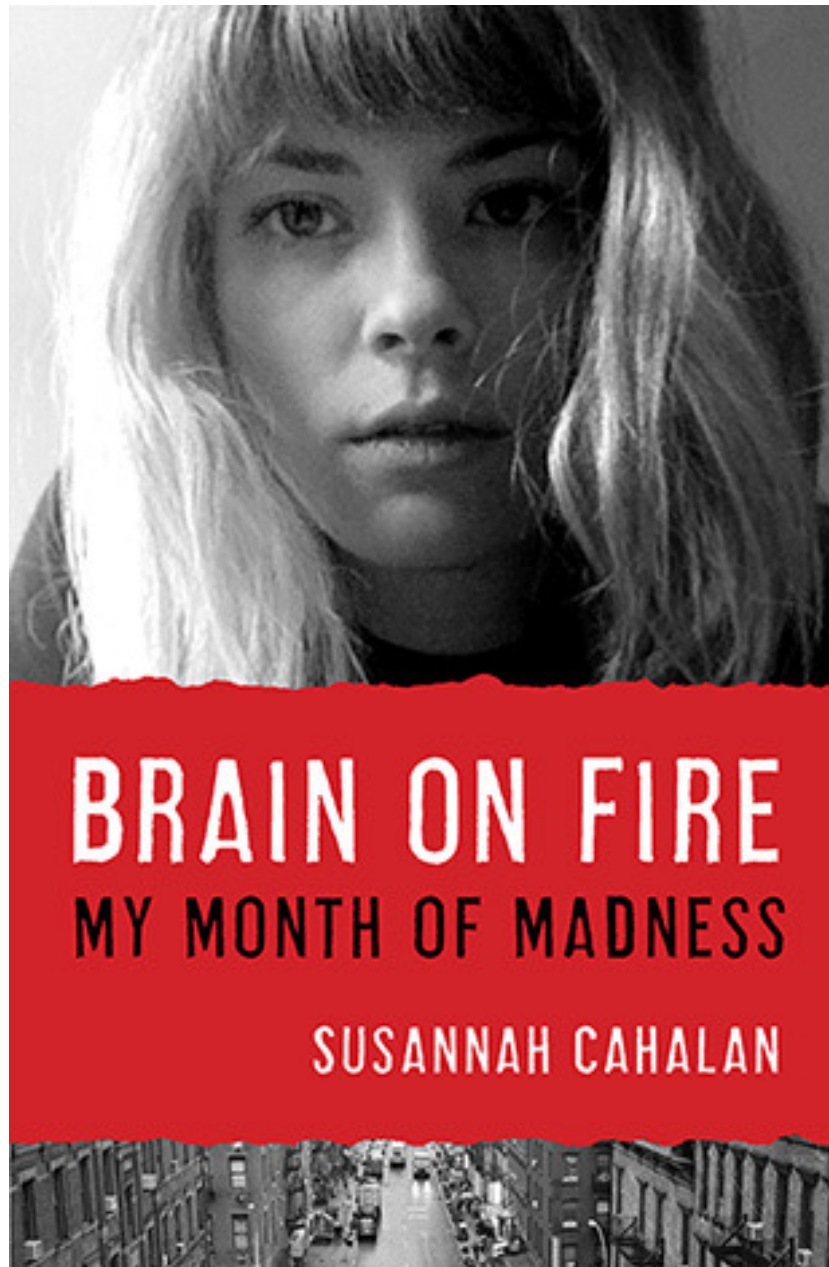


# Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness Book PDF Download



**By:**  
**Susannah Cahalan**

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### Bonnie Jean

I took care of a patient with this tragic and intriguing disorder. Her complex and terrifying journey through this disease is ongoing. Over the course of caring for her, her sister mentioned this book.

In this rare disorder, people often pass through a range of bizarre psychiatric symptoms that lead to catatonia and then often death as the body becomes unable to regulate itself, as with the patient I cared for in ICU. With the young woman who wrote this book, you see her pass through various sta

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In this rare disorder, people often pass through a range of bizarre psychiatric symptoms that lead to catatonia and then often death as the body becomes unable to regulate itself, as with the patient I cared for in ICU. With the young woman who wrote this book, you see her pass through various stages of psychosis--hallucinations, acting out, narcissisms--that baffle everyone around her until one day she has a seizure and is finally admitted to a hospital. The rest of the book is a race against time as her family and the health care professionals around her try to solve her mysterious illness and ultimately save her life in the nick of time. She considers herself incredibly lucky, and wrote this book to raise awareness about people elsewhere who may be misdiagnosed.

It's incredibly well written, and the author does a remarkable job about being open and honest, in even unflattering ways, to be true to the story and to present an accurate picture of just what this terrifying disease can do to you. It was a page-turner--and it was also all true. A fine balance of personal story blended with real science. Loved this book; couldn't put it down, and went back to work with a renewed sense of purpose.

### Will Byrnes

Susannah Cahalan, a young journalist working at a great (ok not so great, kinda schlocky actually) metropolitan newspaper, suddenly notices things going awry. She starts having episodes of paranoia, becomes hypersensitive to sound, light and cold. She suffers from loss of appetite and begins having out-of-body experiences and wild mood swings. A tour of New York psych and neuro pros did not yield much more than a suspicion that she had been partying too hard. On the other hand, grand mal seizure

Susannah Cahalan, a young journalist working at a great (ok not so great, kinda schlocky actually) metropolitan newspaper, suddenly notices things going awry. She starts having episodes of paranoia, becomes hypersensitive to sound, light and cold. She suffers from loss of appetite and begins having out-of-body experiences and wild mood swings. A tour of New York psych and neuro pros did not yield much more than a suspicion that she had been partying too hard. On the other hand, grand mal seizures can be so convincing.

Cahalan's is a tale of survival. It is amazing, in the 21st century, how much we do

know about the human brain. Maybe the Star Trek people were wrong. Maybe the brain is the real final frontier. It sure seems like a lot of the weapons being used today are as old fashioned as spears and tomahawks. It is Cahalan's journey through this hostile environment that is one of the main foci here. She was diagnosed by serious professionals as having partied too hard, as being bipolar, schizophrenic, psychotic and probably a few more fun things from the DSM manual.

Her story is almost like a mystery, with clues, red herrings, suspects, good guys and bad's well, there are not really any bad guys, just uninformed medical pros. Good guys include a bf made of solid gold, and several of the docs who look into her odd case. Dad stands pretty tall as well.

One way you can tell the pioneers is by the arrows in their backs. In terms of what Cahalan is finally diagnosed with it is clear that many of those pioneers did not survive. There is a point in the progress of this particular disease (yes, they do find what ails her) beyond which the damage is too severe to step back. Cahalan comes through, damaged but recovering.

So what are we to make of all this? Cahalan's is definitely a story that comes from the heart. She had to struggle to reconstruct events from her life, events for which she was present, in which she was even an actor, but events for which she retained no memory. Scary stuff. Her journey through the medical Indian territory was frightening and her arrival at Fort Diagnosis was uplifting. We learn something new about the world and the information has implications for a wide swath of maladies. Might it be that many who are diagnosed with autism, say, or schizophrenia, might have a treatable, biological, as opposed to psychological, disease? It might. Consider your horizon expanded.

There is a smattering of science in the book, maybe not enough for my taste, but certainly not too much, and what is there is simple and understandable, even for those of us whose medical expertise stops where the rules of Milton Bradley's

end.

One crucial element here is the personality of the narrator. How we feel about Cahalan can affect our reaction to the book overall. Here we run into bit of a teratoma. I did not feel much for this particular person. While she is certainly bright, and writes well, I got the impression that she was not exactly the best possible human being. During one of her episodes, Cahalan threw repeated fits in a car, while with her family. It was like a spoiled child on steroids and meth. It is an appalling scene, yet seriously mitigated by the fact that this person is not well. However, it does make one wonder about how the manifestations of this disease reflect the underlying person. Her mother later recounts:

## Nancy

I rarely read memoirs. Too often the author spends far too much time painting themselves in the best possible light and/or justifying their behavior. It is a rare and gifted author that can objectively describe a personal event without infusing it with strong emotions.

Perhaps Susannah was able to accomplish this huge feat due to the simple fact that she was unaware of herself much of the time that her brain was inflamed. She begins with the first noticeable symptom; a couple of bed bug bites tha

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Perhaps Susannah was able to accomplish this huge feat due to the simple fact that she was unaware of herself much of the time that her brain was inflamed. She begins with the first noticeable symptom; a couple of bed bug bites that were probably hallucinations and escalates from there. Some of it remembers in bits and pieces right up until her major seizure which wasn't a pretty picture, nor did she try to paint it as such. Rushed to the hospital, her mind is blank for the next month until she is correctly diagnosed and begins the slow healing process.

I found Susannah's story absolutely fascinating. She fairly balances her experiences with simple medical terminology, cites doctors notes and tries to piece together a chronological picture of her sickness, interactions with those who love her, and hospital video. She describes her intense and insane mindset without previously establishing her basic personality. This is an excellent strategy as her writing style and brief "normal" clearly defines her as an intelligent and engaging young woman. The fact that she is confident enough to allow the reader to arrive at this conclusion endeared her to me all the more by trusting the reader.

Although I recoil when an author writes a book with an agenda, Susannah's agenda is simply awareness of the possibility that mental illness can be physiological in nature, caused by a virus or bacteria, changing the personality of a person to such an extreme that mental illness is diagnosed and the person spends the rest of her life in an institution. Susannah was greatly blessed by intersecting with a doctor who had recently made the discovery of this malady.

It's an amazing story and Susannah is an extremely gifted writer. This reader was stunned to do the math on Susannah's age. She was 24 when she fell victim to this illness and no more than 27 or 28 when she reconstructed the time period and wrote the book. I can't wait to see what else she publishes.

## **Emily Fox**

Interesting and terrifying read.

## Jen McLeod

You could probably call this a great piece of investigative reporting. Unfortunately for me, it was instead labelled as a memoir, leaving me feeling exasperated and misled. I guess I was hoping for something akin to the more enjoyable memoirs that I've read (I'm thinking *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls, or even *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, which is not so much memoir as it is fiction based on memoir - beside the point). This was more like an excruciatingly long newspaper article, ch

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rather than

. This book is all

.

Having just finished this (in a day and a half because I wanted to move on to something more enjoyable) I'm really confused by the 4.08 Goodreads rating. This means it's been set between "I loved it" and "it was amazing". That just seems like a really big stretch for me. The excess of sentence fragments alone should disqualify it from being anything above a 3-star rating. The book markedly lacks any sort of style or writer's voice. It's very...singular.

I noted down two sentence that I thought were a bit ridiculous and more or less summed up the whole book for me:

When speaking about her mother, "She was terrified of even hearing about cancer on the radio..." I think the writer meant that her mother became "terrified" when she heard about cancer on the radio.



Otherwise, she is describing an irrational fear of the radio.

"...everyone around me struggled internally to keep the superficial flow of words going while also concentrating on ignoring the obvious pink elephant in the room: my shocking state." Problem words: internally, superficial, obvious, "my shocking state". What a horrid sentence.

I'm so glad to be finished this.