

The Reviewers

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Review Subject

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Memory from A to Z: Keywords, Concepts and Beyond

Yadin Dudai

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Edgar Allen Poe said that the optimal length of a piece of writing should be such that it can be comfortably read and digested in a single sitting (Poe, 1846). Poe was, of course, writing in a more leisurely age when an educated reader could be expected to plough through several pages of text before needing to pause and recuperate. Many modern students are so culturally attuned to the TV remote control, rather than to the slim octavo, that even serious textbooks by earnest authors tend nowadays to be divided into bite-sized chunks and boxes. The average *Reference Reviews* book review is as much as most of us are expected to be able to manage to read at one go without taking a break.

Yadin Dudai, a highly respected neuroscientist, has attempted to follow Poe's dictum strictly in this extraordinary book. He has managed to write a series of 140 miniature essays, arranged in strict alphabetical order, covering the whole range of the scientific study of memory and related areas of study. A tableful of clinical psychologists in the Maudsley Hospital canteen greeted the book with delight, and could not come up with any serious omissions except, tentatively, the need for more discussion on the role of sleep than is found in the entry on "State-dependent learning". Each entry consists of two or three brief definitions, followed by a couple of pages of text, packed with information, and a few selected associative terms to broaden the reader's ideas. The arbitrariness of alphabetical order

means that the cross-referencing has to be very thorough. The only error in this that I have been able to find is a cross-reference to LTP that should have been to long-term potentiation. The bibliographic references scattered through the text are collected into a formidable 66-page bibliography on memory at the end.

Most of the entries are crammed with serious scientific information, though Dudai's bubbling sense of humour breaks through on occasions. Scoopophobia - the fear of being scooped by a scientific rival - is a neologism that would have made Dr Johnson shudder. Inevitably the book is not self-sufficient. General readers without a background in the neurosciences would need to supplement this with a good psychological dictionary at least.

In spite of its alphabetical arrangement this is not really a reference library book, in the sense of being a dictionary or an encyclopaedia. Nevertheless I would recommend it strongly. All academic libraries catering for courses in psychology, psychiatry or the neurosciences should seriously consider acquiring a copy for their lending stock. Memory is not really a hot topic in terms of current popular psychology, but public libraries interested in furthering their readers' scientific education may also find the approach here more accessible than that of some standard textbooks in the field.