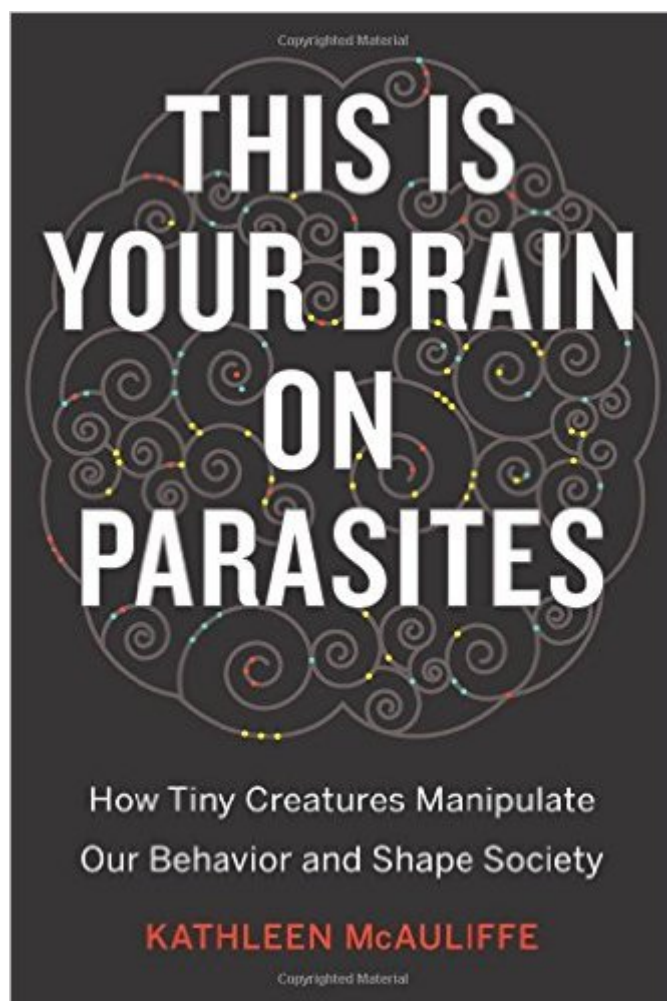


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# This Is Your Brain On Parasites: How Tiny Creatures Manipulate Our Behavior And Shape Society



## Synopsis

A riveting investigation of the myriad ways that parasites control how other creatures—including humans—think, feel, and act. These tiny organisms can only live inside another animal, and as McAuliffe reveals, they have many evolutionary motives for manipulating their hosts' behavior. Far more often than appreciated, these puppeteers orchestrate the interplay between predator and prey. With astonishing precision, parasites can coax rats to approach cats, spiders to transform the patterns of their webs, and fish to draw the attention of birds that then swoop down to feast on them. We humans are hardly immune to the profound influence of parasites. Organisms we pick up from our own pets are strongly suspected of changing our personality traits and contributing to recklessness, impulsivity—even suicide. Microbes in our gut affect our emotions and the very wiring of our brains. Germs that cause colds and flu may alter our behavior even before symptoms become apparent. Parasites influence our species on the cultural level too. As McAuliffe documents, a subconscious fear of contagion impacts virtually every aspect of our lives, from our sexual attractions and social circles to our morals and political views. Drawing on a huge body of research, she argues that our dread of contamination is an evolved defense against parasites—and a double-edged sword. The horror and revulsion we feel when we come in contact with people who appear diseased or dirty helped pave the way for civilization, but may also be the basis for major divisions in societies that persist to this day. In the tradition of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* and Neil Shubin's *Your Inner Fish*, *This Is Your Brain on Parasites* is both a journey into cutting-edge science and a revelatory examination of what it means to be human.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

McAuliffe's article on toxoplasmosis in the 2012 Atlantic "How Your Cat is Making You Crazy" is probably the reason for the word parasites in the title, but the subtitle, "How Tiny Creatures Manipulate Our Behavior and Shape Society," is a more accurate portrayal of the topic of this excellent book. For example, the human gut microbiota (think probiotics) are well covered in this book, but they are certainly not parasites. McAuliffe does a great job of introducing the reader to the major advances in this field. We meet a number of the scientists involved and learn about their findings. What is well accepted, what is still being studied, and what is controversial are clearly presented as such. The book is well footnoted, so you can look the research up yourself online. Here's an overview of the chapters:

- 1 " The beginning of the study of parasites and microbes effecting the behavior of animals and humans.
- 2 " Malaria and other insect carried disease. Focusing on manipulations that get parasites where they need to go to survive.
- 3 " More manipulations, including caffeine in flower nectar to manipulate bees.
- 4 " Toxoplasma and humans. A look at what can happen when parasites get into the wrong host.
- 5 " Rabies; toxocara (roundworms), and other parasites that effect our essential sense of self " our moods, appetites, behaviors, and reasoning abilities.
- 6 " Gut microbiota. Manipulations that are beneficial, mostly.
- 7 " How gut microbiota effect our weight.
- 8 " Behavioral immunity " things animals and humans instinctively do to heal our wounds and protect us from parasites.
- 9 " How the emotion of disgust helps protect us from parasites and disease.
- 10 " The relationship between disgust and prejudice.

One of the greatest insights of 20th Century biology was the notion that life on this planet is all interconnected and interdependent at every level, from individual cells up to the entire planet. Every living thing is part of a great hierarchy of communities. A tree supports a colony of fungi that live in the soil around it, digesting organic material but also breaking down minerals into a form that can be absorbed by the tree. The tree is also home to entire communities of insects, bugs, birds, and mammals that feed on it and benefit from the oxygen the tree produces as a byproduct of photosynthesis, and in return the animals produce carbon dioxide as a byproduct of their energy synthesis that helps fuel photosynthesis in the tree. Individual animals and plants are not just a part of a community; they can be communities themselves. Jellyfish are actually communities of

specialized cells that aggregate together for mutual benefit. Slime molds are communities of individual amoebas that aggregate for reproduction and to serve for new sites to live. We humans are communities, too. Almost all of our cells contains mitochondria, simple organisms that reproduce independently of the cells they inhabit and perform a function similar to that of chloroplasts in plants, synthesizing the ATP that fuels cells. Each of us also has a large community of bacteria and fungi in our gut that plus a large role in not only digestion but in a range of other functions. Each of us carries with us an average of a kilogram of this "biome," containing more cells than there are in the entire human body. Without these symbiotic hitchhikers, or if we experience an imbalance in their population, we can become very ill, or die.

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