned that he had a reputation as being tightly wound and that he loved practical jokes. He was a D.J. in college. (“There was a crazy person bellowing and talking nonsense between the songs,” he observed as he listened to himself on a tape of one of his old radio shows.) He found photos of himself and mimicked his own poses. Not until he read his Fulbright application did he learn what his own research project was about: the grammar of local Indian populations when they spoke English.

He strove to fit in. “I let the other person lead the conversation, and I agreed with whatever was said,” he writes. “It was like having a conversation when your face is full of new stitches and you have to be careful not to split any of them with your emotions. I was a newly stitched together doll myself and thanks to the Oleanz and Ativan, full of cotton batting.”

The book comprises short chapters of one to several pages, presumably to reflect the staccato-like manner in which memories returned. Swaths of cultural and biological history of malaria are woven throughout. Lariam, we learn, was developed by the American Army in the 1970s; concerns about its safety arose in the 1990s after reports emerged about unprovoked violence and suicides among servicemen.

MacLean ends on a redemptive note. One day he and his girlfriend came upon a motorcycle accident. As he rushed to help, he recalled how generous local people took care of him when he lost himself in a train station on the other side of the world. “In the chaos of the world, where we carom and collide in the everyday turbulence,” he writes, “there’s something about the specific gravity of the helpless individual, the lost and the fractured, that draws kindness from us, like venom from a wound.”

Unlike MacLean, who spent years trying to reclaim his former self, Su Meck, who was 22 when she was hit by a kitchen fan that fell from her ceiling, has spent the last two decades trying to inhabit a completely new person. Her near-fatal head wound led to complete retrograde amnesia — all her memories had been permanently wiped. For some time after the accident, she also suffered from anterograde amnesia, the inability to form new memories.

Her understated book, “I Forgot to Remember,” is more an account than a memoir. The matter-of-fact delivery makes the harrowing details of her ordeal stand out all the more.

Incredibly, doctors and rehab therapists pronounced Meck fit to leave the hospital after three weeks even though she did not recognize her two young sons and the man, Jim, who called himself her husband. (“Jim was assigned to me,” she writes. “I never really had a say.”) She returned to her house in Fort Worth, Tex., but it could have belonged to a stranger. In a sense, it did. “I was born into a life already in progress,” she says.
Meck had to relearn everything, starting with how to tie her shoes — a lesson from her preschooler. As her boys learned to read, tell time, draw letters, add and subtract, so did she. She studied other people intently so she could mimic their behavior. Upon discovering she would be a mother again her reaction was: “Gross! There is someone living and growing inside of me!”

In her early 40s, at the urging of relatives, Meck enrolled in college. She doubted her ability to read and write well enough, but her remarkable grit enabled her to obtain an associate degree in music, and she is working on a bachelor’s degree. “For years, I had nothing to long for,” she writes. “I had no neglected hobbies, no dormant talents, no dreams that I knew about. I existed for the sole purpose of serving my husband and children.”

Her universe has now expanded to serving others. Meck expressly wrote the book to show what traumatic brain injury is like. Her message to families is to be patient and to maintain realistic expectations, and never to accuse the injured person of faking symptoms or being intentionally difficult, as she was by her husband and, appallingly, her doctors. Despite her obvious and devastating neurological symptoms, specialists wondered if she was imagining everything because they could find nothing wrong on her brain scans (imaging techniques are more refined today).

Meck winces at the thought of other head injury patients who received such bogus diagnoses but, unlike her, simply gave up. As for her husband, had Jim Meck been better informed of his wife’s limitations, perhaps he would have been more supportive and less inclined to take refuge, as she says he did for years, in a double life of strippers and mounting debt.

Both books are tales of triumph in the search for identity. But there are striking differences as well — MacLean slowly regained his memories and original self. Meck, in comparison, was shattered; she had to etch a life onto an entirely new slate. MacLean was surrounded by supportive souls. Meck was abandoned, clinically and emotionally. One author, a writer by trade, tells his story because it is a good one: dramatic and unique. The other tells a story, no less arresting, because she has a point to make. Both succeed impressively.

THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE IS ME
A Memoir of Amnesia
By David Stuart MacLean

I FORGOT TO REMEMBER
A Memoir of Amnesia
By Su Meck with Daniel de Visé

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/books/review/the-answer-to-the-riddle-is-me-and-i-forgot-to-remember.html?_r=1
Health, Mind and Memory: An interview with author David MacLean

by Heidi Siegrist | May 19, 2014

“I sometimes make the glib joke that the worst thing that can happen to a writer is a diagnosis. It narrows your vision.”

This is the writer David MacLean, who recently published the memoir The Answer to the Riddle is Me. In 2002, while researching a novel in India on a Fulbright Scholarship, MacLean came down with a fever, lost consciousness, and came to in a train station days later with no memory of who he was. It took him years to regain his memory, rebuild his identity, and puzzle out the causes and effects of his brush with amnesia.

We spoke with him about how the experience affected his writing and his view of health and medicine.

A Complex Genre

“As a writer writing about health, I’m just trying to broaden my idea of what can fall into a piece of writing,” MacLean says. “Often, when we have an end result like a diagnosis, we try to make all the data in our lives up until that point fit the end result. But that doesn’t reflect our whole experience in life.”

He approached The Answer to the Riddle is Me as a fusion between science writing, philosophy and autobiography: a fascinating experiment in creative nonfiction. MacLean calls it “a memoir of amnesia.”

Writing his story and interacting with doctors and scientists gave him a lasting awe of the complexity and fragility of the human brain:

“It’s incredible—not only that we are who we are, but that we continue to be who we are.”

Finding A Cause

At first, well-meaning officials in India assumed that MacLean’s amnesia had been caused by drug use, but by the time he was recovered by his family and brought to his hometown hospital in Ohio, the culprit was identified as something much more interesting: mefloquine intoxication resulting from Larium, the anti-malarial drug MacLean had been prescribed.

Now, he says that while researching Larium for his book, studying its dangers and its benefits, it was hard to remain objective:

“When does anecdotal evidence get factored into the equation in medicine? The anecdotal evidence of today is sometimes the empirical science of tomorrow, but not always. That’s a frustrating thing for patients.”
Initially, Larium wasn’t closely monitored for possible psychological effects. But, while rare, several cases of psychiatric problems were reported in patients taking Larium, and awareness and research around the drug began to grow. Even now, however, it’s unclear how often the drug causes psychological issues, or for whom. The drug now carries a “black box warning,” but it’s still prescribed for travelers.

**Facing the Unknown**

“That’s just a part of science,” MacLean says now. “Consider Thalidomide—it was a morning sickness drug that resulted in birth defects. You don’t always know exactly how something works, why it works, or what its best uses are.”

This calmness might be surprising given that MacLean’s life was completely interrupted by what was supposed to be a drug to protect him, but like any good memoirist, he’s reflected on the issue in depth.

“We have to be aware of the chemicals that we’re putting into our body, but not terrified.” He feels that learning how to take control of our health and embrace modern medicine without fearing the unknown is ultimately a grand experiment. “In a way, we’re all guinea pigs.”

**A Fresh Start**

After he recovered from the effects of Larium, MacLean took advantage of the opportunity for a fresh start. “Getting health insurance helped me take charge of my psychological well being. That’s without a doubt the first step to functioning healthcare. I got more involved in self-care, stopped smoking, and started exercising and drinking more water.”

He says he’s now more attuned to the extent to which our physical states affect our mental states:

“I recognize more now that moods are transitory, and mental states are impermanent. If I’m feeling anxious, I know that I can go out, run three miles, and feel radically different.”

While a diagnosis may be narrow, our experiences with health are deep, and they have the power to expand our vision in surprising ways. *The Answer to the Riddle is Me* is not a book about mefloquine poisoning, the validity of anecdotal evidence in medicine, or even MacLean’s experience as a psychiatric patient; it’s about the nature of memory and the things that make up our identity as people. Our health, and our roles as patients, simply factor in.

*The Answer to the Riddle is Me* has received glowing reviews in the *Chicago Tribune* and coverage on *This American Life*.

https://humanpractice.com/blog/posts/health-mind-memory
Your book _The Answer to the Riddle is Me_ is subtitled “A Memoir of Amnesia.” Isn’t that a contradiction?

Yes and no. On the surface, it has the pleasing allure of an oxymoron. But deeper in, one of the things I remember best in my life is the time when I had no memory. My brain was stripped and open to sensory data. I think most of my life I treat life like triage as I move from errand to errand, chore to chore. These errands and chores create in my brain a hierarchy of the data I take in, things that aren’t associated with whatever task at hand get winnowed out of my consciousness. When I woke up on the train platform in India, I had no narrative, no chore, no task at hand, and so the sensory data I was receiving wasn’t ranked by any hierarchy. It flattened the world so that all data was of similar importance. The birds in the rafters were as important as the train in front of me. This feeling haunts me. It has made me aware of how much of the world I miss on a daily basis. In some ways I remember the feeling of no memory better than I remember anything else.

Your book came out of an essay. Can you talk about the difference between the essay and the memoir as forms?

The essay has a distance built into its structure. Essays are considerations of life. And because of this there’s a kind of lovely play between rhetoric and event. Vivian Gornick says that what’s remarkable about Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” is that it’s an essay about rage but the tone isn’t enraged. There’s a tonal space between the events and the narrator. In the essay the narrator doesn’t grow so much as the character that the narrator presents of herself grows (presumably into the person writing the essay). In memoir, the emphasis is more on the mimetic visceral ummmpph of the experience. In the essay version, I told my readers about my experience. In the memoir, I wanted them to feel it. I wanted the book to be disorienting and terrifying. I didn’t want there to be a safe remove.

But there is a safe remove. There are the sections where you investigate the science and history behind the malarial prophylaxis, Lariam, that was the result of your amnesia and hallucinations.

That’s true, but I also feel like I leave the door open at the end about whether or not Lariam was the true culprit. Because that’s how I feel now. I know a lot about Lariam and malaria as a result of the research I did for this book and it is the leading theory as to why what happened to me happened to me, but it’s a theory. I think the worst thing that can happen to a writer is a clear diagnosis. Diagnoses winnow away possibility and eliminate any data that doesn’t correspond to the diagnosis. A good non-fiction writer allows the play between experience and diagnosed condition. It’s the data that doesn’t fit the diagnosis that makes the writer idiosyncratic.

You come off as fairly unlikeable in the book (you cheat on girlfriends, you’re selfish, you’re accused of misogyny until your mother corrects that conception and tells you that
you’re a full-fledged misanthrope, you drink and drive, you do things that seem to work against a healthy recovery.) Are you this unlikeable in life and if not why tell the story this way?

I don’t know if I’m unlikeable in real life. But I made a concerted effort to focus on the bad decisions, bad aspects of my personality in the book. I woke up in a train station with no idea who I was. The policeman who found me told me I was a drug addict. He took me to a guest house that was run by a woman who had lost her son to an overdose and they did a mini-intervention on me. When I started to hallucinate, all of my visions were ones where I was a failure. Again and again, a failure. When my parents did show up to get me, I thought they were hiding my sins from me. I was convinced I did horrible things in the world and with that mind set, I sought out evidence of my wrong-doings. So the events the reader gets in the book are filtered through a pretty unreliable narrator.

You write a pretty damning history of Lariam. Do you get people coming up to you with their own stories about the drug?

All the time. It kind of makes me realize that I got off easy. There’s been a lot of suicides on that drug.

Do you still have your dog Sally?

Yes. She’s 14 years old now and about 85 percent furniture. My daughter uses her as a trash compactor/bean bag.

Are you working on another book?

Yes. But I’m always suspicious when people talk about their books in progress. It’s like listening to a five year old tell you about his dream. You get about half that seems real and half that you know the kid is making up on the spot. Having said that my next book is about failure.

So another uplifting book?

It’s funny though. Hilarious failure.