



Donovan's Brain

Curt Siodmak

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Curt Siodmak was a writer who was always ahead of his time. Today there are many writers who are comfortable in both print and film; there is also frequent overlap between science fiction and horror. But Siodmak was doing all this -- and doing it well -- before anyone else. He helped bring real science fiction to the movies (The Magnetic Monster, Riders to the Stars) and television (with scripts for Men into Space and Science Fiction Theatre). But his greatest fame as a scriptwriter was in the field of horror, with his creation of the character forever linked with Lon Chaney, Jr., The Wolf Man.

How appropriate that his greatest novel should be the basis of three legitimate film versions and endless variations in other movies and television shows. Donovan's Brain is one of the most influential novels of our times.

Dr. Patrick Cory is a scientist who, unable to save the life of W.H. Donovan after a plane crash, keeps his brain alive through an illegal experiment.

The story provides an examination of human evil that is impossible to forget. W.H. Donovan is much more than one of the world's richest men. He is a megalomaniac even before Cory keeps his brain alive in the tank. Once freed of the distractions of the flesh, the will to power is all that drives the brain. It is able to communicate with Dr. Cory through telepathy, but that is only the beginning. Soon it begins to take over the scientist who keeps it alive. Possessed by the mind of Donovan, Cory finds himself helpless to fight the plans of the tycoon. Cory remains aware as he follows orders, becoming more and more like Donovan. His wife is helpless, his assistant is helpless, to stop Donovan's Brain!

A word of warning: Don't start reading this novel unless you have the time to finish it in one sitting! This is a true page turner.

Donovan's Brain Details

Date : Published December 1st 1942 by Pulpless.com (first published 1942)

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Author : Curt Siodmak

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From Reader Review Donovan's Brain for online ebook

Warren Dunham says

Lets put a brain in a jar. What could go wrong?

Donovan's Brain reminded me a lot of Frankenstein. It wasn't nearly as good but it focused a lot on the you really shouldn't do, as wells as the possibly mad science or at least driven scientist.

Well what can go wrong? apparently it was insane before and got psychic powers to control people. This will not end well...

is it good? well it was entertaining in a watching the train wreck way, but the characters were not sympathetic, sometimes a little flat, and their was some sexism and racism. So it needs to be judged against other books of its time. I would recommend it if the primary premise sounds interesting that part is worth it (i almost gave it the fourth star).

Denis says

Curt Siodak 1902-2000 is a German/American scifi/horror screen writer and novelist. "Donovan's Brain (1942)" is his most notorious novel. This book was brought to my attention while listening to a Margaret Atwood interview on Youtube. She went at length to describe Donovan's plot while it just so happened that I was halfway through reading a more recent Siodak novel "City in the Sky" (1974) at the time.

'Well', I thought, 'I must get to that one sooner than later.'

"Donovan's Brain" is an early "Brain in a Jar" type story. I only found two previous examples of these: "The World, The Flesh, and the Devil" (1929) by J.D. Bernal, which is, I believe, a non-fiction speculative book of what is to come and "The Whisperer in Darkness" (Weird Tales Aug 31) by H.P. Lovecraft, where an extraterrestrial race has the ability to surgically extract a human brain and store it into a 'canister' in order for it to withstand the rigors of outer space travel.

In "Donovan's Brain", this idea is fully exploited in a novel: A megalomaniac millionaire (W. H. Donovan) crashes his private plane in the desert near the home of Dr. Cory, a physician who is unable to save him, seizes the opportunity of stealing his brain to continue experiments he happen to be doing with animal brains by placing them in an electrically charged, oxygenated saline solution within a glass tank.

The brain grows as it is fed and eventually develops psi powers, enabling it to control the bodies and minds of others on the outside. You may have seen one of a few movies versions based on this novel "The Lady and the Monster" (1944), "Donovan's Brain" (1953), and "The Brain" (1962). I've only seen the latter version as of yet, however, the novel did not come off as a cheesy scifi B-movie. It was very well written, and could be appreciated on many levels such as:

- Should mad scientist be allowed to use themselves as their own guinea pigs?
- Is scientific pursuits above morality?
- Are certain (evil) people better off left to die, even if they can be saved?

A must read for those who dig this sort of thing.

Ivo says

"Donovan's Brain" describes THE archetypical 50s mad-scientist-plot. The visualisation of the brain under the glass dome with cables attached to it, next to a man in white clothes having a shocked expression on his face can be seen in many pulpy cover pictures of this time. And not only this fact, also the whole style of the book gives us this nice retro 50s feeling.

Written in the style of a diary, the protagonist describes the story of an experiment going awry leading to the loss of control over his mind and body. Therefore it is no wonder, that I was constantly reminded to the even more classical tale of "Dr Jekyll and MR Hyde".

the gift says

fun, fantastic, quick, darkly comic... perhaps because i knew it had been made into a movie (3 times), i read it like a movie script, that is, not much intense psychology, only everything visual, close-up, tracking, lighting, montage- this short book could be black and white 'b' features, you could make it lurid, dramatic, crazy, made for drive-in theatres. in any form this could make a good movie... so i am hesitant to see how the movies actually did it!

Morgan Dhu says

The 1942 novel - another Retro Hugo finalist - Donovan's Brain, by Curt Siodmak, is a complex exploration of obsession and consequence. The protagonist, Dr. Patrick Cory, is a brilliant medical researcher, deeply fascinated with the idea of understanding brain function. In the tradition of the obsessed "mad" scientist, he works virtually alone out of his basement lab in a remote rural area, with his wife Janice, a nurse, as lab assistant when necessary and the local county doctor and coroner, the aging and alcoholic Dr. Schratt, as a sounding board.

Cory has allowed his research to take over the whole of his life. He barely has any relationship remaining with his wife, whose support - domestic and financial - he takes for granted. He sees Schratt only in terms of his usefulness to his own goals, he has no other human relationships - in fact he seems emotionally dead, interested only in his research.

When Cory is called to the scene of a plane crash - Schratt is incapacitated and the locals know him to be a doctor, albeit a non-practicing one - he finds one of the two survivors is severely injured and near death. Emergency surgery on location does little to improve the man's condition, and it becomes obvious that the man - whom Cory has identified as millionaire Warren Horace Donovan - will not survive the journey to the nearest hospital. Instead, Cory has Donovan taken to his lab, where, as he is dying, Cory harvests his brain and, using the equipment he has developed through animal experimentation, preserves the brain, alive.

Cory's obsession to understand what the brain is capable of leads him to discover a means of augmenting the brain's power to the point where Donovan can communicate with him telepathically, at first through

automatic writing, later directly. In fact, Donovan's vastly increased will eventually overpowers Cory's autonomy, forcing him to carry out Donovan's own obsession, allowing nothing to stand in his way.

In their different ways, both men are obsessed with their goals and will stop at nothing, even murder, to achieve them. Siodmak explores the impact of obsession on relationships, first through the empty shell of Cory's marriage, then through observation of the effects Donovan in life had on his family and close associates.

As the novel is presented as a series of entries in Cory's journal, there is an element of the unreliable narrator here, but this is offset by that narrator's devotion to a scientific worldview - he records his events, thoughts, actions, emotions, with a certain level of detachment and self-honesty. And it is through the changes in his entries that we see him slowly regaining his humanity as he experiences what it is to be sacrificed to another's obsession. It's a stripped-down narrative, creating a fast-paced story that generates both mystery and suspense - why is Donovan forcing Cory to do these things, and whose will will prevail in the end.

At its core, *Donovan's Brain* is a case study of the damage done by closing out one's humanity to focus on a single goal, be it scientific truth, or the accumulation of wealth, or any of the other obsessions humans are prone to pursuing.

Nicholas Whyte says

<https://nwhyte.livejournal.com/3011851.html>

A short novel which was the basis of several memorable films. Our protagonist, a mildly corrupt doctor in a desert town in the Western USA, rescues the brain of evil millionaire Donovan, who is fatally injured in a plane crash, and finds a way of keeping it alive; but the brain is stronger than its human minders, and manipulates them to continue its original owner's evil plans of various kinds (notably perverting the course of justice). It's a basic horror plot of possession, but there's a tremendously convincing air of despairing degeneracy about the entire story (the narrator is disgusted with himself) and nods to the latest technology as of 1942.

Mike Jensen says

I like a sci-fi novel that does not overdo the sci-fi. This is basically a study of a sociopathic personality and the conscienceless havoc he inflicts on the lives of others. As such it is quite a good study, in some ways reminding me of the do-anything sociopaths in *Jim Thompson*. The sci-fi side allows us to see this personality both in life (through discovery, Donovan dies at the start of the book) and after death as his brain eventually controls the doctor who preserves it. At first, Dr. Cory seems as obsessive as Donovan, but Donovan's is the stronger will. This sci-fi conceit allows us to see the sociopath in control of another person's body in many ways and to see how far he could go. This is the strength of the book.

Its weakness, of course, is the rank implausibility of it all. The science makes no sense, though you have to credit Siodmak for doing everything he can to make it seem credible. As with everything, you either fall under its spell, or you don't. I could not fall under the spell of that part of the book.

TWILIGHT ZONE fans may enjoy this book. Not only is the story similar to the type of story people like in the ZONE, it even ends with a Serlingesque sermon to tell you what it all means.

Seth says

This was probably the first SF novel I read and it was great. A few years ago I wondered if it was as awesome as I remembered, so I reread it. I was ecstatic to find that it stood the test of time and delivered the same magic as when I first read it sooooo long ago.

Alycia says

I wanted to read this because a line from this book is used in IT.

Antonio Santoyo says

A very enjoyable novel, a classic of sorts. A good story solidly written, with no small talk or useless musings so dear to psychological fiction.

Bukk says

This is an underrated work of excellent science fiction. Though its premise may at first seem familiar or cliché, it is anything but. A truly unique story with substance, psychological intrigue, and fascinating ideas, from the midst of the golden age of sci-fi.

Terrifying of Goats says

this is one of the greatest horror books I've read in a while, and I would never have picked it up if not for Stephen Kings praise of it in Danse Macabre.

It is short, focused, savage little book, composed, structured and written like a crime novels of its day. But at the same time it plays wonderfully - and nastily - with issues of identity, and the blurry line between life and death. It's the best novel on mind control I've read, and leaves Carrion Comfort in the dust. It could be called a noir precedent of Being John Malkovich.

The network of subjugation and control, both normal and supernatural, are deliciously rendered, with variations on passive and dominant relationships (not in an S&M way) underplaying and reinforcing the themes.

I don't think it's dated at all. Beyond a few cultural references, it could've been written yesterday. (even the smoking plays into its obsessions with control and manipulation).

I'd encourage you to check out this neglected masterpiece.

Norman Cook says

This is a quintessential "mad" scientist story. Dr. Cory keeps Donovan's brain in a jar while trying to figure out how to communicate with it. Eventually, the brain develops telepathy with the doctor and the sociopath Donovan is unleashed. This is a quick read, the action propelling forward at a fast rate, although there is still time for Siodmak to ruminate on the nature of humans in stressful situations and relationships. The answers to the mystery of Donovan's actions unfold neatly and logically. Siodmak uses medical jargon to good effect, adding to the verisimilitude of the events. Siodmak's credentials as a screenwriter are evident, too, as he paints vivid word pictures with just enough detail to keep the reader satisfied. Perhaps not great literature, this book nevertheless is entertaining and thought provoking, serving as a model for many subsequent stories of science gone too far.

Note: a couple of times the book uses a racial slur to describe characters. Wince inducing to be sure, but they don't significantly detract from the overall narrative.

Michelle B says

Read the book. Saw the movie. Enjoyed both. The concept is wacky but Siodmak convinces you it could happen. It comforts me that science has never achieved this. The ending is a cheat, but I don't really suppose there was any other way to do it.

Amy Blue says

Dangerous book, but a good one!

Sean Randall says

Spooky stuff, although not really very deep or meaningful. Very interesting treatment of women, too.

Craig says

Curt Siodmak was the father of modern werewolves as Stoker was to vampires, but he also wrote some excellent other stories, Donovan's Brain being among the most prominent. It's a classic medical horror/mad scientist tale; the original brain-in-a-jar novel. It was filmed several times, as well as being dramatized on radio, the most notable that I've encountered being the 1944 Orson Welles version on Suspense. Welles' repetitious catch-phrase of "Sure, sure, sure!" was a real chiller! It's a great old classic, well worth revisiting.

astaliegurec says

Curt Siodmak's 1942 book "Donovan's Brain" apparently was the basis of three B movies:

- Lady and The Monster (1944)
- Donovan's Brain (1953)
- The Brain (1962)

I'm pretty sure I foolishly watched at least one of those movies in my youth. Now, I can say the same for the book. Unfortunately, in terms of literary merit, this book is in the same mold as those movies: bad and cheesy. Essentially, it's the story of one shallow, cardboard cutout of a psychopath who does something bad to another cardboard cutout of a psychopath. When the tables turn, we get to watch some of the entirely empty cardboard cutouts around them react. The science (as expected) is bad, and the writing is bad. I'm giving it an extra star because it's supposedly a cult classic and because the dribs and drabs we collect on one of the psychopaths are somewhat interesting. I'm rating the book at a Pretty Bad 2 stars out of 5.

Joseph Carrabis says

Donovan's Brain is dated and still a great read. The science has been surpassed (you probably don't want to know how and why, it's neither pretty nor pleasant) but you should be reading this for the story and how people deal with the events therein, not for the science. Do you read HG Wells' First Men in the Moon then go looking for Cavorite?

Nick Sheridan says

My longer review of this book is posted at CrapLookingBooks.com

“Dr Patrick Cory is being destroyed by a brain which he recovered from a dying millionaire.”

That’s a pitch and a half right there. The story is surprisingly simple. Somewhat estranged surgeon Dr Patrick Cory saves the brain of a millionaire who happens to crash his plane nearby. He feeds the brain, and as it grows it extends increased control over the doctor, manipulating him to carry out an unknown and possibly diabolical plan.

The text employs strong, original scientific metaphors throughout, that even seven decades later have not become cliché or overused. The reader is aware of looking through a scientist’s eyes, examining the world and making sense of it in a clinical and medical fashion. It is bold originality that some modern writers, who still insist on giving their characters butterflies in their stomach and springs in their step, could learn from.

It is an impeccably well-written book, and an enjoyable read.

I’d recommend it if you fancy a study in driven characters, and if you’re the sort of person who questions your own motives or forgets why you like the things you do.

Nick

xx

My longer review of this book is posted at CrapLookingBooks.com
