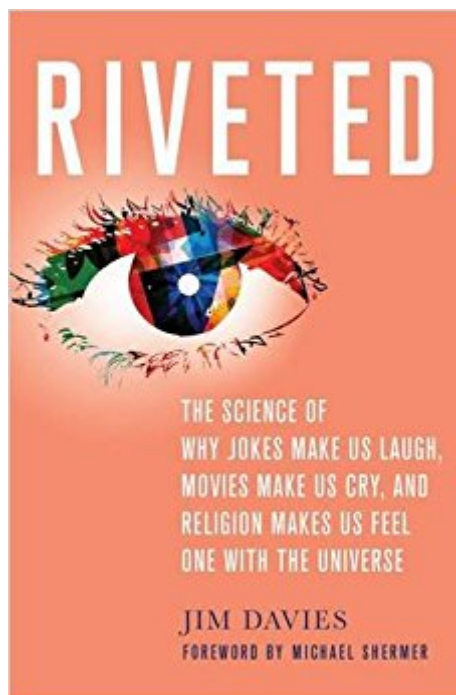


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# Riveted: The Science Of Why Jokes Make Us Laugh, Movies Make Us Cry, And Religion Makes Us Feel One With The Universe



## Synopsis

Why do some things pass under the radar of our attention, but other things capture our interest? Why do some religions catch on and others fade away? What makes a story, a movie, or a book riveting? Why do some people keep watching the news even though it makes them anxious? The past 20 years have seen a remarkable flourishing of scientific research into exactly these kinds of questions. Professor Jim Davies' fascinating and highly accessible book, *Riveted*, reveals the evolutionary underpinnings of why we find things compelling, from art to religion and from sports to superstition. Compelling things fit our minds like keys in the ignition, turning us on and keeping us running, and yet we are often unaware of what makes these "keys" fit. What we like and don't like is almost always determined by subconscious forces, and when we try to consciously predict our own preferences we're often wrong. In one study of speed dating, people were asked what kinds of partners they found attractive. When the results came back, the participants' answers before the exercise had no correlation with who they actually found attractive in person! We are beginning to understand just how much the brain makes our decisions for us: we are rewarded with a rush of pleasure when we detect patterns, as the brain thinks we've discovered something significant; the mind urges us to linger on the news channel or rubberneck an accident in case it might pick up important survival information; it even pushes us to pick up *People* magazine in order to find out about changes in the social structure. Drawing on work from philosophy, anthropology, religious studies, psychology, economics, computer science, and biology, Davies offers a comprehensive explanation to show that in spite of the differences between the many things that we find compelling, they have similar effects on our minds and brains.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gazing at a beautiful view from a log cabin; hearing a ghost story; reciting the Lord's Prayer...Are these experiences in any way alike? According to Jim Davies, they are. "Strange as it may seem, compelling things share many similarities." In this book, Davies claims to do "something that has never been done before": to show that "the qualities that are common to all these things fit like a key in a lock with our psychological proclivities." He calls it the compellingness foundations theory. Davies "a professor at the Institute of Cognitive Science of Carleton University" posits six foundations for compellingness. I'll buy four of them. The first is social compellingness theory. We tend to think that all patterns have something to do with social meaning, intention and agency; and we tend to believe social explanations that we hear from other people. We look for reasons, not causes. Faced with a mysterious or random catastrophe, for example, we assume conscious intent. (Which explains conspiracy theories.) Secondly, we tend to believe the things we fear or hope are true. Believing in what we fear to be true has evolutionary advantages: it's safer to believe that the shape in the corner is a man-eater rather than a heap of old clothes. Hope is a little more curious: "one of the ultimate reasons we do anything is so that we will have beliefs that make us happy." Thus, we prefer landscapes to abstract art: we like to look at pictures of what's good for us, including food, or "sources" of food, like trees and animals. Constable beats Pollock. Third, "we love patterns and repetition." We love symmetry because we prefer patterns that are easy to understand.

So unfortunately I waited too long and forgot to take good notes on this book. But I'm going to do my best. The big idea of *Riveted* is to ask why some things are captivating and others are not. Why some get sucked into a song that leaves others cold. The basic foundational principals Jim Davies uses to construct his argument are the assumption that humans are interested in other humans, we give special interest to facts we hope or fear, humans are pattern seeking, which in turn means we are compelled by incongruity, the structure of our senses is fundamental to our reaction to the world, and there are core psychological structures built into the structure of our brain that shape what we are inclined to believe or disbelieve. The question of compellingness is itself rather compelling. Marketers spend a lot of time wondering about how to manipulate it. Each person spends a decent amount of time considering what they find compelling when making a large purchase, and ultimately we spend time trying to pick from the myriad of possibilities in our daily life what we think will

ultimately be most compelling in the long term. At least based on what stood out to me I'd say the strongest case for what will be compelling is made for items that encourage us to find a pattern and that which disrupts an expected pattern. Repetition in games feeds the desire to observe regularity. But a misplaced object can cause a unquenchable disease even if a person doesn't quite understand what is causing it. The other dimensions all are given a good case too but these seem to touch on some of the most fundamental reasons why something would be compelling. There are some questionable claims that a reader would have to dive into to figure out if are true.

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