



# Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self

*Jennifer Ouellette*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self

Jennifer Ouellette

## Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self Jennifer Ouellette

As diverse as people appear to be, all of our genes and brains are nearly identical. In *Me, Myself, and Why*, Jennifer Ouellette dives into the miniscule ranges of variation to understand just what sets us apart. She draws on cutting-edge research in genetics, neuroscience, and psychology-enlivened as always with her signature sense of humor-to explore the mysteries of human identity and behavior. Readers follow her own surprising journey of self-discovery as she has her genome sequenced, her brain mapped, her personality typed, and even samples a popular hallucinogen. Bringing together everything from Mendel's famous pea plant experiments and mutations in *The X-Men* to our taste for cilantro and our relationships with virtual avatars, Ouellette takes us on an endlessly thrilling and illuminating trip into the science of ourselves

## Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self Details

Date : Published June 26th 2014 by Penguin (first published January 28th 2014)

ISBN : 9780143121657

Author : Jennifer Ouellette

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Science, Nonfiction, Psychology, Philosophy, History, Biology, Neuroscience

 [Download Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Sel ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self Jennifer Ouellette**

---

## **From Reader Review Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self for online ebook**

### **Allison says**

The book deserves at least 3.5 stars for the research put into it.

I love a good science read, and when it's all about our genetics, I love it even more. So, I don't know what quite went wrong with this one for me. It started out really strong, and by mid-point, I began skimming. I never quite made it to the end. Ouellette's writing is good, and the research is great and well suited to a layman's level of understanding (literally a review of high school biology class and upward), but I made the decision to walk away from it in the end.

*(Worth noting, I was doing the audio version of the book, and the narrator was uber-annoying, so that might have been my problem.)*

I would recommend the book -- it's a neat read. For a more personal, less science-based story of chasing down our genetics, I recommend *The Juggler's Children: A Journey into Family, Legend and the Genes that Bind Us*, which focuses more on the social side of the science behind us. Also a neat read.

---

### **Robert says**

If you want to read a very accessible book about personality and who we really are this is it.

The author does a great job of breaking down what makes US a person. The physical and chemical properties as well as that more ephemeral portion of who we are when we think of the word ME.

---

### **Peter Mcloughlin says**

A short book which explores the self. Ouellette starts with Genetics and proceeds into personality, Sexual Orientation and Gender, Psychedelics, consciousness and neuroanatomy, finally memory and construction of a life narrative. It is a fun book with some nice nuggets to pick out on the nature of our biology and psychology. You will learn a thing or two about the self in this short book.

---

### **Isil Arican says**

I had really high expectations regarding this book, but while it was somehow entertaining it lacked the depth I was hoping to read. I like Jennifer Oullette on social media and other venues, and really like her wit and knowledge on many topics. However this book felt like it is written in a rush, and not fulfilled my expectation from her and her style.

If this is the first time you are reading a book on genes and personality, it might still be a fun read. However if you have some background in the topic you'll find the book oversimple in some chapters, will feel the narration is jumping from topic to topic from time to time with no purposeful flow, and some chapters are abruptly ending.

One interesting thing, the writer related lot of her personal life and anecdotes to issues she is exploring in the book. It does help to make the book and the science topics it tackles more personable. On the other hand in some chapters she goes on and on about her personal experience, and it makes the reader wonder why she assumes everyone's experience would be similar. the section on avatars were incredibly long and pointless. It is obvious the writer loves her online persona but it was really pretty boring to hear how her self perception differs from her avatar.

The other issue is that the research studies has been narrated almost like press releases and not with through evaluation and scrutiny.

Overall good book for a very novice science reader, not so good and rushed one and lacking some adequate research for a regular reader.

---

## **Rob Slaven says**

As usual I received this book for the sum of nothing in exchange for a review. This time from NetGalley. Also as usual I give my scrupulously honest opinions below.

The best summary I can give of this book is that it's broad but not necessarily deep. It starts with Mendel and his peas, makes its way through LSD experiments and brain chemistry, stops for a while in virtual reality and ends up in philosophy. It is all over the place and doesn't spend much time in any one area. This is a book best taken at a chapter every night as your first reading of the evening while you're still wide awake.

To the positive, the book is very easy to digest. Even the most complex ideas (and what's more complicated than the brain) are brought down to earth in a way that anyone can understand. There's plenty of technical jargon here but it's all defined and not at all mysterious even to the neophyte. Also, as I said above, the author covers a dizzying array of topics with wit, cleverness and clarity. For those interested in further reading there's an extensive bibliography that consumes the last 20% of the book so it's a good jumping-off point for further in-depth investigation.

To the negative, there is a lot of personal anecdote spread throughout this book. The book is 20% bibliography, 30% about the author and her life and 50% about science. For some readers this is exactly what they were probably hoping for but those looking for hard and gritty science may find themselves annoyed by how much 'Jennifer' there is in this book.

In summary, if this your first foray into such topics then you'll make a good choice to buy thsi one. If this is your 50th book on the topic, don't bother. This book primarily focuses on making complex ideas accessible and not expanding on the existing literature. I realize that for some that will be a recommendation and for some that will be a deterrent. I leave it to you decide which is which.

---

## **Jim Robles says**

Overall one of the most disappointing books I have read in a long time. I ordered it based on a snippet of conversation on NPR: my bad!

An easy read that is far more accessible than many sources on questions of the "self." It is perhaps a little "easier" than I would have preferred, and never meaningfully grapples with the advertised questions. The pages of psychedelic drug advocacy do not have a discernible relation to the advertised subject. There is far too much personal chitchat. On the other hand, I did find things in it that are relevant in the "here-and-now."

The p. 255 claim that "It is not sufficient for the brain's various overlapping networks to receive and process incoming sensory information; for consciousness to emerge, that information must be integrated" is flat out wrong. Many systems have integrated networks that process incoming sensory information (think avionics) without achieving consciousness.

I wonder what Ms. Ouellette would say about the "Chinese Room Experiment?"

The fortieth book I have finished this year.

Ms. Ouellette gets that the whole thing is one big koan. (p. 7. "You're not going to find the answer." But, he added kindly, perhaps responding to my crestfallen face, that doesn't mean one shouldn't try to wrestle with the fundamental questions." p. 9. Ultimately, the story is not about the destination. It's about everything learned along the way.)

The treatment of Descartes (p. 240) and "I think, therefore I am" is a misapprehending as anything I have read in a long time.

p. 44. "one of the gifts of having had cancer is that you appreciate life in a completely different way."

Ms. Ouellette mentions Franz Joseph Gall (the "Father of Phrenology, or a William James suggested "bumpology) on p. 51. I do not see any mention of what cruel monsters he and his fellow researchers were.

p. 63. This, according to LeDoux, is the key to how the brain shapes its unique sense of self: you are your synapses.

Ms. Ouellette nails, one of my crotchets, our failure to distinguish correlation from cause-and-effect. p. 68 - 69. We have evolved to see patterns and we mistake those for causes very easily. p. 89. The more variables there are, the more difficult it becomes, and the easier it is to mistake coincidence for correlation.

Do you remember the "glasses" that Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge wore on the original Star Trek? p. 71 sounds like there is a path to this technology.

p. 91. Several population-wide studies have demonstrated that people become more agreeable and conscientious as they age, better at inhibiting impulses, and also less anxious.

I have to question this (p. 91) claim. It goes back to something that come through reading "Confessions" by Augustine and my own personal experience: do we really get better, or do our impulses (AKA demons) simply get weaker as we age?

p. 95. I realize this was a common perception among people who didn't know me well - that I was cold, aloof, unfriendly - and it was one I felt helpless to change.

This (p. 95) is not my problem, but I think I do know someone who suffers from it.

p. 102. In 2011, UCLA scientists found an oxytocin receptor gene that seems to be linked to a lack of optimism, low self-esteem, and little belief that one has control over one's own life (agency).

Again, this (p. 102) is certainly not my problem, but I do know (a different) someone who seems to suffer from it.

p. 113. Stress, for instance, can leave a molecular signature in the genome, thereby changing an organism's behavior. . . . For Heberlein, she suggested that the same gene controls the flies' response to stress, consistent with studies in humans demonstrating a similar link between stress and alcohol tolerance.

p. 121. Ditto for another genetic variant, common in those of Asian or Ashkenazi Jewish descent, which causes a severe flushing response to alcohol.

p. 149. The word "avatar" comes from a Sanskrit word, avatara, describing various incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu on Earth.

p. 155. Avatars with larger pupils are judged to be more attractive, happier, good-humored, and sympathetic, even though we are not consciously aware of that trait.

p. 159. There must be a sense of continuity, which translates into less than a 250-millisecond delay between the brain sending a command for motion and the feedback it receives once the action is performed.

Yup! This continuity is required to us to believe that we have willed the action: there is the opportunity for us to be fooled, both ways, here.

I would need to hear from "lepidopterist W. J. Tennent" (p. 173) before deciding if Ms. Ouellette has been remotely fair or accurate here. In claiming that "One man's 'horrific sexual offense' is another man's private ecstasy," (p. 173) she seems to be assuming that Tennent was referring to consensual acts between adults, without providing any evidence that this is the case. This is redolent of the lack of regard for what the truth is that is the subject of Harry Frankfurt's "On Bullshit."

p. 178. If the animal kingdom tells us anything, it's that nature abhors the binary model for sexual behavior, ditching a strict either/or construct in favor of a richly varied continuum.

p. 214. Counterintuitively, this boost in human perception might be due to a decrease in brain activity.

p. 220. . . . but LSD disrupts this tightly controlled communication system because its core chemical structure is so close to that of serotonin. Acid can attach to many of the same receptors, altering how someone perceives the world.

---

**Sotiris Makrygiannis says**

Something between a paid commercial of 23andme.com, promoting LTGB rights and taking LSD....probably at the same time or in a sequence.

Nevertheless is well written book, with a bit of background study and is doing an excellent work popularizing our current understanding of genetics and neuroscience.

As for the LSD and Ecstasy, just wait until your kid will provide this book as an excuse, so avoid giving this book to under 21 years old.

---

### **Rene says**

Well unfortunately this book was under my expectations. It was a gossip magazine like string of science fact, making relations to TV series and the authors personal life. Although this gave the book a very individual note as a popular science book, but it lacked depth at the same time. I found myself skimming and skipping whole chapters, mostly because it felt like a TV documentary you have seen before. Some stories were entertaining but overall this book was not a highlight for me.

---

### **Chrisy says**

Easy to read and thought provoking, this book took me all of a weekend to finish. The subject material is extremely broad, but I think the author did a good job representing a variety of fields.

Only problem I had was that it didn't delve too deep into any of the claims it made and I think the representation of our virtual selves deserved more focus.

---

### **Caren says**

I found this on the new books shelf at the library and decided to give it a whirl. It was moderately interesting, but not as entertaining as Mary Roach's science-themed books are. She did seem to be willing to go the mile, all for science, even recording her own LSD trip. The book looks at a lot of current research into the brain and consciousness and into what makes you 'you'.

---

### **Charlene says**

This book exceeded my expectations. I wasn't sure if it would be a good fit. So many books that tackle the subject of personality have very little balance. Some take a self-help angle and largely ignore or misinterpret scientific data. Others focus heavily on scientific data but make crazy assumptions. For example, an author might include some great studies but make assumptions about the results of the study that are not at all warranted. The book Social by Lieberman falls into this category. The studies are great, and yet, the interpretation, even of the studies Lieberman himself conducted, were skewed and failed the grasp the very

science they used to explain personality. Many, far too many, books about the science of personality out there authors as dated and stuck in the neo-Darwinian paradigm that touts genes over everything, where genes are narrowly defined. They debate nature OR nurture (so old and tired). No matter what technique, it seems as though the majority of writers argue against authors as unbalanced as themselves. Ouellette takes a markedly balanced view, which makes her stand out in books on science and personality.

Initially, I was also concerned that this book might not be a good fit because I majored in cognitive neuroscience and was familiar with all the usual studies and concerns addressed in this book. Yet, even when she wrote about the most basic concepts, she was entertaining, which kept me from being bored. She writes for the reader who is interested but might not have previous knowledge and, at the same time, can keep the interest of the reader who has heard it before. She can achieve this because no matter how new or old the material, her perspective is fresh. She has a gift for putting it all together into a final product that is more interesting than the sum of its parts.

Recently I read *The Well-Dressed Ape* by Hannah Holmes and was really unsatisfied with her take on gender and the brain. I was hungry for interesting studies, a good scientific foundation, AND a balanced and critical interpretation of what she discovered. It just wasn't there. Ouellette's discussion of gender and the brain was excellent and let me breathe out that long sigh I have been holding in since reading Holmes' book. Even weeks later, I was still so bothered by her limited perspective, even though I enjoy Holmes. Reading Ouellette restored my faith in pop sci book that choose to tackle the scientific basis for gender differences. Using far fewer words than Holmes, Ouellette was able to introduce the reader to the scientific data and a wonderful interpretation of that data. She included crucial information about culture and its effect on the results that Holmes, whose main focus was gender, failed to include to a sufficient degree.

The structure Ouellette chose for her book worked extremely well. She was able to keep her reader interested in her story, of being adopted and trying to understand herself, while at the same time keeping the reader busy wondering about themselves and humans in general. There was a great mix of personal narrative, people watching, science, and history of scientific discovery. Her section on avatars will have you crushing on the most definitely geeky Ouellette. Her discussion of LSD was equally great. Ending the book with a discussion of memory and Orual was the perfect way to close. I loved this book.

---

## **Daniel says**

I received an electronic copy of this from the publisher via NetGalley. I usually don't have that hard a time assigning stars for a review. Personally, I considered this a three star reading 'experience', but would easily recommend this book highly for other readers not familiar with the topic, so am giving it four stars.

Enjoying following Jennifer Ouellette on social media, I jumped at the chance to read her new book, an explorative overview into 'the self'. Overall the book is a success as a scientifically accurate, but lighthearted education on an incredibly complex topic that extends from hard science to the realms of philosophy and theology. For anyone familiar with Ouellette the style of the book will be instantly recognizable, a combination of awe-filled curiosity, an appreciation for learning and understanding, and a talent for communicating complexities in simple fashion, complete with analogies and references from the classical to the pop culture.

For those that do have a scientific slant of curiosity but don't know much about these topics of self - from genetics (nature) to environment (nurture) that define us to the neurological systems that form our thoughts -



this book is the perfect broad overview, and offers a gigantic bibliography of materials to turn to for further information. Ouellette's coverage of these topics works so well for the general reader because of her relation of the science in terms of personal stories and pop anecdotes.

For me personally the book was a relatively quick read, and not as fascinating as I had hoped, but this is mostly due to the fact that most of the material covered was familiar to me already. Thus, for those out there who are already fairly well-read on the topics presented here, you may be disappointed that Ouellette doesn't delve into deeper detail on the aspects of our current scientific understanding of self. At the end, readers are left with the general conclusion that the mind and the self arises from the combined interplay of a host of factors biological and nonbiological to emerge as consciousness that we are still struggling to precisely define and understand.

Thus, if you are expecting a cut and dry revelation of novel and epic proportions, well, that just doesn't exist. What you will find is an excellent primer on our current understanding of what makes 'me' me, and may open your eyes to fuller empathy that all individuals are truly unique, and to judge anyone without being 'in their shoes' biologically and completely is a horrible sin indeed.

Even if you yourself know most of Ouellette covers in this book, we all certainly know people who don't have any idea, or who may not have even thought about themselves. This book would be the perfect introduction to themselves.

---

## **Katie/Doing Dewey says**

Many books claim that the author will be funny but until you start reading, it's hard to know if that author's sense of humor will work for you. As soon as I started this, I could tell that Ouellette was an author whose writing style appeals to my sense of humor. Although I'm still working on my ability to describe humor well, I think the humor in this book could be described as dry, intelligent, and surprising. I also immediately liked her inclusion of personal stories. The relationship between her research and her life made the material she covered even more interesting. I occasionally felt like she was oversharing about her life, but this wasn't too much of a problem. The material she chose to cover surprised me, including sections on genetic components of alcoholism and the impact of drugs on our brain. At first, I wasn't sure I liked being surprised. I ended up loving it though, since I've read many books on the science of the mind and this is one of the first I've read in a while which included much research I hadn't heard about before.

One of my favorite parts of this book was learning lots of fascinating and surprising fun facts. However, the author started with material I knew very well and I didn't love her explanations. I often felt she was cramming too much information into too little space, at the expense of clarity and accuracy. The fact that she explained the material I knew poorly makes me mistrust her explanation of the new-to-me material as well. I also disliked the organization. Although the subsections of each chapter connected to the theme of the chapter, transitions between subsections and transitions between chapters felt abrupt, almost random. Despite the occasionally cramped explanations and less than ideal organization, the material this book covered was fascinating and it made for an easy read. I'd recommend it to anyone interested in the science of the mind or non-fiction with lots of fun facts.

*This review first published on Doing Dewey.*

---

## Rama says

### Discovering the self

Self is a process and not a thing and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious. It is not located in any particular part of the body but it is an emergent phenomenon. If there is no matter (or energy), the mind doesn't exist. Soul is uniquely generated by the causal interaction with myriads of elements of the self. The Self-as-Object (the material "me") and Self-as-Knower (the subjective, self-aware "I") are linked. The former is the fundamental cognitive layer that we share with all animals and the latter is a richer self-representation that is uniquely human.

The Self is viewed differently in many fields of study. Physicists suggest that consciousness and the laws of physics are a coherent whole. Existence is explained by the operation of laws of physics on matter (or energy) in spacetime, and consciousness is inherently entangled with physical reality. For a biochemist, self would result from biochemical mechanisms involving genes, hormones, proteins, enzymes and a host of environmental factors that shapes up an individual. The intricate wirings of the brain are the essence of self for a neurobiologist, and for a social psychologist, it is a product of our environment and surroundings. For Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism and many philosophers, reality is an illusion.

In this book, Science journalist Jennifer Ouellette has done extensive literature study to write this challenging book. Even though she has not done any original research in this field, but she has been in touch with the subject matter from discussions with leading biologists, neurologists, geneticists and psychologists. A brief summary of the book is as follows; one of the most active regions of brain, when it comes to our sense of self, is the prefrontal cortex. It is the default mode network which is more active during daydreaming and is critical to self-recognition. This is where we store our representations of the people we know and process social information and predict how other people are likely to behave. So what accounts for the individual differences? The information encoded in the unique synaptic patterns in a person's brain is determined partly by genes and partly by environment. Synapses are not passive storage devices but are modified by experiences, and the brain shapes its unique sense of self. Each and every wire in the brain; the dendrites and axons that form the synaptic connections between neurons shapes self. A comprehensive map of neural connections in the brain (the wiring diagram/circuit diagram of brain) is called connectome and they define the characteristics of self. The functions of the connectomes during the resting state and during tasks help in understanding how neural structures result in specific functional behavior such as consciousness. Connectomes are modified by altering the connections as a response to neural activity patterns that accompany experiences. This is where personal nature meets physical nature. Since brains re-wire constantly in response to experience, one would need many connectomes to construct detailed map of synapses. In addition we need a theory to relate brain-functions to anatomical connectivity, because mere anatomy is like a network of roads, but that will not provide the functions, unless we know all the vehicles on the road and cargo they are carrying and where they are headed including their origin, then we will have some knowledge of overall economic and social functions.

With regards to future, the author has something interesting. It is possible to get a total personality download of our selves, an avatar or an incarnation of an individual self in virtual reality in cyberspace. With immersive digital technology, the avatar won't be you in the sense of a conscious being, but a perfect representation of you with which your future generations can interact with this digital self of yourself. An avatar of the future will learn and grow just like a real life of you. It not only uses real life memories of you and your experiences but also learns from its interaction with its environment and people. You can upload your consciousness, mind, memories, thoughts and experiences into cyberspace and achieve immortality.

Many neurobiologists believe that this may create many different representations of us that live in virtual space. The biggest challenge in all this is creating human consciousness in cyberspace.

She amuses herself and the readers with her excursion into the Wonderland using "Orange Sunshine," the mind-altering substance LSD to discover herself. This is unorthodox and juvenile excursion, but she defends her actions by listing many luminaries in science, technology and show-business who also used this psychedelic substance. The author concludes with no firm thought on the nature of self and consciousness but some key ideas from leading biologists and medical professionals are discussed. One thing that struck me was that she has not discussed physicists' perspectives of consciousness that are in better agreement with many philosophers, even though many of her friends are physicists and her husband is Caltech physicist Sean Carroll. I recommend this book to anyone interested in biology of self.

---

### **Allison says**

The author did a good job of explaining the science behind determining personality and the sense of self. I enjoyed reading this book a lot. It made me more conscience of myself. The big message I took from this book was the plasticity of personality.

---