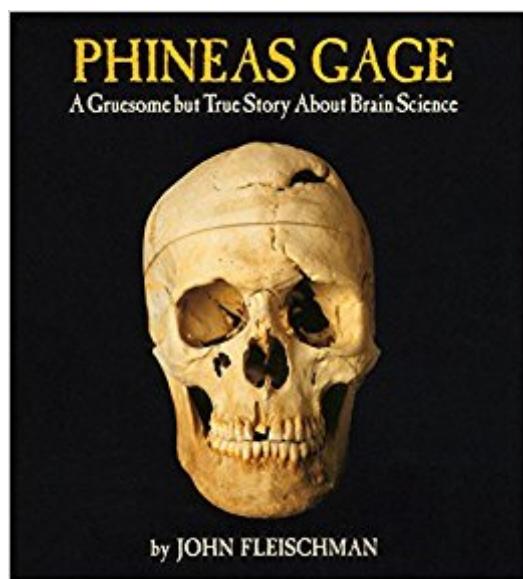


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# Phineas Gage: A Gruesome But True Story About Brain Science



## **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**

Science writer John Fleischman uses a clipped, engaging expository style to tell the incredible story of the railroad worker who, in 1848, survived the piercing blast of a 13-pound iron rod as it entered below his cheekbone and exited the front of his skull in *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science*. Photographs, glossary, a resource listing and index lend this textbook case the same sense of immediacy as do the words. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Gr 5 Up-The fascinating story of the construction foreman who survived for 10 years after a 13-pound iron rod shot through his brain. Fleischman relates Gage's "horrible accident" and the subsequent events in the present tense, giving immediacy to the text. He avoids sensationalizing by letting the events themselves carry the impact. The straightforward description of Gage calmly chatting on a porch 30 minutes after the accident, for example, comes across as horrifying and amazing. The author presents scientific background in a conversational style and jumps enthusiastically into such related topics as phrenology, 19th-century medical practices, and the history of microbiology. He shows how Gage's misfortune actually played an intriguing and important role in the development of our knowledge of the brain. The present-tense narrative may cause occasional confusion, since it spans several time periods and dates are not always immediately apparent from the text. Illustrations include historical photographs; one showing the iron bar posed dramatically next to Gage's skull is particularly impressive. Other photos and diagrams help explain the workings of the brain. The work of Gage expert Malcolm Macmillan, cited in the list of resources, seems the likely main source for the quotes and details of Gage's life, but this is not clearly spelled out in the text or appendixes. Like Penny Colman's *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts* (Holt, 1997) and James M. Deem's *Bodies from the Bog* (Houghton, 1998), *Phineas Gage* brings a scientific viewpoint to a topic that will be delightfully gruesome to many readers. Steven Engelfried, Beaverton City Library, ORCopyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

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.

I purchased this to help get my 13 year old daughter become more engaged with science. She typically eschews all things science but this actually captivated her from page one. It's style is dramatic and engaging. I've been familiar with the Phineas Gage story from my undergrad years and even I was drawn in.

I really loved how the book had multiple perspectives and how it had detailed charts and pictures! It was a big help while studying for the 7th grade final! We were focusing on brain sciences so this

book pretty much gave me a case and I pretty much learned every bit of the case of Mr. P. Gage! It is truly a gruesome but true story!

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

Mind blowing. Studied this in psychology 101 25 years ago and now my some 12 read this for his summer easing. What's up with summer homework for kids now a days?

This story is an entertaining and informative essay about how brain's anatomy and physiology and general medicine was understood in the past and how they have evolved to the present stage using the singular Phineas Gage's case as a typical partial lobotomy case.

When I first saw this book, I was pretty hesitant of choosing it for my summer reading. Because who wants to read a book on brain science!? But somehow I chose it. And loving every little bit about it! (Coming from someone who hated reading) And not only that, I got to finish my book report! I recommend the book to anyone who enjoys reading, if you need to do a book report, and medical. Because the book shows a lot of brain science and I found it very cool!

It's only about a half-hour's worth of reading for an adult, and it's written in language that most adults will find smarmy. Nevertheless, the introduction this book offers to the current state of knowledge about the human brain may well come as news to many adult readers, and the life story of the man Phineas Gage is fascinating. In 1848, Gage had a massive iron bar shot straight through his head in an accident with blasting powder. The bar entered through his mouth and existed through the top of his skull, all in an instant, and yet Gage lived. Any young reader will find this story vivid enough to keep her/his attention focused on the science that Gage's misfortune stimulated. I'm not a teacher, so my guess may be wrong, but I'd say this book is especially suitable to junior high readers. You'll find mention of Gage in a far more mature piece of writing - "Soul Made Flesh" by Carl Zimmer - which narrates the life-work of the 17th C Englishman, Thomas Willis, who first convinced at least some people that the brain was not merely a blob but in fact the seat of consciousness. I recommend that book heartily/brainily to all readers who enjoy the history of science. I'd also urge people with serious scientific interests to learn about the "Brainbow" project underway at the Harvard Center for Brain Science, directed by my smartest friend, Dr. Joshua Sanes.

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