

September 15, 2002

## On the one hand, actually both .

### RIGHT HAND LEFT HAND: THE ORIGINS OF ASYMMETRY IN BRAINS, BODIES, ATOMS AND CULTURES

By Chris McManus

Harvard University Press, \$27.95, 412 pages

REVIEWED BY CHARLES ROUSSEAU

On the one hand, Dr. Chris McManus' book is an engaging, erudite read on handedness, so full of astonishing facts and anecdotes that readers will want to shake his hand. On the other hand, his book occasionally handles technical details with such a heavy hand that readers without knowledge beforehand will find some passages to be, hands down, as confusing as anything else they have ever read.

That said, anyone who has ever wondered about handedness will want to take a look, since handedness is a constant of the human condition, from the first moments of development until the hands are laid to rest. The very molecules that humans are made of show handedness. It permeates practically every aspect the substance and symbolism of human society.

It's not easy to get a handle on it all. For instance, right-handedness so overwhelmingly favored as a positive symbol, even though there's no objective reason that left-handed is bad. Meanwhile, the human heart most commonly found on the left side of the chest cavity, even though there seems no real reason that the right side wouldn't do.

The mysteries come from all sides, and Dr. McManus' book is dedicated to describing and, where possible, to solving them. The first half of the book moves from handedness in social structures — religion, philosophy and language, to handedness in biological structures — molecular and developmental. The rest of book covers handedness in humans — in family inheritance, in brain asymmetry, in cultural differences, in common myths, and in the seeming human need for symmetry.

It would take a book or two to describe, much less answer, any one of those questions, and yet each point is ticked off in fairly fast fashion. Unfortunately, technical material is often condensed with a rough hand. For instance, the chapter on the handedness of molecules (chirality) that humans are made of takes up only 25 pages and includes discussions on the construction of

Updated at 7:30

- Israel Plants F
- Palestinian HC
- Bush Has Per
- Plans for Iraq
- Iraq Rejects N
- Resolutions
- Thousands Hc
- Firefighters
- German Lead
- Re-Election

## UPI BREAKIN

Updated at 7:30

- Suspect in Jap
- boy's beating
- Dozens fearec
- Russia iceber
- Berezovsky p
- for election
- Slovak voters
- NATO hates
- Abraham urge
- competitive oil
- Arafat aide wa
- Sudanese pilc
- terror probe
- A soured elec
- Germany

## DAILY

Front Page  
Nation/Politics  
World  
Commentary  
Opinion/Editorial  
Metropolitan  
Sports  
Business  
Technology  
Entertainment  
Culture  
Weather

## WEEKLY

Family Times  
Auto Weekend  
Wash. Weekend  
Books  
Home Guide  
Arts  
Nat'l Weekly  
Edition

## MARKETPLACE

Classifieds  
Gift Guide  
Tourist Guide  
Int'l Special  
Reports  
Employment Extra

proteins the conservation of parity (a cocktail party topic for Nobel-prize winning physicists), and the makeup of extremophiles (bacteria who like Vin Diesel movies, er, extreme living conditions). The concept of chirality alone covered a chapter in this reviewer's organic chemistry book, and fried his brain like few legal substances.

Which points to another minor problem. The book is liberally sprinkled with diagrams and photos, but while all are illustrative, not all are illuminating. For instance, the complex genetic theory that Mr. McManus uses to describe his own theory of the inheritance of handedness has no accompanying diagram, leaving those individuals who had basic genetics long ago with the left-handed option attempting a paper cross. Those 'knuckle-draggers' who never had genetics, and who can barely remember discussions of the birds and the bees, will be biting their fingernails in aggravation.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, those readers who try their hand at making it through the book's more turgid sections will be amply rewarded.

Dr. McManus clears up the question of why some writing scripts go right to left and others left to right (a combination of economic, historical, and religious factors), tells who determined that there would be a right and a left wing in politics (the officers of the National Assembly of France in 1789), and answers, as far as can be done so, why right-handers predominate in the populace (you'll have to read the book to find that one).

The tales that Mr. McManus tells are even better. He tells of Charles Darwin's extraordinary efforts to diagnose the handedness of his son William, and still getting it exactly wrong. He describes the medical ailment 'neglect', suffered by both author Charles Dickens and director Federico Fellini, which caused them to ignore the left hands of words, reading, for instance, "Date" as "ate." Mr. McManus also proposes a wildly improper, and wholly probable reason why one of Salvador Dali's lesser paintings might have been handled in a slightly different manner.

Those who wish to acquire on a 'D.C. doctorate' in handedness (knowledge sufficient to impress politicians or policy wonks at cocktail parties, but not, by any means, to make policy) will certainly want to read the last couple of chapters, where Mr. McManus discusses and dismisses many myths of handedness. For instance, left-handers will be relieved to learn that they are likely to live as long as their right-handed counterparts, and no more likely to suffer immune disorders than their right-handed counterparts. On the other hand (couldn't resist) they may be disappointed to discover that they are neither more creative, nor more intelligent.

Taken as a whole, Mr. McManus' book is well worth the read. At its heart, the study of handedness is the study of humanity, and if Mr. McManus is sometimes clumsy at condensing complexity, he still handles the span of his subject with a dexterous hand.

*Charles Rousseaux is an editorial writer for The Washington Times.*

◀ **Back to Books**



All site contents copyright © 2002 News World Communications, Inc.  
[Privacy Policy](#)