



Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril

Margaret Heffernan

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Margaret Heffernan argues that the biggest threats and dangers we face are the ones we don't see--not because they're secret or invisible, but because we're willfully blind. A distinguished businesswoman and writer, she examines the phenomenon and traces its imprint in our private and working lives, and within governments and organizations, and asks: What makes us prefer ignorance? What are we so afraid of? Why do some people see more than others? And how can we change?

We turn a blind eye in order to feel safe, to avoid conflict, to reduce anxiety, and to protect prestige. Greater understanding leads to solutions, and Heffernan shows how--by challenging our biases, encouraging debate, discouraging conformity, and not backing away from difficult or complicated problems--we can be more mindful of what's going on around us and be proactive instead of reactive.

Covering everything from our choice of mates to the SEC, Bernard Madoff's investors, the embers of BP's refinery, the military in Afghanistan, and the dog-eat-dog world of subprime mortgage lenders, this provocative book demonstrates how failing to see--or admit to ourselves or our colleagues--the issues and problems in plain sight can ruin private lives and bring down corporations. Heffernan explains how willful blindness develops before exploring ways that institutions and individuals can combat it. In the tradition of Malcolm Gladwell and Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Margaret Heffernan's *Willful Blindness*, is a tour de force on human behavior that will open your eyes.

Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril Details

Date : Published March 1st 2011 by Walker Books (first published February 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780802719980

Author : Margaret Heffernan

Format : Hardcover 304 pages

Genre : Psychology, Nonfiction, Business, Science, Sociology, Economics

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From Reader Review Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril for online ebook

Trey McIntyre says

Lots of REALLY provocative information here and presented in a thought-provoking way.

But it also contains a fair amount of question-begging and presumptions of fact. That's understandable, I suppose, since outlining an entire treatise on the ethical perspective, research background, and culture from which the author is speaking is usually FAR afield of any text.

I'm not sure if this is a quick read or not. I spent most of my day in airports and so I was able to finish the whole audiobook in a single day of pretty dedicated reading. Nevertheless, I think there's a lot of meat in this book.

The only thing I would say is that you should follow the author's advice and question everything... even the claims she makes both directly and indirectly.

Wens Tan says

It's quite depressing to know that our brains are wired not only to willfully blind ourselves to evidences that contradict our beliefs, but to perform cognitive acrobatics to rationalize away the contradictions. Power, money, identity, need for social acceptance and conformity, and cognitive overload can all contribute to the blindness. Hefferman writes as a journalist would. The book is paced quickly, with references both to well-known academic studies and business anecdotes in how they support her theme. In such popular psychology books, depth is sometimes lacking, but her aim is to get a message across, and that message is sobering.

Randy says

Must read

Ms Heffernan delivers a wonderful collections of instances in which we blind ourselves to many situations and points of view. Her had fundamentally changed the way a look at the world. Her view on the utility of Wikileaks, is debatable. I feel that it endangered lives.

Surita du Toit says

I must confess here, that most of the books I read...eh-uhm... "read", are actually audio books. It just frees up so much time that I would otherwise spend washing dishes or doing laundry. (Yes the faceless beings on the interwebz also have laundry)

The reason why that is relevant is because this book is narrated by the author herself. Not only is she

eloquent in her writing, she is also a compelling narrator. She understands that people tell stories better than numbers and statistics so the text is rich with first hand accounts, and she tells these stories with such a sense of respect and dignity that you are reminded that these people were just people. Flesh and blood human beings. It makes it easier to remember that we are all at risk if turning a blind eye, and that if it could happen to them, it could happen to us.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I've listened to it start to finish three times already and will probably listen to it again. Why do we ignore the obvious? Read this book and Margaret Heffernan will tell you just how far people will go to fool themselves, how limited your mind's capacity for input is and why claiming you didn't know is not a defense in court.

You are responsible if you could've known and should've known something, but instead you strove not to see.

The narrative is exceptionally organic and she leads you into her next point so smoothly that you sometimes don't even realize the topic has changed. This was a fascinating, captivating read and I recommend it to anyone wishing to learn how to avoid the obvious errors, why working more hours makes your workforce less productive and why things blow up before people finally come forward with the truth.

For more reviews visit www.thereadinggraves.wordpress.com

Rob says

Great book, with the title proving more than appropriate. The author's willful blindness is her political bias, which plays peek-a-boo throughout the book. She examines - and continually revisits - specific incidents in recent history, then judges who was blind to what. For instance, a BP disaster was due in part to how huge the company was, with too few people stretched too thin over vast distances to really know how to prevent or respond to a crisis. A better system would be emphasis on local, on-site management, which has better information and reaction time. Yet later, when discussing Hurricane Katrina, the author flips the scale. She lays significant fault at the federal government - arguably larger and stretched much more thin than BP - while ignoring the incompetence at the local level. That's one example of her political bias manifesting itself, as it does several times throughout the book. If you can look past it, it's a worthwhile read.

Emmkay says

Explores the tangle of factors that can lead people and organizations to be willfully blind to perils and moral failures. Some of the ground Heffernan covers is familiar (eg the Milgram experiment, Kitty Genovese's death - I remember both of these from first year psychology), but others are fresh and in any case the way she puts her argument together makes it thought-provoking and timely. 3.5 stars.

Rebecca says

Great case studies and examples of this concept of willful blindness related to large organizations and personal lifestyle choices, including helpful prompts for self assessment based on the case study failures and

successes.

Robert Day says

Rather a tiresome book that spend far too much time explaining what's wrong and then far too little time telling us how to put it right.

Basically, the world is in a parlous state and we're in denial - there, that's the first 8 chapters covered.

In essence, the last 2 chapters tell us that we have to stop denying that there is anything wrong with the way the world works and start trying to put it right.

I went to see a play last night called 'Outsiders' that tried to shed some light on the human condition by proposing that if we don't trust each other, then bad things will happen.

Trouble is, by being called 'Outsiders' it rather preached to the converted. It struck me that it would have better served its purpose by being called 'Insiders'. In this way it would perhaps attract the kind of people that are robust enough to have overcome the problems affecting those who see themselves as Outsiders. They could in this way be inspired to help 'outsiders' to overcome their malaise.

The play's approach is rather like trying to immunize someone against a virus by injecting them with serum derived from the blood of people that haven't been able to fight off the virus themselves - it just doesn't work.

In the same way, this book needs to attract people who are *not* wilfully blind to the perilous position the world is in, i.e. the people that have the knowledge, strength and money to do something about it.

As it is - there's far too much doom-mongering in this volume and not enough rocket-fuel to inject into the backsides of those that can genuinely assist in putting things right.

It should have 2 stars really, but my glass-half-full nature wouldn't allow that.

Joseph says

A very readable blend of history, psychology, and science that looks at how human nature often makes us overlook threats and dangers that should otherwise be obvious. Using examples such as Enron's bankruptcy, the 2008 housing bubble, the 1964 Kitty Genovese murder, Bernie Madoff's investment scams, and two - that's right, two - BP Oil disasters, Heffernan lays out a case that critical thinking continues to be in short supply today.

Susan McCutcheon says

I love this writer. Margaret Heffernan gets you thinking about how you think. Here's my favorite quote from her book, Willful Blindness:

"Being a critical thinker starts with resisting the urge to be a pleaser."

She embeds stories and examples that make this deep subject a fascinating read.

Daniel Ionson says

This book deserves a review, but this is so close to the *Mistakes Were Made...* book, that I should paste the same here. Or, perhaps I'm just really lazy.

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What this book exposes, sometimes bringing laughs, sometimes shock and horror, is how blind we can all be. And this means everyone, even though the blindness reaches into the absurd.

The science for cognitive dissonance/biases is solid: We, through a mixture of subtle mechanisms, find ways of deceiving ourselves, of editing our memories and perceptions to justify the conclusions that serve us. This is our daily habit. This is how we make it through our days to minimize the conflict that comes from being in the wrong.

This is one of those books that everyone should read. The funny thing is, everyone who reads it wants "certain Other people" to read it. The real trick is to read it for ourselves, and meditate on it for ourselves. Only then can we possibly begin to remove our blindness.

Rhys says

Heffernan's *Willful Blindness* represents a good effort summarizing the 'drivers of willful blindness' for which she includes "our preference for the familiar, our love of individuals and for big ideas, a love of busyness and our dislike of conflict and change, the human instinct to obey and conform, and our skill at displacing and diffusing responsibility" (p.198).

She addresses the tendency of homogenizing our individual environments, like-minded people developing their own groupthink. An interesting point Heffernan makes is how these groups tend to become more extreme: "This is natural but it isn't neutral. In what he calls the "group polarization effect," legal scholar Cass Sunstein found that when groups of like-minded people get together, they make each other's views more extreme" (p.16). Something we see every day.

Groupthink is supported by personal exhaustion and the overstimulation typical of modern society: "When we are tired or preoccupied – conditions psychologists call 'resource-depleted' – we start to economize, to conserve those resources. Higher-order thinking is more expensive. So too are doubt, skepticism, and argument. "Resource depletion specifically disables cognitive elaboration," wrote Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert. "Not only does doubt seem to be the last to emerge, but it also seems to be the first to disappear.""(p.78).

Our inability to doubt or use other higher cognitive functions exacerbates the problem of groupthink and our ability to respond to what we collectively need to see when we need to see it - the crisis of capital or climate change being modern examples.

The ending was disappointing, but not untypical. We need to hear the Cassandras, even though everything prevents us from doing so. "Cassandras may see the truth, but they inspire fury because those truths were so energetically and necessarily hidden, and because their revelations demand change. We side with the truth teller but, in the comfort of the theater, we don't have to bear the cost" (p.219).

Jennifer Stone says

I purchased the audio version of the book and enjoyed listening to Margaret Heffernan read her book. Although the book's purpose is to heighten our awareness of our own shortcomings, her tone is neither preachy nor shill. She makes her points powerfully, with calm authority. I enjoyed her British accent, and it was easy to imagine her sitting across a table from me, discussing the issues in the book.

Prior to listening to "Willful Blindness," I'd read about a dozen books about failed decision making, such as "Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me). The constant theme among them all is that we make ourselves powerless by pretending we don't know. Whether we are blind to our own shortcomings or blind to others' deceptions, we suffer in the end from this lack of knowing. Because the theme has been explored by so many others, I wondered if Heffernan would have anything original to say.

I found the book to be filled with tremendous insight into the paradox of the human condition. For example, Heffernan tells a story about her own life and her decision to marry a man with a serious heart problem that would, inevitably, lead to his death before the age of 40. Why would she blind herself to the fact of his medical condition and marry him, even after his other girlfriends had left him for healthier mates? It was love, she says. Our love for each other and our blindness to the faults of each other is part of the human condition. It is part of who we are. We are, in general, overly optimistic, wear rose colored glasses, trust others more often than we should, and typically fail to put all the facts together into a whole until confronted with a terrible, irreparable truth.

When does this blindness become dangerous, she asks? When there is harm, she says, especially when damage is done to the innocent, like children. So it is vitally important to learn how to trust our instincts, to have difficult conversations, and to take back any form of power that we might have given away. None of this is easy, she points out.

Other books on the topic make change seem so lineal: just realize how flawed your decision-making can be, and follow the instructions on how to remove one's blind spots. The great value of "Willful Blindness" is first pointing out through the use of stories how very human it is to be flawed, and then to heighten awareness of the value of recognizing difficult truths. Heffernan calls us to be better versions of ourselves, and because of her book, I think that we can.

Ed says

I thought this a quite extraordinary book that has changed my view of the world and certainly given me ways

to uncover my blindspots. It covers a vast area of human activity from business, environment, personal life and all around the 19th century legal idea that if for instance you carry a bag of stolen goods but don't look inside you are guilty of willful blindness and not innocent. There is so much in modern life that we are willfully blind in and unfortunately, I have come to think that the modern day Republican Party in the US has this disease very strongly. Plenty of willful blindness among liberals but it has become the whole core of GOP thinking to its cost and to the cost of the US. But hey this is not a political book and should be of interest across the spectrum to those with open minds.

Anandh Sundar says

The book is indeed a gem and deserves its awesome ratings. Read this for a cross discipline idea on why we are like ostriches burrying their head in the sand. The book is really a great critical thinking resource, written for the layperson.

Some extracts below

In the book's initial chapter, the author summarizes the book much more than I better could--->When we are willfully blind, it is in the presence of information that we could know, and should know, but don't know because it makes us feel better not to know..The world is full of Cassandras, individuals whose fate it is to see what others can't see, who are not blind but compelled to shout their awkward, provocative truths...Groups have the potential, in other words, to be smarter than individuals; that's the case put forward so compellingly by James Surowiecki in his book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*. But the problem is that, as our biases keep informing whom we hire and promote, we weed out that diversity and are left with skyscrapers full of people pretty much the same..Media companies understand this perfectly. They know that when we buy a newspaper or a magazine, we aren't looking for a fight...There is a special narcissim in the belief that we, and our times, are special, that we are so smart that we have nothing to learn from the past—even about who we are.To paraphrase Edmund Burke, all that evil needs to flourish is for good people to see nothing—and get paid for it.Higher-order thinking is more expensive. So too are doubt, skepticism, and argument. “Resource depletion specifically disables cognitive elaboration,”Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions. Nobody wanted to look into the detail.
