Losing Touch - A Man Without His Body

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Book Review

Cole, J. *Losing touch - A man without his body*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Reviewed by: Astrid M.L. Kappers, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Most of us will think that it is possible to imagine how it would be to be blind: just close your eyes and experience how hard it becomes to move around, to find objects, to cook your meal or to explore the internet. Likewise, blocking your hearing with earplugs or white noise may give an indication of how it is to be deaf: speech becomes inaccessible, warning sounds cannot be heard and the pleasure of listening to music is no longer attainable. But how would it be to be without touch?

This book has the appropriate subtitle "A man without his body". It tells the story of the life of Ian Waterman, a man who lost his touch and proprioception at the age of 19. Without proprioception, all movements have to be planned and performed consciously with constant visual guidance. But knowing about this need to constantly guide one's movements hardly conveys the impact this condition has on normal life. Since every movement disrupts the delicate body balance, it involves an immense daily struggle to be able to walk, to gesture and even to move the arms while seated. Only someone with the enormous drive and energy of Ian Waterman could manage to appear near normal at first contact.

Not only his personal life, ups and downs, jobs, marriages, houses, animals and hobbies are touched upon in the book, the numerous scientific experiments in which he participated are also described in detail. Over the years, the author, the neurologist Jonathan Cole, accompanied Ian Waterman to many neuroscience labs all over the world, where scientists of high standing "subjected" Ian Waterman to all kinds of clever experiments to shed more light on his neurological condition. These experiments only worked when Ian Waterman was given the opportunity to critically comment on the experimental conditions and was treated as an actively participating person instead of just a "guinea pig" (term used in the book).

Thanks to Ian Waterman's active involvement in the experimental design, the scientists got better insights into which unforeseen and surprising cues he sometimes used to perform their tasks. In one such experiment, he had to make a grasping movement without seeing his hand or arm and subsequently move his hand back to the start position. For someone without proprioception this latter task should be impossible, but to the surprise of the researchers, he managed this without any problems. Ian Waterman, in his turn, was surprised that the researchers had not realized that he just used temperature to move back to the same, slightly warmer location.

Jonathan Cole managed to write a very interesting and accessible book, not only for specialists, but also for a broad readership. The book is a combination of a biography and a scientific search for a fundamental understanding of the neurophysiology of our proprioceptive system. It also answers very convincingly the question how it would be to be without touch and thereby stimulates awareness of the importance of touch. It may be uncommon to call a book like this a page-turner, but once you start reading, it is hard to put the book aside.