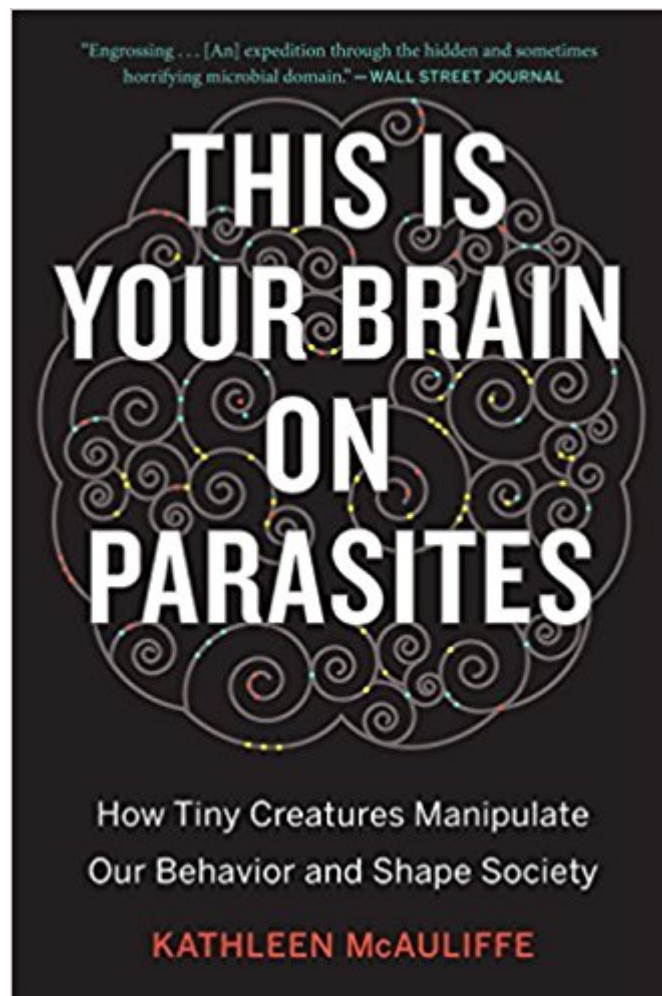




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# This Is Your Brain On Parasites: How Tiny Creatures Manipulate Our Behavior And Shape Society



## Synopsis

“Engrossing [An] expedition through the hidden and sometimes horrifying microbial domain.” • Wall Street Journal “Fascinating” • and full of the kind of factoids you can’t wait to share.” • Scientific American “Parasites can live only inside another animal and, as Kathleen McAuliffe reveals, these tiny organisms have many evolutionary motives for manipulating the behavior of their hosts. With astonishing precision, parasites can coax rats to approach cats, spiders to transform the patterns of their webs, and fish to draw the attention of birds that then swoop down to feast on them. We humans are hardly immune to their influence. Organisms we pick up from our own pets are strongly suspected of changing our personality traits and contributing to recklessness and impulsivity—even suicide. Germs that cause colds and the flu may alter our behavior even before symptoms become apparent. “Parasites influence our species on the cultural level, too. Drawing on a huge body of research, McAuliffe argues that our dread of contamination is an evolved defense against parasites. The horror and revulsion we are programmed to feel when we come in contact with people who appear diseased or dirty helped pave the way for civilization, but may also be the basis for major divisions in societies that persist to this day. This Is Your Brain on Parasites is both a journey into cutting-edge science and a revelatory examination of what it means to be human. “If you’ve ever doubted the power of microbes to shape society and offer us a grander view of life, read on and find yourself duly impressed.” • Heather Havrilesky, Bookforum “

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of June 2016: Have you heard the one about the wasp that turns cockroaches into living food trucks for its larvae? How about the schizophrenia-inducing parasite that lives in your cat's litter box, literally altering human brain chemistry to its own inscrutable ends? If not, you have a choice to make: to immediately read or assiduously avoid Kathleen McAuliffe's *This Is Your Brain on Parasites: How Tiny Creatures Manipulate Our Behavior and Shape Society*. McAuliffe, author of The Atlantic article "How Your Cat Is Making You Crazy," surveys a horrorshow universe of microscopic maladies and the strangely specific ways they use us, including the shapes of our civilizations and beliefs. Highly original, thought-provoking and compellingly cringe-inducing; you should choose to read it. --Jon Foro, The Book Review --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"If you've ever doubted the power of microbes to shape society and offer us a grander view of life, read on and find yourself duly impressed."-BookForum "A fascinating account of an extraordinary suite of biological phenomena, only recently come to light and proving that given enough time and enough evolving species to work with, natural selection can accomplish almost anything."-Edward O. Wilson, Professor Emeritus, Harvard University, author of *Consilience*. "This book has all the elements of a crime thriller: violence, blood, gore, race and sex. But here the criminals are parasites. McAuliffe tells a vivid and sometimes horrifying tale of the hijackers that control our brains and our behaviour. In company with the best science writers, she shows us that reality can be way more interesting than fiction."-Valerie Curtis, Director of the Environmental Health Group of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and author of *Don't Look, Don't Touch, Don't Eat* "Be prepared to throw away all your preconceptions about the order of life. Humorous, inspiring and macabre this is infectious reading in the tradition of giants like Robert S. Desowitz and Jared Diamond."-Michael A Huffman, associate professor, Primate Research Institute, Kyoto University "From start to finish, [McAuliffe] spins a consistently engrossing tale of invasive creatures that can alter your behavior and outlook, depress your cognitive functioning, and even make you more violent or sexually aggressive." -- Heather Havrilesky, Book Forum --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

McAuliffe's article on toxoplasmosis in the 2012 Atlantic "How Your Cat is Making You Crazy" is probably the reason for the word parasites in the title,

but the subtitle, *How Tiny Creatures Manipulate Our Behavior and Shape Society*, is a more accurate portrayal of the topic of this excellent book. For example, the human gut microbiota (think probiotics) are well covered in this book, but they are certainly not parasites. McAuliffe does a great job of introducing the reader to the major advances in this field. We meet a number of the scientists involved and learn about their findings. What is well accepting, what is still being studied, and what is controversial are clearly presented as such. The book is well footnoted, so you can look the research up yourself online. Here's an overview of the chapters:

- 1 The beginning of the study of parasites and microbes effecting the behavior of animals and humans.
- 2 Malaria and other insect carried disease. Focusing on manipulations that get parasites where they need to go to survive.
- 3 More manipulations, including caffeine in flower nectar to manipulate bees.
- 4 Toxoplasma and humans. A look at what can happen when parasites get into the wrong host.
- 5 Rabies; toxocara (roundworms), and other parasites that effect our essential sense of self.
- 6 our moods, appetites, behaviors, and reasoning abilities.
- 7 Gut microbiota. Manipulations that are beneficial, mostly.
- 8 How gut microbiota effect our weight.
- 9 Behavioral immunity.
- 10 things animals and humans instinctively do to heal our wounds and protect us from parasites.
- 11 How the emotion of disgust helps protect us from parasites and disease.
- 12 The relationship between disgust and prejudice.
- 13 The relationship between disgust, religion, and politics.
- 14 Maybe we've underestimated parasites.
- 15 political clout. Maybe they permeate our entire worldview. Maybe geopolitics should be taught from a parasite's point of view.
- 16 Really. A look at how the prevalence of parasites and disease effects culture.

Some new and interesting research is presented here in a enjoyable (yes, really) manner. I would note that I have read several books and a number of research papers on gut microbiota, but McAuliffe still came up with very interesting research that I was unaware of. This book offers a lot to think about with far reaching impacts on our personal health and the state of the world.

For devotees of popular science this is a category to which I most definitely belong. Kathleen McAuliffe's *This Is Your Brain on Parasites* is a real treasure. From its title, which is obviously a take-off on the "this is your brain on drugs" advertising campaign, all the way to

extensive end-notes, this book is a lively, engaging and thoroughly informative read. McAuliffe surveys current cutting-edge research linking the impact of various parasites not only on the physical health and well-being of their hosts, but also on psychological functioning as well as social and cultural developments. She discusses the entire spectrum of parasitic infestation from those in the interior like protozoa or tapeworms to those on the outside like ticks and leeches. Some of the studies she cites include ones with which I was already familiar like the jewel wasp which turns a cockroach into a zombie as a living food source for her larva, or the molecule that can change a rat's protective aversion to the smell of cat urine into attraction. Many other examples, however, were fascinatingly new, and extremely cogent. In my opinion, one of the hallmarks of an extremely worthwhile discussion of various aspects of science is one's tendency when encountering new concepts to think, "But of course! This is so obvious! It explains everything! Why didn't somebody think of it before?" In other words, it's that "Eureka!" moment when puzzle pieces fall into place with a sense of complete illumination. Indeed, the most delightful aspect of McAuliffe's exquisite book is that she perfectly conveys this exact sense of delight not only on the part of the scientists making the discoveries she describes, but also on her own part as she interacts with them personally and synthesizes their discoveries in her own narrative.

This book set me on the path to looking at the world in a different way: an unabashedly parasite-centric way. We are more microbe than humans! Some of our unconscious may be controlled by pathogens! Gut microbiome influences our brains, behaviors, and even personality!! Do you know how? Well... you can read it yourself. Save for anthelmintic, how parasites affect you? Are you happy to have high standards of hygiene? What do you think about the stomach churning emotion, disgust: visceral vs moral disgust? How politicians harness disgust sensitivity? How about Hillary Clinton's extended bathroom break during a Democratic primary debate? Do you wonder about whether you have the larger anterior insula relative to total brain size? Do you want to get the answers? Read it yourself. Remember the following tips: (1) eat vegetables that have been scrubbed thoroughly; (2) wear gloves while gardening; (3) cook meat well or, if you prefer it rare, freeze it first to kill the microbe's cysts. *Toxoplasma gondii* produces thick-walled cysts in the animal's muscle. Ectoparasites and microscopic parasites may exist anywhere around you... and jeopardize you, your partner, and your offsprings.... So go get the book and read it yourself! Don't worry. I bet you will totally lose track of the time while reading. You will

find yourself indulged in this a wee bit provocative topics. Well-written and very informative. I highly recommend this one to you.

I'm not a science person, my college biology grades will attest to that. But I read this book as greedily as I might a page-turner novel. Her enthusiasm for the topic along with her ability to weave an exciting tale make for an excellent read. As a mental health therapist by profession, I found the psychological, sociological and cultural issues and their relationship to parasites fascinating. I just finished the book and was disappointed to discover the author doesn't have more books for purchase!

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