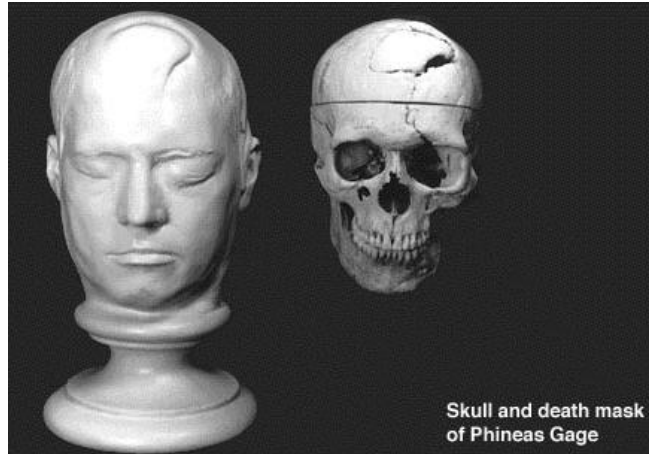


Dr. Catherine J. Golden, Skidmore College
Saratoga Reads! Junior Reads!
February 2 and 9, 2012
Bonus: Fleischman is coming to SSPL on February 16, 2012

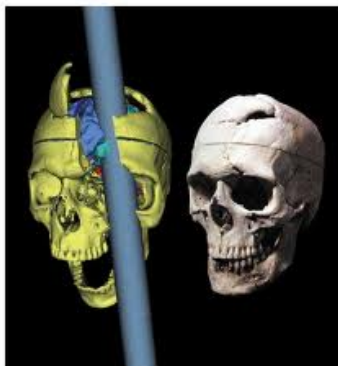
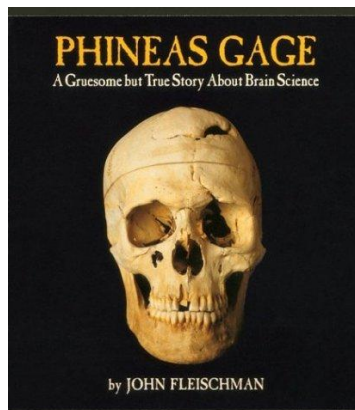


This year, we are reading a nonfiction book entitled *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science* (2002). Author John Fleischman works as the science writer for the American Society for Cell Biology and is a magazine freelancer whose work appears in *Discover*, *Muse*, and *Air & Space Smithsonian*. He was working in the Office of Public Affairs at Harvard Medical School at the time he wrote *Phineas Gage*. In addition to writing for science publications, Fleischman was a senior editor at *Yankee* and *Ohio* magazines. His previous books include *The Ohio Lands* and *Mind/Body Medicine: A Harvard Health Publications Special Report*. Fleischman lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with his wife and a greyhound named Psyche.

Phineas Gage tells the story of a railroad construction foreman named Phineas Gage who miraculously survived a horrible accident: on September 13, 1848, a 13 ½ pound iron rod shot through his skull and brain during an accidental explosion in Cavendish, Vermont when he was blasting rock. The tamping iron was 3 feet 7 inches long; it was 1 ¼” in diameter at one end and tapered to a diameter of ¼” at the other. It entered under his left cheekbone and went completely through the top of his head, landing about 25 to 30 yards away. Living another eleven years, Gage became a textbook case for the study of brain science. While Phineas made a complete physical recovery, he never recovered emotionally. He was able to walk, talk, and work, but, according to his Vermont physician, Dr. Harlow, Gage “was no longer Gage” (59). Fleischman tells the story of how a capable and well-balanced Phineas transformed into a crude and unpredictable man. His case, which astonished doctors in his day, still fascinates scientists today because it has taught researchers how our brain works and how to act human. For the second meeting (February 9th), Professor Denise Evert, who teaches courses in Neuropsychology at Skidmore College, will answer questions from about brain science and the case of Phineas Gage. In addition, John Fleischman will be coming to the Saratoga Springs Public Library to speak about his book on February 16th.



1. Most of the books we read are fiction where the author makes up characters and settings to tell a story. *Phineas Gage* is nonfiction. What other kinds of nonfiction do you know? Are there any ways that this book seems fictional?
2. Nonfiction presents a factual account of a subject. What does Fleischman do to make his book appear factual and true? In other words, what does he do to make this incredible story seem believable to us?
3. Why does Fleischman include photographs? What effect do the photographs have on you? How do they help you understand the case?



4. Why do you think Phineas Gage always carried around the 13 ½ pound tamping iron that shot through his head, even to the grave?



5. According to Phineas's Vermont physician named Dr. Harlow, Gage after the accident "was no longer Gage" (59). From your reading, construct a picture of the old Phineas and the new Phineas. Describe him and draw him to let us see how he changed.
6. What was the most surprising thing about the story of Phineas Gage?
7. Why do you think Phineas related so well to horses after his accident?
8. How did Phineas's case help scientists understand the mysteries of the brain in the nineteenth century and beyond?
9. Adult members of the community are reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, another nonfiction book about how scientific benefits can grow out of misfortune. Henrietta died, but her cells still live on for scientific research. How is Phineas Gage's story similar? Can you think of other medical situations like this where good comes from a horrible accident?
10. Henrietta Lacks's husband, David Lacks, refused the request to have his dead wife's cells used for scientific research. In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, an article from *Ebony* magazine is referenced: "Pounding in the back of their heads was a gnawing feeling that science and the press had taken advantage of them" (5). How might this same comment apply to Phineas Gage, whose horrible accident has become a textbook case?

11. John Fleishman says at the end of the book, “Phineas Gage was lucky” (75). From your reading of this book, do you agree with this view? Why or why not?
12. John Fleischman recommends the following websites to learn more about brain science and the case of Phineas Gage: “Neuroscience for Kids” <<http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/neurok.html>>; a Phineas Gage page at Deakin University in Australia, maintained by Dr. Malcolm Macmillan <<http://www.deakin.edu.au/hmnbs/psychology/gagepage/>>. In your groups, look over these websites; how do they influence your understanding of Phineas’s case?
13. John Fleischman will be coming to the Saratoga Springs Public Library on Thursday, February 16. What question would you like to ask him about his book?
14. Prof. Denise Evert will be coming to talk to us at the end of our second session. She is a Psychology professor and regularly teaches about Phineas Gage in her courses at Skidmore College. What question would you like to ask Prof. Evert either about brain science or the case of Phineas Gage?

