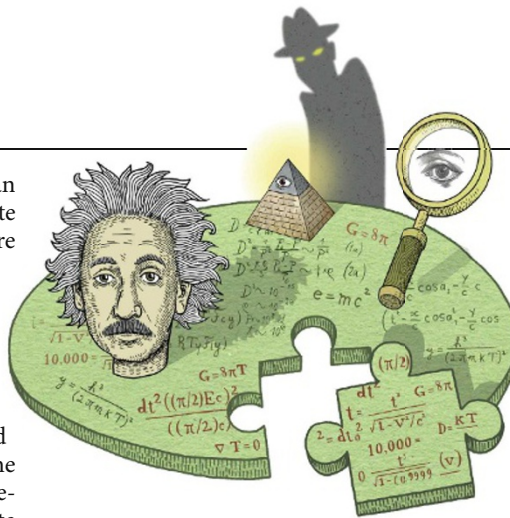


goes on the run with Monique Reynolds, an up-and-coming string theorist, in a desperate attempt to find the secret information before it falls into the wrong hands.

The book is reminiscent of Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*, about the exploitation of antimatter. But this is no ordinary thriller. First, Alpert can actually write. Like many 'lab lit' authors, he is clever with scientific metaphors: Monique is at one point described as "unyielding and unstoppable, bending the whole fabric of spacetime around her". Moreover, Alpert has made an effort to integrate serious physics into the plot. As a former grad student turned Einstein biographer, Swift knows the great man's work intimately and can explain the basics on behalf of the reader. In the author's note, we learn that Alpert has a lot in common with his protagonist. Both share a physics education, a defection to a peripheral career (Alpert currently writes for *Scientific American*) and, like Swift in the novel, Alpert is author of a seminal research paper that is enjoying a re-examination.

Alpert manages to avoid some of the usual fictional-scientist stereotypes. His coup is Reynolds, a black female physicist who drives



a Corvette with the number plate 'STRINGS'. Her geek chic is as far from the boffin cliché as you can get; indeed it is a reasonable representation of what modern scientists can be like. Alpert does occasionally slip: grad students are described as pale, gangly, poorly dressed and bespectacled, and the last Einstein protégé left standing goes mad while seeking to exploit the theory for his own ends. Yet right up until the point he starts waving around an Uzi, the protégé's 'madness' is relatively harmless, fixated on unlimited energy and new medicines.

It is disappointing when these wild but admirable dreams degenerate into frank evil.

It would have been more elegant had Alpert explored scientists' obsessive nature without actually crossing that line. Nevertheless, even this character is not half as mad as the rogue terrorist nor as evil as the FBI. The flip-side of yearning for plausible scientific characters in fiction is to recognize that, as human beings, scientists should be allowed to be as prone to crazy or bad behaviour as any other member of society.

The more disturbing stereotypical trait in the book, however, is that scientists shouldn't meddle with things they aren't meant to know. Swift "thought he could get a glimpse of the Theory of Everything without suffering any consequences, and now he was being punished for this sin of pride, this rash attempt to read the mind of God". This could be a sentiment straight from *The Clouds*, Aristophanes' cautionary comedy about the hubris of the sophist school, or the myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the Sun. Haven't we moved on a bit since then? ■

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Inside the mind of a marathon runner

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running

by Haruki Murakami

Translated by Philip Gabriel

Harvill Secker/Knopf: 2008. 192 pp.

£9.99/\$21

Reading, writing and running: three skills I did not expect to encounter alongside each other with much passion. I grew up playing sports and desired a physically active career. Of the three skills, running came to me last and the hardest. I took it up after the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. One Olympiad later, I find I share these interests with Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, who has written

a memoir about the role that marathon running plays in his life.

The Athens Olympics was a turning point in my amateur athletics career because the city's heavy smog made me rethink my asthma treatment. I enjoyed anaerobic or short-burst events, but quickly became short of breath. After taking my fix of salbutamol — technically doping, if not prescribed — I could continue in some limited fashion, but endurance events eluded me. I decided on returning from Athens to start taking a preventive inhaler, beclomethasone dipropionate. My doctor had prescribed it, but I had never taken it, objecting to being permanently medicated for a mild and reasonably well-controlled condition. Within a

month of using it, I could run for an hour without taking a deep breath or additional medication. The experience was transformative.

This is how it felt reading *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. At the start, I thought Murakami and I were different: he is human and I am a cyborg. When I run, I am motivated by the thought that this should not be possible, that I am defying nature. I feel 'better than well'. Murakami started running when he was 33, about the same age I am now, so I hoped to find some common ground. And so it proved.

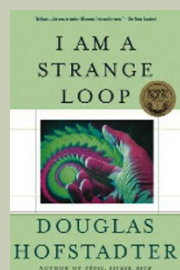
I was asked to review Murakami's memoir in the context of my expertise on the ethics of biotechnological enhancements. Perhaps

I Am A Strange Loop

by Douglas R. Hofstadter

(Basic Books, \$16.95, £9.99)

Hofstadter extols his views on the nature of consciousness and the self. The book provides an interesting journey whether you agree with his conclusions or not. He "whisks us away to tangle with ever more layers of paradox and wonderfully mind-wrenching questions," wrote Susan Blackmore (*Nature* **447**, 29–30; 2007).

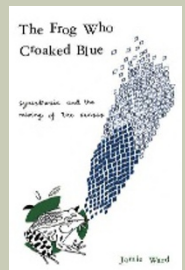


The Frog who Croaked Blue: Synesthesia and the Mixing of the Senses

by Jamie Ward

(Routledge, \$16.95, £8.99)

A fascinating introduction to synaesthesia, explaining how the trait gives insight into the way the senses are organized. Ward also delves into other sensory experiences, such as phantom limbs and sympathetic touch, in an accessible introduction to this growing research field.





this text might persuade me of the value of remaining unenhanced by technology. After all, the experience of a long-distance runner — international novelist or not — is typically existential, with narrative usually more important than competition to an individual's performance. Runners refer to being in the 'zone' or the 'runner's high', the latter describing the euphoria experienced when running long distances. What struck me about Murakami was his ability to reconcile the two dimensions of competitiveness and personal narrative.

Murakami speaks of his body in mechanical, performative terms, attributing autonomy to each body part, thereby invoking the prospect of intelligent biology. His muscles talk to him, plead with him and sometimes work with him. His relationship with various parts of his body is an exemplar of Cartesian mind-body dualism, and accords with the science of long-distance running more generally. Murakami's

process of self-dialogue, reflected in his title, is a feature of a long-distance runner's introspection, a motivating mantra without which the perception of pain and awareness of the practice's futility might return.

Murakami's primary mode of performance enhancement is training, and critics and advocates of the integration of humans and technology should pause to reflect on that. Amid the mire of moral discourse on enhancements such as designer steroids, competitive sport comprises a technological relationship between biology and artifice. Murakami celebrates technological support in various, non-doping ways. For example, he coats his body in Vaseline before donning a wetsuit at the start of a triathlon to improve the efficiency of his switchover from swimming to cycling, when he must remove the suit. He uses a feather-light bicycle to optimize his speed and explains how competitive cycling is unlike riding for leisure: generating power on the up-pedal motion

changes the muscle group required.

His running shoes are light and well padded, but not enough to prevent the knee damage he encountered after his 62-mile ultramarathon in Japan. Murakami is at ease with the prospect of the long-term damage that accrues from his running, speaking of it as an inevitability of the pursuit. He does not dwell on the discomfort: "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional."

Running nourishes Murakami's writing. It allows him space, a void that he sees as a necessary encounter with nothingness to balance the verbose side of his life. Like many mountaineers who are compelled to climb, he runs because some unknown force makes him do so — his legs need to run, he says.

Readers who hope to understand Murakami through this memoir might feel unsatisfied. It is not about Murakami's life overall, but of his life as a runner. No great mysteries are uncovered about his writing, where it comes from, what inspires it, or what his books mean to him. The style is different from his other literary works. Yet it reveals that, for Murakami, books and running cannot be separated. With this his only published memoir, it is all we have of the writer at his most intimate.

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running reveals what kind of man Murakami is, rather than describing what he has done. He is a humble, self-effacing author who struggles with the idea of writing about himself, finding his fortunes to be a matter of unlikely chance. He succeeds because he has a strong sense of his own identity, his goals and expectations.

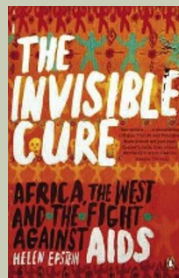
After one ultramarathon, around 25 full marathons, countless half-marathons and triathlons, and with his prodigious literary success, Murakami is a great example of the view that exercise stimulates the mind. I still wouldn't run a city marathon during any summer, certainly not in Athens or Beijing, without some kind of technological enhancement. ■

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The Invisible Cure: Africa, the West and the Fight Against AIDS

by Helen Epstein (Penguin, £9.99)

Challenging orthodox wisdom, "Epstein combines personal research and corroborative evidence from others to posit the view that where Africa's AIDS rates are highest, the key difference is not the numbers of sexual partners, but the timing", wrote Stephen Lewis and Paula Donovan (*Nature* 447, 531-532; 2007).



Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means

by Siegfried Zielinski (MIT Press, \$19.95, £12.95)

Focusing on how devices for hearing and seeing connect audience and creator, Zielinski highlights models and machines that changed the face of the media landscape, many overlooked by historians. These show that simple tools did not predictably lead to complex machinery.

