



# Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science

By John Fleischman

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Phineas Gage was truly a man with a hole in his head. Phineas, a railroad construction foreman, was blasting rock near Cavendish, Vermont, in 1848 when a thirteen-pound iron rod was shot through his brain. Miraculously, he survived to live another eleven years and become a textbook case in brain science.

At the time, Phineas Gage seemed to completely recover from his accident. He could walk, talk, work, and travel, but he was changed. Gage "was no longer Gage," said his Vermont doctor, meaning that the old Phineas was dependable and well liked, and the new Phineas was crude and unpredictable.

His case astonished doctors in his day and still fascinates doctors today. What happened and what didn't happen inside the brain of Phineas Gage will tell you a lot about how your brain works and how you act human.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

Science writer John Fleischman uses a clipped, engaging expository style to tell the incredible story of the railroad worker who, in 1848, survived the piercing blast of a 13-pound iron rod as it entered below his cheekbone and exited the front of his skull in *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science*. Photographs, glossary, a resource listing and index lend this textbook case the same sense of immediacy as do the words.

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#### From School Library Journal

**Gr 5 Up**-The fascinating story of the construction foreman who survived for 10 years after a 13-pound iron rod shot through his brain. Fleischman relates Gage's "horrible accident" and the subsequent events in the present tense, giving immediacy to the text. He avoids sensationalizing by letting the events themselves carry the impact. The straightforward description of Gage calmly chatting on a porch 30 minutes after the accident, for example, comes across as horrifying and amazing. The author presents scientific background in a conversational style and jumps enthusiastically into such related topics as phrenology, 19th-century medical practices, and the history of microbiology. He shows how Gage's misfortune actually played an intriguing and important role in the development of our knowledge of the brain. The present-tense narrative may cause occasional confusion, since it spans several time periods and dates are not always immediately apparent from the text. Illustrations include historical photographs; one showing the iron bar posed dramatically next to Gage's skull is particularly impressive. Other photos and diagrams help explain the workings of the brain. The work of Gage expert Malcolm Macmillan, cited in the list of resources, seems the likely main source for the quotes and details of Gage's life, but this is not clearly spelled out in the text or appendixes. Like Penny Colman's *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts* (Holt, 1997) and James M. Deem's *Bodies from the Bog* (Houghton, 1998), *Phineas Gage* brings a scientific viewpoint to a topic that will be delightfully gruesome to many readers.

*Steven Engelfried, Beaverton City Library, OR*

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#### From [Booklist](#)

**Gr. 7-10.** Railroad foreman and blasting expert Phineas Gage was hard at work in 1848 when an improperly prepared charge of gunpowder rocketed a three-foot-long iron rod through his brain. Bloodied and blackened, Gage remained coherent and surprisingly relaxed as he rode an oxcart back to town to get help. He survived the accident for nearly a dozen years, though his personality changed drastically: the once amiable man became crude and argumentative. The author combines this believe-it-or-not story with a history of brain research, including everything from phrenology to high-tech tools. The text is vivid, though curiosity seekers drawn in by the promise of a gruesome story will get bogged down in heavier sections on brain physiology and chemistry. The illustrations are well captioned but don't have enough visual interest to attract browsers for more than a moment. Report writers and science buffs will be the book's best audience. A glossary and an annotated bibliography help make this a terrific resource. *Randy Meyer*

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**Nancy Royals:**

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