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Memory and Movies: What Films Can Teach Us about Memory (MIT Press)

By John Seamon



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In the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, the childhood memories of a young game show contestant trigger his correct answers. In *Memento*, the amnesiac hero uses tattoos as memory aids. In *Away from Her*, an older woman suffering from dementia no longer remembers who her husband is. These are compelling films that tell affecting stories about the human condition. But what can these movies teach us about memory? In this book, John Seamon shows how examining the treatment of memory in popular movies can shed new light on how human memory works.

After explaining that memory is actually a diverse collection of independent systems, Seamon uses examples from movies to offer an accessible, nontechnical description of what science knows about memory function and dysfunction. In a series of lively encounters with numerous popular films, he draws on *Life of Pi* and *Avatar*, for example, to explain working memory, used for short-term retention. He describes the process of long-term memory with examples from such films as *Cast Away* and *Groundhog Day*; *The Return of Martin Guerre*, among other movies, informs his account of how we recognize people; the effect of emotion on autobiographical memory is illustrated by *The Kite Runner*, *Titanic*, and other films; movies including *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Rachel Getting Married* illustrate the complex pain of traumatic memories. Seamon shows us that movies rarely get amnesia right, often using strategically timed blows to the protagonist's head as a way to turn memory off and then on again (as in *Desperately Seeking Susan*). Finally, he uses movies including *On Golden Pond* and *Amour* to describe the memory loss that often accompanies aging, while highlighting effective ways to maintain memory function.



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After explaining that memory is actually a diverse collection of independent systems, Seamon uses examples from movies to offer an accessible, nontechnical description of what science knows about memory function and dysfunction. In a series of lively encounters with numerous popular films, he draws on *Life of Pi* and *Avatar*, for example, to explain working memory, used for short-term retention. He describes the process of long-term memory with examples from such films as *Cast Away* and *Groundhog Day*; *The Return of Martin Guerre*, among other movies, informs his account of how we recognize people; the effect of emotion on autobiographical memory is illustrated by *The Kite Runner*, *Titanic*, and other films; movies including *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Rachel Getting Married* illustrate the complex pain of traumatic memories. Seamon shows us that movies rarely get amnesia right, often using strategically timed blows to the protagonist's head as a way to turn memory off and then on again (as in *Desperately Seeking Susan*). Finally, he uses movies including *On Golden Pond* and *Amour* to describe the memory loss that often accompanies aging, while highlighting effective ways to maintain memory function.

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Editorial Review

Review

In this informative and enjoyable book, John Seamon takes a unique approach to explaining the workings of memory: by exploring its depiction in movies. Seamon knows a lot about both memory and movies, and his attempts to link them are fascinating. You'll never look at memory or movies in quite the same way after reading this book.

(Daniel L. Schacter, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*)

What a great book! Readers will learn much about how memory works and also how movies portray issues of memory. While written for a general audience, it could easily be used in courses on cognitive psychology or human memory to make the material come alive in ways that textbooks too often do not. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in memory and/or movies -- and who isn't?

(Henry L. Roediger III, James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor of Psychology, Washington University in St. Louis)

From *As You Desire Me*, through *Rashomon*, *The Bourne Identity*, and *Memento*, to *Trance*, memory and amnesia have been themes, and plot devices, in films. Sometimes movies get the science right, sometimes they don't (and sometimes it doesn't matter). In this book, John Seamon connects science to art in a way that advances both -- and suggests new themes and plots for future directors.

(John F. Kihlstrom, Richard and Rhoda Goldman Distinguished Professor, Undergraduate and Interdisciplinary Studies, University of California, Berkeley)

Readers who know little about the science of memory will learn a lot from this eminently readable book.... Those with some background in the science will be impressed at how cogently Seamon presents this information and illustrates it with film examples. Everyone, regardless of background, will be entertained and enlightened by his analysis of the treatment of memory in films and will probably find a few new films to add to their Netflix list.

(*The Manhattan Mercury*)

In clear, nontechnical prose, Seamon writes about how memory is portrayed in a number of movies, most of which are recent and likely familiar to most readers

(Robert B. Faux *PsycCRITIQUES*)

About the Author

John Seamon is Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Professor of Neuroscience and Behavior at Wesleyan University.

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