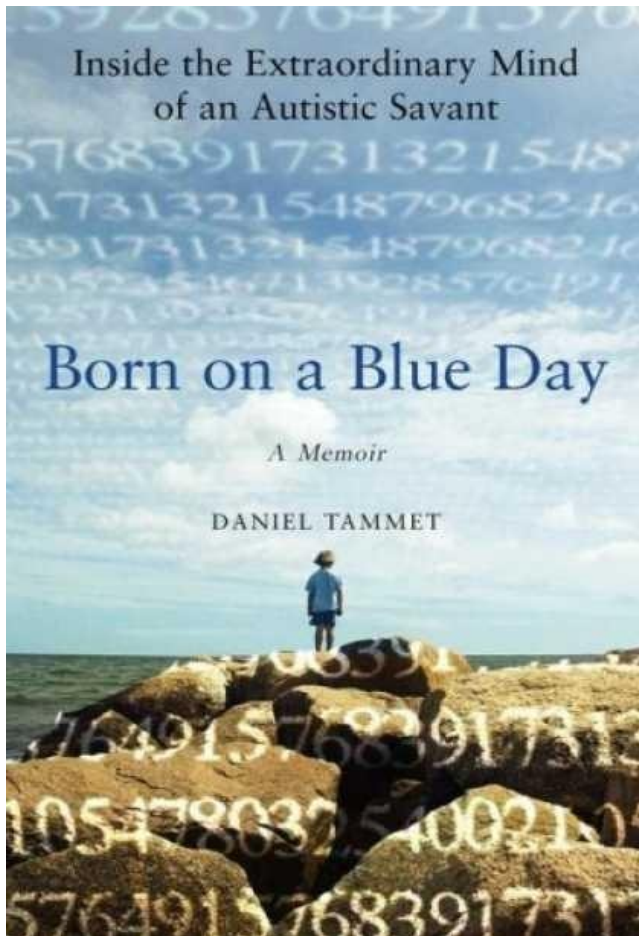


About the book



Born On A Blue Day is a journey into one of the most fascinating minds alive today -- guided by the owner himself. Daniel Tammet is virtually unique among people who have severe autistic disorders in that he is capable of living a fully independent life and able to explain what is happening inside his head.

He sees numbers as shapes, colors, and textures, and he can perform extraordinary calculations in his head. He can learn to speak new languages fluently, from scratch, in a week. In 2004, he memorized and recited more than 22,000 digits of pi, setting a record. He has savant syndrome, an extremely rare condition that gives him the most unimaginable mental powers, much like those portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the film, Rain Man.

About the Author (danieltammet.net)

Daniel Tammet was born in a working-class suburb of London, England, on 31 January 1979, the eldest of nine children. His mother had worked as a secretarial assistant; his father was employed at a sheet metal factory. Both became full-time parents.

Despite early childhood epileptic seizures and atypical behaviour, Tammet received a standard education at local schools. His learning was enriched by an early passion for reading. He won the town's 'Eager Reader' prize at the age of eleven. At secondary school he was twice named Student of the Year. He matriculated in 1995 and completed his Advanced level studies (in French, German, and History) two years later.

In 1998 Tammet took up a volunteer English teaching post in Kaunas, Lithuania, returning to London the following year. In 2002 he launched the online language learning company Optimnem. It was named a member of the UK's 'National Grid for Learning' in 2006.

In 2004, Tammet was finally able to put a name to his difference when he was diagnosed with high-functioning autistic savant syndrome by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen at Cambridge University's Autism Research Centre.

The same year, on March 14, Tammet came to public attention when he recited the mathematical constant Pi (3.141...) from memory to 22,514 decimal places in 5 hours, 9 minutes, without error. The recitation, at the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, set a European record.

Tammet began writing in 2005. His first book, *Born On A Blue Day*, subtitled 'A Memoir of Asperger's and an Extraordinary Mind', was first published in the UK in 2006 and became a Sunday Times bestseller. The US edition, published in 2007, spent 8 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. In 2008, the American Library Association named it a 'Best Book for Young Adults'. It was also a Booklist Editors' Choice. It has sold over 500,000 copies worldwide, and been translated into more than 20 languages.

In 2009, Tammet published *Embracing the Wide Sky*, a personal survey of current neuroscience. The French edition (co-translated by Tammet himself) became one of the country's best-selling non-fiction books of the year. It also appeared on bestseller lists in the UK, Canada, and Germany, and has been translated into numerous languages.

Thinking in Numbers, Tammet's first collection of essays, is published in August 2012.

In 2008 Tammet emigrated to France. He lives in Paris.

Awards (Books & Authors)

ALA Best Book For Young Adults and Booklist Editor's Choice, 2007, both for *Born on a Blue Day*

Writings

Non-fiction

- [*Born on a Blue Day*](#) (2006)
- [*Embracing the Wide Sky*](#) (2009)
- [*Thinking in Numbers*](#) (2012)

Non-fiction, Other

- *What It Feels Like To Be A Savant*, in "Esquire", August 2005
- *Open Letter to Barack Obama*, in "The Advocate", December 2008
- [*Islands of Genius*](#) (2010), foreword to book by Dr. Darold A. Treffert

Sidelights (Books & Authors)

Daniel Tammet's parents realized their son had extraordinary abilities when he was age four, not long after he suffered from an epileptic seizure. Young Daniel began associating numbers with images, imbuing each digit with characteristics such as color, texture, and size; this synesthesia gave him the ability to make rapid mathematical computations in his head and memorize long sequences of numbers in an instant. Tammet was later diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism that is associated with milder symptoms. Although he suffers from many of the classic symptoms of autism, such as difficulty socializing and a lack of empathy, Tammet is unique among so-called "autistic savants" in that he is able to describe how he makes split-second calculations, giving researchers valuable insight into the thought processes of those with savant abilities.

Tammet chronicles his life story in *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant*. The autobiography was described by a Kirkus Reviews contributor as "a riveting account of living with autism" that "transcends the disability-memoir genre." Wook Kim wrote in a review for *Entertainment Weekly* that it is "a book that inspires even as it astonishes." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer was impressed with Tammet's "ability to express himself clearly and with a surprisingly engaging tone." Tammet, declared *Booklist* reviewer Ray Olson, "writes some of the clearest prose this side of Hemingway; he tells his story with such concentration, precision, and simplicity."

Reviews

Booklist

Although Tammet is only 27, his autobiography is as fascinating as Benjamin Franklin's and John Stuart Mill's, both of which are, like his, about the growth of a mind. Not that Tammet is a scientist-statesman or philosopher. He is an autistic savant who can perform hefty arithmetical calculations at lightning speed and acquire speaking competency in a previously unknown language in mere days (the latter capability he used to create the Web-based language-learning systems with which he supports himself). More socially competent and independent than the autistic savant famously played by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, Tammet shares his peers' strong preferences for routine, peace and quiet, private space, and literalness, as well as aversion to chance occurrences, aural and informational noise, and figurative language (despite his arithmetical gift, he can't do algebra; he reads a lot but never fiction). He learned fellowship very gradually and says he couldn't really acknowledge his eight siblings until he grew up. He also writes some of the clearest prose this side of Hemingway; he tells his story with such concentration, precision, and simplicity that his familial poverty, schooling as a mainstreamed student, self-realization as gay, and embracing of Christianity prove as enthralling as they are, ultimately, normal. --Ray Olson

Publisher's Weekly

This unique first-person account offers a window into the mind of a high-functioning, 27-year-old British autistic savant with Asperger's syndrome. Tammet's ability to think abstractly, deviate from routine, and empathize, interact and communicate with others is impaired, yet he's capable of incredible feats of memorization and mental calculation. Besides being able to effortlessly multiply and divide huge sums in his head with the speed and accuracy of a computer, Tammet, the subject of the 2005 documentary, *Brainman*, learned Icelandic in a single week and recited the number pi up to the 22,514th digit, breaking the European record. He also experiences synesthesia, an unusual neurological syndrome that enables him to experience numbers and words as "shapes, colors, textures and motions." Tammet traces his life from a frustrating, withdrawn childhood and adolescence to his adult achievements, which include teaching in Lithuania, achieving financial independence with an educational Web site and sustaining a long-term romantic relationship. As one of only about 50 people living today with synesthesia and autism, Tammet's condition is intriguing to researchers; his ability to express himself clearly and with a surprisingly engaging tone (given his symptoms) makes for an account that will intrigue others as well.

A riveting account of living with autism.

Tammet, a 27-year-old Brit, is a highly functional autistic individual and something of a genius when it comes to numbers--he's a terrific chess player and knows over 22,000 digits of pi. Here, he chronicles his often confusing childhood and his successful adult life. As a schoolboy, he felt isolated: Autistic children tend toward literalism, and they have a difficult time catching unstated nuances in speech. And so, when teachers or friends spoke to Tammet but failed to ask him a direct question, he didn't realize he was supposed to respond. Although, as the author explains, autistic people tend not to catch on to emotional undercurrents, Tammet is quite attentive to the stresses and strains in his childhood home: His father had a nervous breakdown and there was never enough money (Tammet experienced his parents' fights as a color--dine). Turning to adolescence and his early 20s, Tammet recalls coming out as gay, but he doesn't allow sexuality to take over the book. Perhaps the most affecting chapters come near the end, as the author describes the quiet comfort he has achieved with his partner, Nell. In the predictable order of their shared home, Tammet feels "calm ... and secure." Tammet usefully sets his own story in a wider context, with period discussions of the state of research into autism and Asperger's syndrome. At times, he is quite poetic, especially when he writes about numbers. In his mind, numbers have shape, color and texture. Describing his occasional nighttime visions of numbers, Tammet explains that "walking around my numerical landscapes ... I never feel lost, because the prime number shapes act as signposts."

Discussion questions

1. How does Daniel Tammet's experience of numbers and language differ from that of most people? What explains his intense attraction to prime numbers? How does Daniel characterize his relationships with numbers, and how does it compare to his relationships with people?
2. How are Daniel's savant syndrome and his epilepsy connected? Why might epilepsy allow some regions of Daniel's brain to perform with remarkable efficiency? Of Daniel's many remarkable abilities as a savant, which did you find most fascinating or extraordinary, and why?
3. "Predictability was important to me, a way of feeling in control in a given situation, a way of keeping feelings of anxiety at bay, at least temporarily." To what extent is Daniel's need for regularity and predictability a kind of compulsion? Why might similar behavior in someone without savant syndrome be perceived as neurosis? How does the unexpected affect Daniel?
4. How can Daniel's professional success be understood in light of his having grown up in a large family that required a great deal of him socially, despite his autism? What roles might his family's uncertain finances and his father's illness have played in Daniel's development? How would you characterize Daniel's connection to his family as an adult?
5. Why was Daniel unable to reveal the fact of his homosexuality to his parents prior to his time volunteering in Lithuania? How did his experiences living abroad affect Daniel's sense of self? To what extent were you surprised at Daniel's ability to adapt to life in another country?
6. How would you describe Daniel's relationship with his partner, Neil? In light of Daniel's unique neurological concerns, why was their decision to move in together especially complicated? How do they accommodate Daniel's autistic spectrum disorder in their day-to-day life as a

couple? Given that Daniel has difficulty feeling and identifying emotions, why do you think he is able to experience romantic love?

7. "The relationship I have with language is quite an aesthetic one, with certain words and combinations of words being particularly beautiful and stimulating to me." How does Daniel use his knowledge of different languages to help him understand and learn new languages? What does Daniel's invention of a language of his own, Manti, reveal about his desire to communicate his appreciation of language to the world?
8. How does Daniel describe his experience of the number pi? Why are scientists particularly interested in his ability to see numbers as landscapes with color and texture? How did Daniel's memorization and recitation of thousands of digits of pi affect him and how did it enhance his visibility in the world of savant study?
9. Why might Daniel have felt a special kinship with Kim Peek, the person whose life as a savant inspired the film *Rain Man*? How does Daniel's experience of autism differ from Kim's, and what neurological abilities do they share? Why do you think Daniel describes meeting Kim Peek as "one of the happiest moments" of his life?
10. What impact did Daniel's conversion to Christianity in 2002 have on his life? What role does his religious belief play in his engagement and interaction with others? To what extent are you surprised that someone with Daniel's gifts and abilities is able to put his faith in God?

Read-Alikes

Shonda Shilling, *The Best Kind of Different* (2010)

In *The Best Kind of Different: Our Family's Journey with Asperger's Syndrome*, Shonda Shilling, wife of Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling and mother of their four children, offers the story of her family's experiences with an often misunderstood autism disorder. After their son Grant was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, Shonda and Curt set out to educate themselves and their family on the illness. Their most profound education, however, came from Grant himself, who opened his family's eyes to the challenges and joys of raising a very smart and special little boy.

Dale Archer, [*Better Than Normal: How What Makes You Different Can Make You Exceptional*](#) (2012)

Clinical psychologist and radio personality Dale Archer presents an interesting approach to rethinking diagnosis and treatment of prevalent psychological disorders. The traits that characterize disorders such as ADHD and social anxiety disorder are, in varying degrees, components of a normal personality. Archer illustrates, primarily through anecdotes and personal experience, how these characteristics may actually serve as assets. He looks at eight different disorders and their associated personality traits--including ADHD and adventurousness, OCD and perfectionism, social anxiety disorder and shyness, and generalized anxiety disorder and hyper-alertness--and explains how each trait can make an individual exceptional rather than abnormal.

Stephen M. Shore, *Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome* (2003)

In *Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome*, author Stephen M. Shore explains his experiences with autism and Asperger Syndrome. Shore is a high-functioning autistic person who also has Asperger Syndrome. His story is mostly autobiographical but is also factual and informative. In *Beyond the Wall*, Shore discusses the challenges he faces in his personal and professional life. He provides information on autism and Asperger's Syndrome and explains the frustrations he experienced within the educational and medical fields. He also shares his difficulties forming relationships in his adult life. The second edition has two new chapters: one focuses on preparing for college, while the other talks about Shore's public involvement with autism issues.

John Elder Robison, [*Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's*](#) (2007)

Originally featured in his brother Augusten Burroughs's book, *Running with Scissors*, John Elder Robison shares his story of life with Asperger's syndrome. It was not until later in life, when Robison was 40, that he was correctly diagnosed, and so spent much of his life being misunderstood. Robison begins the tale of his childhood with an alcoholic father and mentally disturbed mother. He tells how from a young age he could not communicate with others. An early indication of Asperger's is the inability to recognize facial expressions or social cues. When he failed junior high school, he was encouraged by teachers to fix the broken audiovisual equipment and thus discovered the effects the machines had on him. Eventually this leads him to his work building computerized toys and fixing cars.

Augusten Burroughs, [*Running with Scissors: A Memoir*](#) (2002)

Augusten Burroughs' mother gave him away to her psychiatrist, to pursue her own poetic delusions. The man reared him in the most bizarre of conditions. Burroughs grew up in a dilapidated Victorian house, frequented by the psychiatrist's patients. The doctor himself was mentally deranged; a pedophile lived in a shed in the backyard. Normalcy for Burroughs included free access to Valium and an electric shock machine.

Roy Richard Grinker, [*Unstrange Minds: Remapping the World of Autism*](#) (2007)

Scientists and researchers have come a long way in their understanding of autism and autism spectrum disorders. These brain disorders have been highly stigmatized in the past, and few people really understand the disease. In his book *Unstrange Minds: Remapping the World of Autism*, author and father Roy Richard Grinker explores the changing ideas and feelings about autism. Grinker's daughter, Isabel, suffers from the disorder and was diagnosed in the 1990s. Since that time, both the medical world and society as a whole have changed their views about autism. While Grinker covers the ever-changing ideas about autism, he also shares a personal and heartfelt story about his family and his daughter.

Watch-Alikes

[*The Autism Enigma*](#), PBS (2011)

The Autism Enigma looks at the progress of an international group of scientists who are looking for clues to the baffling disorder by examining the amazingly diverse and powerful microbial ecosystem that's an essential part of the human gastrointestinal tract, and the extraordinary efforts of parents who have been relentlessly pushing science forward in hopes of finding answers for their children's condition.

[*A Mother's Courage: Talking Back to Autism*](#), First Run Features (2009)

Follow one woman's journey as she tries to help her severely autistic son break out of his own mind. Traveling to the United States from her home in Iceland to try to learn more about this complex condition, she meets along the way other families who have similar situations and all are looking for some answers.

[*Autism is a World*](#), CNN (2004)

Sue Rubin, who is autistic, was diagnosed and treated as mentally retarded until the age of 13, when she began to communicate using a keyboard. She is now a junior in college. This documentary takes the viewer on a journey into her mind, her daily world, and her life with autism.

[*Temple Grandin*](#), HBO (2010)

An engaging portrait of an autistic young woman who became, through timely mentoring and sheer force of will, one of America's most remarkable success stories as a leader in the field of animal husbandry and the humane handling of cattle.

[*Rain Man*](#), MGM/UA (1988)

A callous young hustler living in California finds his father has died and left him only rose bushes and a '49 Buick convertible. Feeling cheated out of what he considers is his 3 million dollar inheritance, he is in for an even bigger surprise-a brother he never knew he had!

Listen-Alikes

- Brady Rymer, [*Love Me For Who I Am*](#) (2011)
- Andrew Bird, [*The Mysterious Production of Eggs*](#) (2005)
- Dave Brubeck, [*Time Out*](#) (1959)
- Philip Glass, [*Glassworks*](#) (1982)
- V. S. Ramachandran, [*The Tell-tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes us Human*](#) on Audiobook (2011)



Ann Arbor District Library