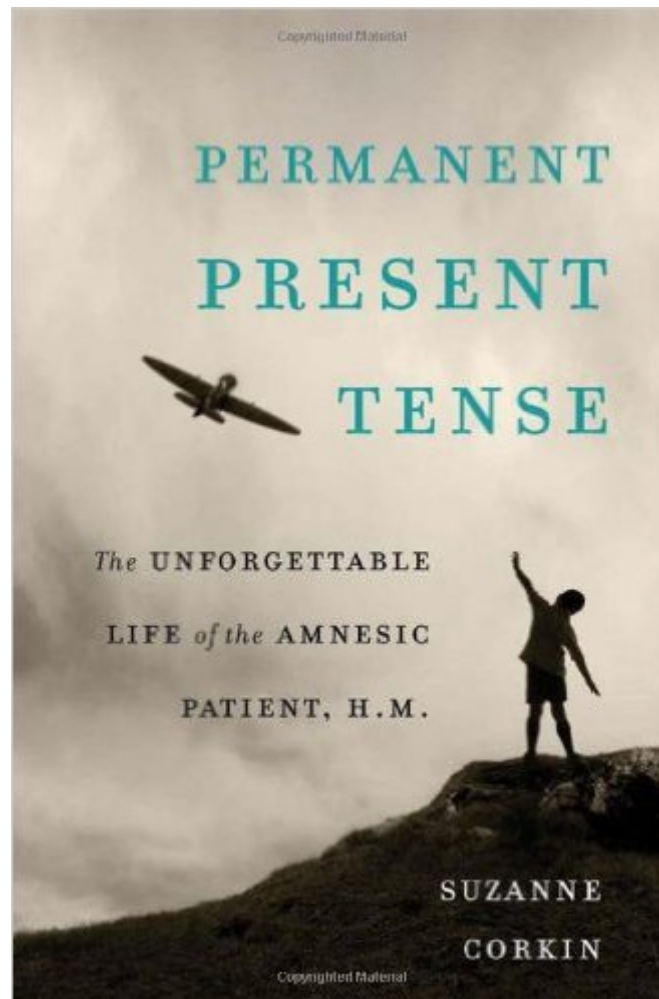


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# Permanent Present Tense: The Unforgettable Life Of The Amnesic Patient, H. M.



## Synopsis

In 1953, 27-year-old Henry Gustave Molaison underwent an experimental &#147;psychosurgical&#151; procedure&#151;a targeted lobotomy&#151;in an effort to alleviate his debilitating epilepsy. The outcome was unexpected&#151;when Henry awoke, he could no longer form new memories, and for the rest of his life would be trapped in the moment. But Henry&#151;s tragedy would prove a gift to humanity. As renowned neuroscientist Suzanne Corkin explains in *Permanent Present Tense*, she and her colleagues brought to light the sharp contrast between Henry&#151;s crippling memory impairment and his preserved intellect. This new insight that the capacity for remembering is housed in a specific brain area revolutionized the science of memory. The case of Henry&#151;known only by his initials H. M. until his death in 2008&#151;stands as one of the most consequential and widely referenced in the spiraling field of neuroscience. Corkin and her collaborators worked closely with Henry for nearly fifty years, and in *Permanent Present Tense* she tells the incredible story of the life and legacy of this intelligent, quiet, and remarkably good-humored man. Henry never remembered Corkin from one meeting to the next and had only a dim conception of the importance of the work they were doing together, yet he was consistently happy to see her and always willing to participate in her research. His case afforded untold advances in the study of memory, including the discovery that even profound amnesia spares some kinds of learning, and that different memory processes are localized to separate circuits in the human brain. Henry taught us that learning can occur without conscious awareness, that short-term and long-term memory are distinct capacities, and that the effects of aging-related disease are detectable in an already damaged brain. Undergirded by rich details about the functions of the human brain, *Permanent Present Tense* pulls back the curtain on the man whose misfortune propelled a half-century of exciting research. With great clarity, sensitivity, and grace, Corkin brings readers to the cutting edge of neuroscience in this deeply felt elegy for her patient and friend.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 400 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; First Edition first Printing edition (May 14, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465031595

ISBN-13: 978-0465031597

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.3 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (45 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #77,643 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #12 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Epilepsy](#) #64 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Basic Sciences > Neuroscience](#) #143 in [Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Neurology > Neuroscience](#)

## Customer Reviews

'Why Sir, if you have but one book with you upon a journey let it be a book of science. When you read through a book of entertainment, you know it, and it can do no more for you, but a book of science is inexhaustible'. This quote of Samuel Johnson's was recorded by his Scottish friend, James Boswell, in his book, 'Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides', published in 1785, a year after Johnson's death. Suzanne Corkin's new biography of Henry Molaison, the man with no memory, is a fitting example of Johnson's wise quote. 'Permanent Present Tense: The Unforgettable Life of Amnesic Patient, H.M.' (Basic Books, New York, 2013), has been eagerly anticipated since the news leaked out that Dr. Corkin had begun writing the life story of her most famous patient, H.M., shortly after his death in December, 2008. Corkin met H.M. in 1962 on his only visit to the Montreal Neurological Institute. Her supervisor, Dr. Brenda Milner, a neuropsychologist, and neurosurgeon, Dr. Wilder Penfield, both from the Montreal Neurological Institute, were the first to realize that the experimental brain operation performed by William Scoville on 27-year-old H.M. in an effort to cure his epilepsy, had rendered him amnesic. His seizures were almost vanquished, but he would never again be able to make new conscious (declarative) memories. In 1966, at the age of 40, H.M. --as he was known until after his death--made his first of 55 visits to the Clinical Research Center at MIT in Boston, not far from where he lived in Hartford, Connecticut. Corkin was now a research scientist at MIT and "inherited" H.M., partly because of the ready access of MIT to Hartford. In Dr. Corkin's lab, Henry was the subject of thousands of experiments on memory and other cognitive abilities. When H.M.

This is a truly remarkable book about the most famous patient in neuroscience - Patient H.M. - written by his bona-fide scientific guardian Dr. Suzanne Corkin. All students of Neuroscience know about H.M. and his anterograde amnesia due to the surgical removal of his hippocampi, but there are much more fascinating details to be learned! For example, did you know that H.M.'s amygdala were also completely removed? That he could still express a full range of emotions without the amygdala, but he had deficits in judging internal states such as hunger, thirst, and pain? Did you

know that H.M. also suffered retrograde amnesia that extended backwards to almost 15 years before the surgery? H.M. was sometimes able to learn and remember certain information after his surgery, which surprised Dr. Corkin and prompted her to conduct further experiments to find out the causes. Dr. Corkin's research investigated not only the declarative memory deficits of H.M., but probed the emotion, sleep, motor skills, priming effects, and various other intricacies of learning and memory. In the book, Dr. Corkin goes into comprehensive details of her experiments, complete with the rationale and the scientific background for her experimental designs. One can learn a tremendous amount about memory research and neuroscience in general just by reading this book. Overall, this is a fascinating read. The narrative is well-written and engaging; I read the whole book cover-to-cover at once. My only minor criticisms are that 1) there could be better graphs and diagrams, and I'd appreciate more high-quality photos of the main star, Henry Molaison; and 2) names of collaborating researchers and scientists are selectively mentioned or omitted, it would be better to either mention all the names (instead of eg.

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