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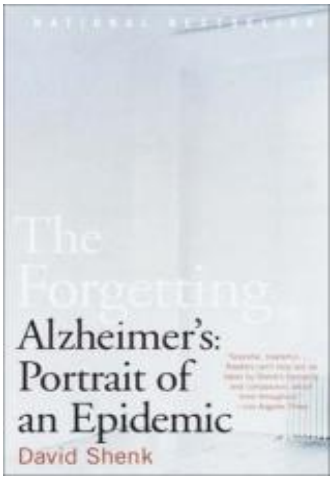
The Forgetting: Alzheimer's: Portrait of an Epidemic

by David Shenk



About the Book

Afflicting nearly half of all persons over the age of 85, Alzheimer's disease kills nearly 100,000 Americas a year as it insidiously robs them of their memory and wreaks havoc on the lives of their loved ones. It was once minimized and misunderstood as forgetfulness in the elderly, but Alzheimer's is now at the forefront of many medical and scientific agendas, for as the world's population ages, the disease will kill millions more and touch the lives of virtually everyone.

The Forgetting is a scrupulously researched, multilayered analysis of Alzheimer's and its social, medical, and spiritual implications. David Shenk presents us with much more than a detailed explanation of its causes and effects and the search for a cure. He movingly captures the disease's impact on its victims and their families, and he looks back through history, explaining how Alzheimer's most likely afflicted such figures as Jonathan Swift, Ralph Waldo Emerson,and William de Kooning. The result is a searing, powerfully engaging account of Alzheimer's disease, offering a grim but sympathetic and ultimately encouraging portrait.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the difference between a healthy brain and a sick one?

2. What comparisons might be made between early childhood development and Alzheimer's?

3. By what processes?historic, scientific, semantic, cultural?have certain forms of dementia come to be known as Alzheimer's?

4. By holding the story of Ralph Waldo Emerson's mental decline in a light cast by the story of the molecular biology

community's efforts to combat Alzheimer's, Shenk's prologue illustrates the principal juxtaposition that frames **The Forgetting**. And by including in that prologue not only an excerpt from Emerson's poem "Brahma" but a reference to the Barbara Walters/Monica Lewinsky interview that coincided with the keynote address of the Molecular Mechanisms in Alzheimer's Disease conference, Shenk prepares his reader for the broad scope of the rest of his book, a book as likely to quote from Plato or Shakespeare as to refer to The New England Journal of Medicine and gaze at William de Kooning's paintings. Why do you suppose Shenk elected to work with such a broad canvas?

5. Plato "insisted that those suffering from 'the influence of extreme old age' should be excused from the commission of the crimes of sacrilege, treachery, and treason." Keeping in mind that Plato was talking about people suffering the influence of old age, but keeping in mind as well that the onset of Alzheimer's is gradual and often undiagnosed, do you feel that old age alone should be a mitigating factor in any other crimes? Would you take this a step further and argue that society should make a legal distinction for elderly people, jut as it does for juveniles?

6. "We are the sum of our memories. Everything we know, everything we perceive, every movement we make is shaped by them." Despite the truth of Shenk's statement, most people go through their daily lives entirely unmindful, if not unaware, of the role played by memory in their behavior. Try to articulate the ways in which your memories have made you what and who you are.

7. Short of medical treatment, what options would you like to see available for people who learn that they have early Alzheimer's? How would you plan for your future and the future of you family if you were to become one of those people?

8. Shenk writes of Alzheimer's patients and their families struggling to create meaning out of their loss. Do you think that such meaning exists? Do you, too, desire to find meaning in suffering?

9. Should the government continue to allow Alzheimer's patients to give away all assets to their children in order to qualify for government-sponsored care?

10. Nonfiction books can be as suspenseful as novels. Discuss the ways in which Shenk achieves suspense in **The Forgetting**.

11. Are you encouraged or discouraged by the advances that have been made in our understanding of Alzheimer's over the past century?

12. Many of us are caregivers to Alzheimer's patients. Discuss Shenk's proposal that "the caregiver's challenge is to escape the medical confines of disease and to assemble a new humanity."

Author Bio

David Shenk is the author of three previous books, including **Data Smog**, which *The New York Times* hailed as an "indispensable guide to the big picture of technology's cultural impact." A former fellow at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center at Columbia University, he has written for*Harper's*, *Wired*, *Salon*, *The New Republic*, *The Washington Post*

, and *The New Yorker*, and is an occasional commentator for NPR's *All Things Considered*. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter.

Critical Praise

"Shenk is a wonderful writer on science....He has an eye for the social and financial forces that shape scientific interests and he brings key players, whether proteins or people, to dramatic life."

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