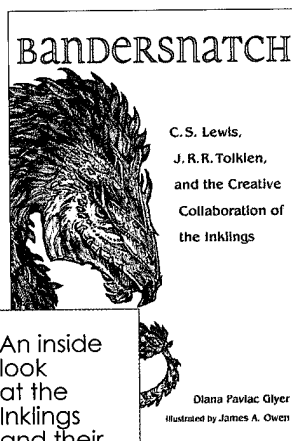


BANDERSNATCH

**C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien,
and the Creative
Collaboration of the
Inklings**

Diana Pavlac Glycer

Illustrated by James A. Owen



An inside
look
at the
Inklings
and their
creative
process

C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the other members of the Inklings met each week to read and discuss each other's work-in-progress, offering both encouragement and blistering critique. How did these conversations shape the books they were writing? How does creative collaboration enhance individual talent? And what can we learn from their example?

"What a gift! *Bandersnatch* is a joy to read and helps dispel that dangerous myth that our greatest writers created in solitude. We all need community in order to do our best work, and this book will show you how some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century did just that. You won't be able to read this book just once."

—Jeff Gains, founder of *Tribe Writers* and author of *The Art of Work*



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when. The experiment thus presupposes, and adds nothing to, the merely conceptual, anyway hazy, distinctions we already have. What does such 'science' prove?

More persuasive are the experiments, cited by Bloom, that suggest that, contrary to much received wisdom, there is no causal link between low empathy and either psychopathy or aggression. Psychopaths are often highly emotional. And, thanks to the 'spotlight effect', the very empathy that inspires kindness and generosity can equally engender anger, prejudice and cruelty. Both the conservative and the liberal, Bloom rightly argues, can be empathic. If one empathises with the robbed, the other with the robber, it is not empathy that determines which of the two is right.

Bloom is not, despite the title, against empathy. He even gestures in Hume's direction by saying that perhaps empathy is indeed part of the aetiology of morality.

He simply wants to redress the balance, pulling us away from Hume and towards Kant. To make others loom as large as you do in the immediate foreground, he says, is a less effective strategy for achieving morality than to shrink and depersonalise yourself until you see yourself as just one in a wider arena of individuals. This rehashes Kant, as does Bloom's argument that most wrongdoing stems from making special – in other words, empathic – exceptions only for certain individuals: ourselves, those we love, those who happen to touch us at a specific moment of time. Of course, we all thrill to the story of the Nazi who spared the man who looked into his eyes, but is it any consolation? It simply raises the question of why, if he could empathise in that instance, he killed all the others.

To order this book from our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill, see page 63.

MAREK KOHN

Meme Streak

From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds

By Daniel C Dennett

(Allen Lane 496pp £25)

Daniel Dennett has decided that the mind is less like a computer than he had previously imagined. Instead, the Darwinian philosopher suspects that the brain may be even more Darwinian than he had supposed. The constituent elements of a computer have no individual interests and are not in competition. They encounter no risks or opportunities. Brains, however, are made up of basic elements, neurons, the distant ancestors of which were free-living cells. Dennett speculates that neurons may retain traces of their ancient ancestral spirit, inducing them to compete with each other for resources. This competition feeds upon the opportunities provided by the constant influx of virus-like information entities known as memes. These themselves exploit the opportunities that the marketplace of the brain affords to replicate and spread to other minds.

Dennett's notion of 'feral neurons' is eye-catching and rather thrilling, but its value

is hard to specify. It signals that he is continuing to have ideas (though this one was first aired several years ago) and that he is capable of changing his mind. It humanises the idea of the mind as a computer and resonates with our sense that mental processes are full of contests that need to be resolved, or suppressed, before we can say that our minds are made up. But the idea of neurons as competitive agents is not yet capable of doing the work that Dennett would like it to do – that of explaining how culturally transmitted information shaped the unique evolution of the mind. Although it suggests ways in which individual brains might be altered, it does not explain how those alterations might be transmitted to subsequent generations.

The principal contribution of Dennett's idea to our understanding of the brain is the way it encourages us to think about our minds. Humans find consciousness irresistible, and they see it everywhere. The highly

valuable ability to understand that other humans have intentions of their own is over-applied to animals and extended to inanimate things such as rivers and mountains. It gives rise to the idea of spirits and the sense, so difficult to shake, that somewhere inside our minds there is something other than ordinary matter. By characterising the brain as a place where neurons act independently and pieces of information spread like viruses, Dennett offers an alternative ecology of the mind – one that is free of spirits. Focusing on memes allows him to emphasise the incalculable wealth of material that has been central to the development of consciousness.

Focusing on memes is one thing, though; integrating them into the story of the mind is another. We can describe memes as agents that pursue their own replication, but this may only be a way of looking at a process, not an explanation of it. Although looking at the subject from a ‘meme’s-eye point of view’ may be useful, it may also draw attention away from the human interests that are what really counts. No doubt internet memes, with their big capital letters and short texts that minimise the demands they make upon the reader’s attention, exploit human perceptual biases. But this is surely less significant than the desire for popularity, or at least attention, that induces people to create new copies of them.

While Dennett has concerns about the effect of digital technology on our minds, he is more interested in language than in internet ephemera. For him, words are the best example of memes. It is indeed stimulating to think of a word as ‘a minimal kind of agent: it wants to get itself said’, because if it doesn’t, it will become extinct. But how much do we gain, or possibly lose, by considering the interests of words, as distinct from the interests of those who utter them? Dennett notes that languages spoken by small groups tend to be more complicated than ones spoken by large numbers of people. He suggests that isolation allows linguistic memes that would not withstand the pressures of a wider world to survive, although many may be useless or even disadvantageous to their hosts.

A closer consideration of human interests raises possibilities that are more interesting and potentially significant. In Papua New Guinea, where there is a greater concentration of languages than anywhere else

in the world, language diversity is greatest not in the most physically isolated areas but in more open ones. Where groups are more exposed to competition from other groups, they use languages as barriers to exclude outsiders and strengthen their own local identities. Complexity may also be more advantageous, language researchers Gary Lupyan and Rick Dale have suggested, in languages that are almost exclusively learned in childhood, as distinct from ones that are often learned by adult outsiders in order to reach across ethnic boundaries. The more complicated the tongue, the harder it is for an adult to learn; but for children, the extra elaborations may offer welcome support. An adult may confidently make sense of a sentence from a single cue, such as the position of a word; a child, wading uncertainly into the stream of language, may benefit from the additional confirmation about the relationships between words that is provided by case endings, gender marking and the like.

Anthropological fieldwork and child development are at the margins of Dennett’s intellectual world, however. As he

notes, his formative intellectual interests stretched across philosophy, neuroscience and computing. His writing has an engineer’s sensibility – he revels in the methodical exposition of each step in the process of an argument – and an inclination towards engineering language. One effect of this is that the book reads like an example of what he describes: it is dense with vigorously replicating word-strings, relentlessly assembling the vision from below but making it hard for us to see the mind for the memes.

This is not the first time he has replicated many of them, either. If you have read any of Dennett’s previous books, a lot of his ideas and analytical tools will be familiar to you. If not, he details the unfolding of his thinking over time in a bibliographic appendix. This book forms a kind of summary compendium, incorporating his most recent ideas and those of like-minded thinkers. In software terms, it is a package with a few new features but it is not an essential upgrade.

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