Chris McManus is beguiled by a wistful, gnomic
	Tilting at the windmills of our minds

... good writing is memorable writing, and popular science writing is no exception. In Douwe Draaisma's case, there is the delicious circularity of memorable writing about that slippery, elusive process "halfway between the enduring and the transient" — memory itself.

Memory seems straightforward. Things happen; we remember them; we describe what happened. Politicians present it that way in their 1,000-page memoirs — every detail precise, every victory recalled, every record set straight. And yet autobiographical accounts show it is not like that. Much cannot be remembered, much is inaccurate, and we remember our memories of retellings as much as events themselves.

In his previous book, Metaphors of Memory, Draaisma described how scientific theories of memory exploit the latest technologies, as in 1677, when Robert Hooke witnessed a Royal Society demonstration of the newly discovered phosphorus. Five years later, that curious element was the metaphorical, alchemical core of Hooke's theory of memory, published as An Hypothetical Explication of Memory: How the Organs Made Use of by the Mind In Its Operation May Be Mechanically Understood, with phosphorescence modelling the mind's ability to retain visual images.

Such models are near endless: the wax tablets of the ancients, theatres of memory, hydraulics, the mirror, the camera obscura, photography, the phonograph, electric batteries, electronic circuitry, the photocopier, the hologram and, currently, the computer, with its gigabytes and terabytes of digital memory. All emulate some aspects of human memory, but most fail with that very human problem — forgetting. We forget, but we do not forget reliably, predictably or consistently. Human memories are distressingly quixotic, perverse and idiosyncratic.

Human memory is at the core of our conscious sense of awareness. A. N. Whitehead wrote that "the present is... the fringe of memory tinged with anticipation", an image perfectly encapsulated in Titian's enigmatic triple portrait in London's National Gallery, the present staring us straight in the eye, hopelessly entangled with the follies of youth and the future indignities of age and decay. The Allegory of Time Governed by Prudence contains a central Freudian core — that remembering everything would not be prudent. But neither should we nor would we want to forget everything, however traumatic, however horrid, for it forms us and is us. Draaisma often invokes that great explanatory trope of modern psychology — Darwinian evolution. Human minds did not evolve to record the world like digital cameras, but instead evolved to help us survive, so the excessive cost and the minimal benefit of remembering everything means we remember only what, on aggregate, it is beneficial to remember.

Draaisma writes beautifully, and this book is simply a joy to read. I cannot speak for the original Dutch, but the writing of this book has a wistful, thought-provoking, gnomic quality, a lightness of touch, a gentle rhythm, a willingness to reflect and to share its author's own memories, the slightest sense of a worldweariness coupled with an endless curiosity for the nooks and crannies of human experience and a simply carried wisdom, all reminiscent of the great essayists. Those qualities were not quite there in Metaphors of Memory, but the translators were different, and I cannot tell what is an evolving echt-Draaisma, and what is his translators. Either way, this book is a wonderful read, its self-contained chapters being perfect for reading at leisure, to amuse, to provoke and to reflect on.

A broader agenda lurks behind the apparently unconnected essays. Draaisma believes that psychology lost its way in studying memory. Textbooks tell the tale of Hermann
look at the curious ways we remember and forget all our yesterdays

Ebbinghaus’s late 19th-century experiments on endless lists of nonsense syllables, an experimental paradigm responsible since for boring innumerable undergraduates in lab classes. The technique allowed quantification and experimental manipulation, but thereby lost the very object of its study, for as Draaisma says, those experiments told us everything about memory but nothing about memories.

Draaisma instead sees the founding father of research into memories as Sir Francis Galton, who “on a stroll along Pall Mall... fixed his attention on the objects he saw and at the same time noted the associations they called to mind”. Galton “demonstrated that fleeting associations can be recorded and registered for statistical analysis, that they can be sorted, dated and categorised. He had penetrated the ‘obscure depths’ of his mind.”

In a proto-Freudian insight and with appropriately cloacal imagery, Galton wrote that he had “exhibited his mental anatomy with more vividness and truth than he would probably care to publish in the world”, comparing the experience with that “when the basement of our house happens to be under thorough repairs, and we realise... the complex systems of drains and gas and water pipes, flues, bell-wires, and so forth... which are usually hidden out of sight, and with whose existence... we had never troubled ourselves”. It was a century before autobiographical memory was again a legitimate area of study for psychologists.

Autobiographical memory must be at the margins of science, for its subject matter is inherently subjective, the timescales cover life spans, and control and manipulation are near impossible. That is the challenge for psychologists wanting to confront the ineluctably psychological, rather than dabbling with brain scanners and statistics. Draaisma’s dissection of the sincere (but mistaken) identifications by survivors of the Treblinka concentration camp of John Demjanjuk as the notorious “Ivan the Terrible” shows how careful science can steer through minefields, illuminating deeper truths, not only of one man and one place, but about how the severest of traumas affects remembering itself.

In one chapter, Draaisma compares Aleksandr Luria’s case report of the hypermnemonist Solomon Shereshevsky, who could forget nothing but was neither happy nor successful as a result, with Borges’s fictional Ireneo Funès, who likewise forgot nothing and was profoundly unhappy. Luria described his work as “romantic science”, which Draaisma says is aimed, “not at reduction and abstract law but at the subjectivity of experience”.

It is a thin line between Borges’s scientific fiction and Luria’s literary science, and Draaisma’s writing hovers at the edge of both worlds. His literary, romantic storytelling is not the relentless, reductionist application of a single insight or formula, as with Richard Dawkins or Stephen Hawking, or in Philip Ball’s recent Critical Mass (which won the Aventis Prize for which Draaisma’s book was a finalist), and neither is it a tale of heroic men, massive machines and enlarged egos, as in other popular accounts of science. Instead, its gentle reflections, timeless stories and enduring anecdotes will for many years attract those researching the psychology of memory, as well as those working on memory and memorialisation in history, literature and the arts.

As with most sets of essays, there is no final destination, no grand theory of everything. The journey is more important than the destination, the detours en route the justification for travelling. This book does not provide a hard-nosed answer to its titular topic of why life speeds up as we grow older, or why “we are a long time young and a short time old”. That life does indeed move more quickly as we age I have little doubt, and indeed I am finally realising its benefits. That tedious business of gardening, when nothing ever happened to the seeds planted in the special area of my parent’s garden, is now replaced by the joy of plants flowering and fruiting as if the very next day.

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