

# **Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant Study Guide**

**Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of  
an Autistic Savant by Daniel Tammet**

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## Plot Summary

Daniel Tammet is a savant. He is a high functioning autistic with Asperger's syndrome and has an extraordinary mind, especially for numbers. Daniel tells the story of his life from the time of his birth until the present day. His tale is certainly amazing given the potential obstacles that he faced and his own personal frustrations with socialization and disruptions to established routines. *Born on a Blue Day* tells the story of a man who seems to ignore the stigma attached to his disability and pursues a life that is both profitable and perfectly comfortable for himself.

Daniel is born in the late seventies in England, before much was known about savant syndrome. As the first born, he is cherished and encouraged by his parents, even as he develops several idiosyncrasies that are unusual for a developmentally normal child of his age. As an infant, Daniel cries incessantly and there is little his parents can do to calm him. During his toddler years, Daniel develops the habit of banging his head against a particular wall in the living room until he is moved to another location. Throughout all his developmental years, Daniel remains anti-social, preferring the comforting solitude of his room to the noisy play of neighborhood children.

When Daniel starts his school years, he quickly realizes that routines are extremely calming but that the slightest deviance from an established routine can cause him endless frustration. Daniel also discovers that numbers are fascinating things and he develops a peculiar relationship with them; he sees numbers in the form of shapes and colors. This phenomenon is called a synesthetic experience. The association of a visual aide with a number enables Daniel to have an amazing talent for learning and solving mathematical problems. He also has an incredible capacity for learning new languages quickly and fluently.

As Daniel ages he continues to pursue the things that interest him most: numbers, books, and languages. He eventually realizes that he is lonely and longs for companionship; however, this realization occurs during adolescence when he discovers that his sexual preference is for other boys. Daniel's sexual orientation and lack of socialization skills makes meeting and keeping friends difficult until he has graduated school and accepts a volunteer position in Lithuania.

Daniel's nine month commitment in Lithuania teaches him a great deal about his own capabilities and about the things he desires in life. During his stay, he meets several other gay men and forms close friendships with them. Daniel also learns to cope with new people and situations without the comforting encouragement of his family. He matures immensely over the course of his stay in Lithuania and returns to England ready to take on whatever challenges the world has to offer. Soon after his return home, Daniel meets Neil in an online chat room and the two quickly fall in love. Daniel then decides to move in with Neil. Together the two are able to create an Internet based company that teaches foreign languages. The company allows Daniel to earn an income and at the same time work from the safety of his own home.



Daniel continues to mature and show the world that savants are capable of more than most people suspect. He memorizes over 22,000 digits of pi for a charity event and is then contacted to star in an American documentary. The filming requires that Daniel fly to America and travel the country for several months with the production crew. During the course of filming, Daniel meets a prominent scientist in the field of autism research, plays blackjack in Las Vegas, and meets the real-life inspiration for the movie *Rain Man*. Following the success of the documentary, Daniel is invited to appear on the David Letterman show. Daniel then returns to his "normal" life in England, where he continues to assist researchers and speak about his syndrome. Over the course of the book, the reader will see Daniel change from a clinical sounding young man into a passionate and loving adult. Daniel's story shows readers that the only difference between someone who has a disability and someone who does not is the way others choose to treat them.



# Chapter One, Blue Nines and Red Words

## Chapter One, Blue Nines and Red Words Summary and Analysis

Daniel Tammet is a savant. He is a high functioning autistic with Asperger's syndrome and has an extraordinary mind, especially for numbers. Daniel tells the story of his life from the time of his birth until the present day. His tale is certainly amazing given the potential obstacles that he faced and his own personal frustrations with socialization and disruptions to established routines. *Born on a Blue Day* tells the story of a man who seems to ignore the stigma attached to his disability and pursues a life that is both profitable and perfectly comfortable for himself.

Chapter one begins with the author's account of his birth and his extraordinary condition. Daniel was born in England in the late seventies with a rare condition known as savant syndrome. Because of this syndrome, Daniel finds peace and comfort in routine and in numbers. Life for Daniel is experienced in a close relationship with numbers; everything becomes associated with and comprehended by numbers.

Daniel is able to perform large mathematical operations in his head. He spends several pages giving examples and explaining to the reader his method for solving them by use of diagrams. Daniel is very much like the savant portrayed in the movie, *Rain Man*, and he refers to Dustin Hoffman's character. Daniel, like the movie character, also suffers from a milder form of Autism known as Asperger's syndrome. Asperger's impairs the way Daniel interacts socially and emotionally with society. Daniel understands the world and expresses himself through numbers and very conscientious and lengthy speech.

For most of the first chapter, Daniel explains his synesthesia to the reader. He uses several visual explanations in order to give the reader an idea of what he sees in association with certain numbers. The concept is difficult to understand merely through words, but Daniel's pictures significantly help the reader's comprehension. By the end of the chapter, the reader begins to feel that he, too, can see certain shapes and colors when looking at a particular number. Daniel looks at numbers in a very unique way, but his method of understanding mathematics seems easier than the academic drills practiced by most people.

As the reader enters Daniel's world, he may become at once confused and amazed. Daniel's writing is both circuitous and concise. He moves from topic to topic, often returning to a discussion of numbers in between ideas, without any apparent connections. However, the reader senses no disruption of the story and is able to clearly follow the events of Daniel's life. Somehow, over time Daniel has created a workable medium through which he can communicate with the world. The reader begins to feel that there is nothing "wrong" with Daniel; only that he is a brilliant man who views the world in a different light than the average person.



# Chapter Two, Early Years

## Chapter Two, Early Years Summary and Analysis

Chapter two gives some background information for Daniel's parents, Jennifer and Kevin. He describes their meeting and courtship, and their early years together leading up to Daniel's birth. Most of this chapter's contents appear to be memories told to Daniel by his parents. He chronicles his birth and the problems his parents encountered once they brought Daniel home from the hospital. Daniel was a fussy child who could find comfort in nothing. Outside of the crying, Daniel developed normally in other areas. The only problem seemed to manifest itself in his behavior.

Daniel was not a bad child but just one with a few unusual habits. As a toddler, he would bang his head against a particular wall incessantly. When Daniel started nursery school, it became apparent that he was lacking basic social skills. He preferred his own solitary company to that of the other children. Daniel's preference for routine also became evident when he cried anytime his normal routines were disrupted. Even the birth of a little brother did not appear to faze Daniel in any way. Daniel continued to live his life as he desired and paid little attention to the new arrival. Instead of interacting with classmates or his sibling, Daniel found solace in things. He ordered books in piles, drew circles on the ground or paper, and remained content to play alone.

Although Daniel repeatedly notes his inability to express emotion or communicate with peers, his rendering of his childhood is both heartbreaking and heartwarming. He is able to convey a sense of love and warmth that emanates from his family. The reader never senses that Daniel is different or handicapped. In many ways, his early experiences seem to be retold as intensely focused events. Daniel's ability to memorize large amounts of information makes him an excellent historian. He brings the reader right down to his two-year-old level and shows the reader the world through the wide eyes of a young child; eager to experience everything the world has to offer. The only notable exception to Daniel's memories is the lack of friends to share his wonderment.



# Chapter Three, Struck by Lightning: Epilepsy

## Chapter Three, Struck by Lightning: Epilepsy Summary and Analysis

Daniel continues to describe memorable events from his earliest years as though he himself clearly remembers the experience. At the age of four, Daniel suffers a massive epileptic seizure. Daniel describes the event step-by-step, including a digression into the uses and workings of an EEG and a MRI. Daniel also reveals that the seizure deeply affected his father, whose own father had suffered from epileptic seizures, which had caused the break-up of his family. After the seizure, Daniel takes anti-seizure medication and needs extra care for a time. His father tends to him, while his mother seems upset by her oldest sons newest disability. For three years, Daniel continues to take the medication, and his parents watch him extra carefully for any reoccurrences.

Daniel's epileptic incident brings up particularly unpleasant memories for his father. Kevin's own father had fallen ill when Kevin was still very young. The deterioration of his father eventually led to the separation of Kevin's family. Daniel's father has very few childhood memories about his own father, but he did get the chance to meet him and spend time with him in the hospital before he passed away. Kevin's father died of organ failure resulting from a stroke and a seizure.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of various studies done on the lasting effects of epilepsy and the efforts scientists have made to determine a cause of seizures. For Daniel, he is able to process bits of detailed information at a time, but is unable to comprehend the whole picture at once. Instead of seeing this as a limitation, Daniel views it as beneficial. He can read a piece of writing and pick out all the grammatical and spelling errors. Daniel also notes that he is not alone in his experience with childhood seizures. He discusses several prominent writers, including Dostoyevsky and Lewis Carroll, who attribute their skills to their experience with epilepsy. Daniel finishes off the chapter by adding that he went through a period in elementary school where he would write profusely and formulate stories that just flowed freely from his brain.

For the first time, Daniel appears to have a disability. The advent of the epileptic seizure drives home for the reader that this child is not physically "normal". However, the fact that Daniel only ever suffers one seizure in his life continues to reinforce the idea that he is an extraordinary person. Indeed, his seizure seems to add to Daniel's already amazing strengths, as he notes his shared proclivity for words and grammatical structure as several notable authors.

The point of view continues to be Daniel's adult memories accompanied by knowledge that he probably gained as he matured. Although it is entirely possible in Daniel's case that he had a working understanding of MRIs and EEGs, it seems more likely that this

extraneous information is being added by the adult author. Similarly, the reader may suspect that Daniel's knowledge of Dostoyevsky's experiences with epilepsy were learned from his love of books, but given that Daniel is only four at the time of his seizure, it is more probable that this knowledge was gained later in his life.





# Chapter Four, School Days

## Chapter Four, School Days Summary and Analysis

Daniel's story progresses chronologically, up to his first days of grammar school. The experience of school presents several disturbing encounters, as well as new routines that Daniel finds pleasing. He sees the other children as nuisances that he must deal with instead of opportunities for new friendships. School plays and speeches are distressing events that cause Daniel to become visibly upset. However, he finds comfort in his lessons.

During Daniel's school years, his family continues to increase. Because of the growing number of children, Daniel's parents move the family to a larger home. Daniel remembers two things about their new home: the fact that the year they moved was one of extreme weather in England, and that the house numbers were all prime. The larger family disrupts some of Daniel's routines. He must take a bath with his three younger brothers in order to conserve time and water. The house is also full of pleasing memories. Daniel can see his school from his bedroom window and would watch the teachers leave everyday while memorizing their license plate numbers. Because of the many young children, the house is always filled with drying diapers and crying babies. While Daniel does not like the chaotic world of school, he does seem to have certain affection for the hubbub of his own home.

Money is tight because both of his parents stay home to care for the family. However, Daniel's mother is an excellent money manager and still finds ways to purchase books of mathematical puzzles for Daniel. Daniel's parents recognize that he has a special aptitude for math and try to encourage his love of numbers as much as possible. They have a little trouble supporting his habit of collecting things. Daniel tries to fill the house with chestnuts, leaflets, and then small coins. He even tries to bring a large collection of ladybugs to school, but the teacher releases the insects outside when Daniel is out of the room. Because of his underdeveloped social skills, Daniel does not understand why the teacher would do such a thing. He also cannot comprehend why several older boys tease him and are mean to him on a class trip. Daniel continues to find solace in numbers and books. The familiarity of these things helps Daniel cope with what he views as the unusual behavior of his classmates. He is oblivious to the way the other children perceive him.

In many respects, Daniel's experience of starting school is similar to that of normally socialized children. He is apprehensive about the change in his usual routine and the inclusion of so many strangers. Like most children starting school for the first time, Daniel finds a few things that bring him comfort and stability so that he can cope. Familiarity is something people cling to in new situations and Daniel's behavior is not abnormal in this respect.



What is most notable about this chapter is the reverent tone Daniel uses when speaking about his parents. Later in the book, Daniel will note his changing respect for his family; but throughout the text, his love for them is already apparent. He recognizes that his parents must work extra hard to provide for him but he already appears appreciative of their constant acceptance and ignorance of his differences. Throughout the book, Daniel meets (or at least mentions) more people willing to accept him than disrespect him. The reader may suspect that Daniel's parents' early equal treatment of their eldest son created a nonchalant demeanor that other acquaintances readily picked up on.



# Chapter Five, Odd One Out

## Chapter Five, Odd One Out Summary and Analysis

Daniel's struggle to interact with peers increases during his school years. He comes to realize that he has no friends and attempts to engage some of his classmates in conversation. However, his conversational skills more closely resemble those of an adult and the children soon lose interest in talking to him. In order to overcome his loneliness, Daniel invents several imaginary friends, most of whom are older than him. In particular, Daniel forms a close relationship with an imaginary older woman named Anne. She appears to him during recess while he walks among the trees. The two discuss philosophical matters and whatever else Daniel finds interesting. One day, Anne visits him for the last time and Daniel realizes that he must learn to associate with real people because he cannot have imaginary friends forever.

Typical childhood activities like swimming or riding a bike are difficult for Daniel because he lacks coordination. Daniel is well into puberty before he manages to master these childhood tasks. In order to combat the loneliness of not playing social games, Daniel invents his own games. He plays mathematical games in the solitary quiet of his room. Daniel invents a game with a regular deck of cards in which each card is assigned a particular value. Whenever the pile of cards reaches a prime number the top cards are discarded and the game continues. Daniel creates an elaborate set of rules and contingencies that seem to make sense only to him and would unlikely be thought of as "fun" by other players. Daniel also engages his brothers and sisters in a game of "house". The game revolves around ironing and folding the laundry. Although the game may not be of interest to most players, Daniel's siblings appear to recognize the enjoyment he derives from ordering the game and they humor him by playing.

Daniel is starting to reach out in his own ways to his peers. He earnestly tries to make friends with his schoolmates, but his conversational style does not match theirs. While he finds one topic to expound on for paragraphs at a time, the other children converse in rapid fire exchanges of the playground. Daniel is also limited by his ability to understand the nuances of speech. Jokes and statements posed as questions are confusing for him. His method of coping with this situation is not unlike that of many young children who feel left out by their peers; he invents his own imaginary friends. These friends are usually adults who are better equipped to handle a lengthy exchange of information with Daniel. As Daniel's social skills continue to evolve, he is eventually able to enjoy playtime with his siblings. It seems that the acceptance of Daniel's made-up games by his brothers and sisters leads to his increased social skills at school.



# Chapter Six, Adolescence

## Chapter Six, Adolescence Summary and Analysis

When Daniel is ten years old and ready to begin secondary school, his father becomes very ill. His father suffers from a series of mental breakdowns for a period and is repeatedly hospitalized. His illness puts a strain on family finances and relationships, but as quickly as the illness began, it seems to disappear. Following Daniel's father's return to health, the final two children are born to the family: two girls, which made a total of eight children.

Secondary school brings a whole new set of difficulties for Daniel. Instead of staying in the same room all day, he must now move to a different classroom for each lesson. He must also purchase his lunch in the dining hall and learn to ride public transportation to and from school. After several anxious moments during the first days of school, Daniel figures out a routine and adjusts to the new environment.

Social interaction continues to be a problem in school. Daniel is an athletic child but team games make him nervous so that he freezes and forgets to participate. However, Daniel makes friends with a boy whose family is of Indian descent and is ostracized by the other children because he looks different. Daniel's father teaches him how to play chess. Daniel has a natural aptitude for the game, so his father enrolls him in a chess club. Because chess is played quietly and Daniel does not have to interact much with the other players, he enjoys the club a lot. Daniel's strong language skills help him gain another friend when he tutors an exchange student from Germany. As Daniel makes friends and increases his social interaction, he discovers that he prefers boys and not girls. He feels about boys the way the other boys in his class feel about girls. This additional difference between himself and his classmates only serves to make his final years at school more difficult.

Daniel's start to middle school is made even more difficult by his father's mental breakdowns. While Daniel is sympathetic to his father's illness, he is unable to communicate his fears and concerns with the rest of his family. Daniel must forge into this new unknown with diminished support from his parents. His mother is preoccupied with his father's illness and the care of her large family. However, the experience strengthens Daniel's independence as he figures out how to ride public transportation on his own and learns the details of buying school lunch without someone explaining the process to him. This growing independence will serve Daniel well as he reaches adolescence and he realizes that his disability is not the only thing that separates him from his peers. Daniel is able to focus on his positive attributes and not dwell on his differences. Because of the "can do" attitude fostered by his parents, Daniel finds enjoyment in the chess club and readily accepts his sexual orientation.



# Chapter Seven, Ticket to Kaunas

## Chapter Seven, Ticket to Kaunas Summary and Analysis

When Daniel graduates from high school, he makes the decision not to attend University. His parents are slightly disappointed with the decision but are more concerned about how Daniel will adapt to life in the outside world. Daniel responds to an advertisement for volunteers to work overseas. After several interviews, Daniel is accepted into the program. He is given a position teaching English classes in Lithuania, where he will be stationed for nine months.

Daniel arrives in Lithuania with an entire weekend available before he begins work. He takes the time to adjust to his apartment but does not venture into town. The first few days of work are anxious ones for Daniel, but he becomes familiar with his students and befriends one of them, Birut?. Birut? shows Daniel around the town and they become good friends during his stay. Daniel makes other friends while in Lithuania and even reaches out to a group of gay people to make friends. He spends Christmas with a local family and learns about Lithuanian customs. Daniel also picks up the language quickly and becomes so fluent that the locals mistake him for a native speaker. Daniel enjoys being able to plan the classes according to his own design rather than following a prescribed set of standards. When one of the other volunteers becomes ill and must return home, Daniel is given the extra responsibility of teaching those classes as well.

Daniel encounters unwanted houseguests in his apartment. He sees a smudge moving across his counter and Birut? tells him that the insect is a cockroach. Daniel is more surprised by the appearance of the bug than disgusted, but he does contact his landlord to have the building fumigated. Birut? does not find the situation disturbing at all, but then she has a mouse living in her apartment and is very comfortable with the rodent's presence. Before long the nine months is over and Daniel readies himself to return home. He has made many close friends and learned a lot about his own capabilities away from home during his volunteer time in Lithuania.

The reader may find that this is one of the most personal chapters of the entire book. Daniel's trip to Lithuania serves to move him from dependent child to independent adult. If Daniel had not pursued this opportunity at this particular time, he may not have gone on to accomplish as much as he did later in life. For someone who does not handle changes to his routine and has never been away from home longer than a few days at a time, a trip to a foreign country is a big step. Daniel handles the transition beautifully, and in the process becomes an entirely different person than the young man who left England.

When Christmas arrives, Daniel does not mention that he feels any homesickness or longing to spend the holiday with his family. Instead, he embraces his current surroundings and the family who offers to open their home to him. Daniel becomes

absorbed in the new experience of a Lithuanian Christmas. Similarly, at the encouragement of Gurcharan, Daniel contacts a local club for gay people. He makes friends in the process, and takes an important step in recognizing his sexuality. Daniel's adaptations to life away from the comforts of home provide a better education than time spent in University. Daniel is not an average man; and as such, he needs to find ways to make the world work for him instead of adjusting himself to fit the rest of the world. The reader should realize that Daniel's early support from his parents has provided him with the positive outlook that a "disabled" man needs in order to function positively in society.

# Chapter Eight, Falling in Love

## Chapter Eight, Falling in Love Summary and Analysis

Daniel returns from Lithuania with a new outlook on his life that helps him adjust to the new larger home his family moved into while he was away. During his time as a volunteer, Daniel has been able to come to terms with his differences. He has accepted them and learned from them. Daniel views his life in a forward motion that excites him about future possibilities.

In 2000, Daniel is introduced to the world of the Internet and online chat rooms. In one chat room, he meets Neil, with whom he eventually falls in love. Daniel's new-found relationship means that he must tell his parents the truth about his sexuality, but as with everything else concerning Daniel, both his parents accept Daniel's choice. Neil lives in Kent and, after six months of long distance dating, Daniel moves out of his parents' home and in with Neil. The couple then moves into a cottage near the coast. Daniel has found a welcoming partner and has established his first real connection with another person outside of his family.

Daniel's new life with Neil is both challenging and exciting. Daniel is unable to find work because of his Asperger's, but together he and Neil make ends meet. The couple maintains a close social circle of friends that they regularly get together with, and the computer allows Daniel to keep in touch with his other friends. The pair combines Neil's computer knowledge and Daniel's expertise with languages into an online learning system for teenagers. The company is called Optimnem and offers e-mail language courses. The courses are not structured like traditional language classes and do not include the same technical terms. Daniel's hope is that the courses will be accessible to beginners, and enable them to quickly and effectively learn a new language. The company is successful and allows Daniel to earn an income while working from the comfort of his own home.

During this chapter, Daniel's life seems to be moving in fast forward. He has returned from Lithuania with a new appreciation of his own abilities and is eager to take the next step in his life. However, opportunities are not plentiful for individuals with savant syndrome. The incorporation of the Internet into Daniel's life removes barriers and introduces him to another world.

The chapter title seems to include only Daniel's relationship with Neil, but the reader may also extend the title to include his newfound freedom. The Internet allows Daniel to move away from his family but still keep in close contact. Similarly, when the everyday world refuses to accept his differences, the online experience permits Daniel to marry his love of language with a lucrative business. Daniel has found a comfortable place for himself, and after a short adjustment period, he is able to relax and live a relatively free-spirited lifestyle.



# Chapter Nine, The Gift of Tongues

## Chapter Nine, The Gift of Tongues Summary and Analysis

This chapter is rather clinical in its voice. Daniel begins to discuss the methods he uses for learning new languages so quickly. His autism allows him the ability to "see" the words in unique ways and these pictures help him to quickly understand and recall a word or word phrase. Daniel's ability to so quickly and completely learn new languages is astounding, and may make the reader just the slightest bit jealous.

The rest of the chapter focuses on discussions of research into the physiology of an autistic person's ability to learn languages. Daniel mentions several studies and prominent researchers in this field of research. He also discusses a language called Esperanto in detail. Daniel's aptitude for languages is apparent, but for the reader, the lengthy academic discussions become monotonous and seem to contribute little to the actual story. These digressions do serve to give the reader an idea of what conversing with Daniel must be like. Daniel notes that he often has the tendency to venture off on a tangent when someone mentions a topic of interest. In the book, this entire chapter becomes an informative and interesting side note, but one that does not further Daniel's story.

This chapter departs from the tone and content of the rest of the book. There seems to be very little information about Daniel's life in this chapter, and the reader finds it difficult to place where exactly in time Daniel is at this stage. While it is fascinating that Daniel can comprehend and learn new languages so quickly and fluently, the discussion of how he accomplishes this task is a bit confusing to the reader. The reader feels as if he is sitting in a beginning foreign language class and the teacher is speaking only in the language intended to be learned. The whole chapter feels out of context with what happened previously and does not lead neatly into what happens next.





# Chapter Ten, A Very Large Slice of Pi

## Chapter Ten, A Very Large Slice of Pi Summary and Analysis

Twenty years after his epileptic seizure, Daniel decides to memorize over 22,500 digits of pi in order to raise money for the National Society for Epilepsy and at the same time break the European record. Many people have tried various methods for memorizing the infinitely long number. Daniel is able to visualize the number as a picture. The hills and valleys of the picture along with dark and light spots allow him to recall the number associated with each phase of the design.

In order to learn the sequence, Daniel and Neil locate a printout of pi from a Japanese website that reaches into the millions of decimal places. Daniel then prints out the sequence in manageable chunks the length of a sheet of paper. He then works at memorizing a line, or "sentence", of numbers at a time. In order to practice his memorization, Daniel recites the chunks he has learned out loud to Neil once a week. After three months, the day for the recital arrives. It takes Daniel over five hours to recite 22,514 digits of pi, but he achieves his goal.

Perhaps the reader can make a slight connection between the previous chapter's lengthy discussion of learning new languages and Daniel's attempt to memorize pi. For Daniel, numbers are a type of language-one he feels more comfortable with than regular speech-so the application of his language learning skills can be understood in his memorization of thousands of numbers. The reader may have felt confusion during Daniel's explanation of learning Esperanto but would have certainly been more frustrated at trying to decipher a detailed explanation of exactly how Daniel is able to commit over 22,000 digits to memory. The reader cannot immediately make sense of Daniel's decision to progress his story in this manner, but Daniel's detail oriented mind appears to have picked up on the need to relate his number language to speech language.



# Chapter Eleven, Meeting Kim Peek

## Chapter Eleven, Meeting Kim Peek Summary and Analysis

Daniel is surrounded by a media frenzy following his triumphant recitation of pi. He is approached by a British TV station about filming a documentary of his story. In order to film the program, Daniel will have to fly to America and be apart from Neil and all his usual routines. While the prospect of a disrupted life does not excite Daniel, the extraordinary opportunity thrills him and he accepts the offer.

Daniel's tour of America includes a stop in San Diego, where he meets Dr. Ramachandran, one of the scientists Daniel has repeatedly noted throughout the book. The professor and his team of scientists are fascinated by Daniel's ability to associate numbers with pictures. Daniel spends two days talking with the researchers before continuing his journey to Las Vegas. At a small casino, Daniel is taught to play blackjack. He plays against the dealer in an attempt to recreate Dustin Hoffman's card counting scene in *Rain Man*.

After Las Vegas, the film crew takes Daniel to Salt Lake City to meet Kim Peek, the real-life savant who inspired *Rain Man*. Daniel is awed and inspired by Kim. Kim travels the world with his father because he is not as high functioning as Daniel. Kim gives lectures and demonstrations of his amazing skill with numbers. Kim's specialty is dates. He can tell anyone the exact day of the week they were born on or what year and exact day they will turn a particular age. Kim is also good at recalling historical dates and loves reading. Daniel enjoys his time with Kim and takes away a new sense of appreciation for his own life from the experience.

It seems that Daniel jumps suddenly from the still shy and uncertain youth of his school days into an independent and industrious adult. The reader may attribute much of this change to natural maturity but Daniel's relationship with Neil also plays a significant role in his adult decisions. Daniel has steadily progressed through Neil's love and support into a more open and adventurous person. The offer to travel so far from home and meet so many new people would have scared the younger Daniel. However, Daniel recognizes that this is the chance of a lifetime and an opportunity to spread knowledge and raise awareness for individuals living with Autism and Asperger's syndrome.

The meeting between Kim Peek and Daniel represents the opposing ends of the savant syndrome. Daniel is very high functioning, while Kim's father must travel with Kim in order to ensure Kim's safety and comfort. Both men realize that even in their differences from the outside world they are different from each other. However, they respect each other's differences and the contributions that each can make separately to the study of autism.



# Chapter Twelve, Reykjavik, New York, Home

## Chapter Twelve, Reykjavik, New York, Home Summary and Analysis

As a final challenge for Daniel during filming, the directors decide to film Daniel learning a new language over the course of one week. After researching various languages, they choose Icelandic, a language full of complexities that has remained largely unchanged for the past eight centuries.

The production team sends Daniel several study aides prior to the trip and a letter informing him that they have had to shorten his stay in Iceland from seven to four days. This means that Daniel will have less time in the country to absorb the language from native speakers. The culmination of the experiment will be a live television interview during which Daniel will be expected to converse only in Icelandic. At the end of the four days, Daniel is able to speak fluently during the entire two-hour interview.

The following spring, Daniel is asked to appear on the David Letterman show. Prior to his appearance on the show, Daniel is shown around the studio and told about the process of being interviewed by Letterman. The preparation allows Daniel to relax during his interview and the appearance goes wonderfully. As Daniel leaves the television studio, he realizes that he has come a long way from the lonely child who disliked socializing with peers and had difficulty adjusting to new routines.

Daniel concludes the book by discussing his life now. As he matured, Daniel has grown much closer to his family and even learned to reciprocate their love for him. Daniel enjoys spending time with his brothers and sisters and keeps in close contact with his parents. He and Neil have developed a workable routine for their life together. Most of their time is spent at home gardening, cooking, and working. Daniel also continues to work with scientists who are busy researching Autism and Asperger's syndrome.

Daniel also mentions that he is a Christian. The inclusion of this bit of information is surprising to the reader for a couple of reasons. First, this is the first time that Daniel has mentioned religion throughout the entire book. Second, it may seem strange to hear a gay man state that he is a Christian given the basic beliefs of Christianity do not permit homosexual relationships. However, Daniel does believe in God, but notes that it is a little difficult to consider religion in the abstract manner that most people do. Religion for Daniel is a largely intellectual experience rather than social or emotional. He has considered life's bigger questions and concluded that a force must exist outside of humanity that orders and controls the universe.

The title of this final chapter sums up the sentiment of the whole book. Daniel has grown from an unsure boy into a confident adult who is able to leave home without becoming



extremely distressed. Daniel recognizes that he is different from other people but has been blessed in his life to find those understanding individuals willing to encourage his strengths and be patient with his weaknesses.

Daniel's life thus far has been a success. He has found love in an intimate personal relationship, with his peers, and finally with his own family. In doing this much, he has achieved more than most autistic individuals ever do; socialization and emotion are difficult concepts to grasp when one is lost inside one's own mind. Daniel has been able to adapt his personal preferences into a meaningful and socially beneficial lifestyle. His ability to express himself so concisely may not be comfortable in a conversational setting but does much to further researchers understanding of how the autistic brain functions. Daniel's greatest contribution to society is his book because it breaches the gap between the unfamiliar and the known worlds. Daniel's memories enable the reader to understand a little understood world and appreciate the lives of the Daniel Tammets and the Kim Peeks.



# Characters

**Daniel**

**Neil**

**Kevin**

**Jennifer**

**Kim Peek**

**Birut**

**Gurcharan**

**Anne**

**Shai**

**Professor Vilayanur Ramachandran**

**Rehan**

**Lee, Steven, Paul, Claire, Maria, Natasha, Anna-Marie,  
and Shelley**

**Vytautas and ?ygintas**



## Objects/Places

### Lithuania

After graduating high school, Daniel decides that he does not want to continue his education by attending a University. Instead, he answers an ad for volunteers to work in underdeveloped countries. Daniel is accepted into the program and placed in a small town in Lithuania. There he teaches English and tutors students. Lithuania becomes a special place for Daniel. He meets several new friends and even learns the language so that he is able to converse with the local people. The experience of moving so far away from home greatly affects Daniel. He learns more about himself and his abilities to cope with new situations.

### Books

Daniel is obsessed with books. One of his favorite places to visit to feel comforted is a library. As a child, Daniel would check books out of the library or spend hours pouring over dictionaries and encyclopedias. During his school years, Daniel spends his free periods in the library instead of interacting with his peers. His family's home is always full of books, and as a small child, he would stack the books in piles.

### Las Vegas

Daniel spends some time at a casino in Las Vegas learning to play blackjack against the dealer. The event is part of his tour of America for the documentary, *Brainman*. The idea is that because of his mathematical abilities, Daniel will be able to prove or disprove the possibility of someone beating the house by counting cards. The reader may notice that Daniel does not specifically state that he beat the house, but he does extremely well once he learns the rules of the game. It becomes apparent from this brief experiment that only someone with Daniel's level of mathematical genius could stand a chance at winning consistently against a Las Vegas blackjack dealer.

### Optimnem

This is the name of the company that Neil and Daniel create together. The name, Optimnem, comes from Greek mythology and is a series of educational online language courses. Students receive lessons via e-mail. Each lesson includes audio clips, written examples, and lots of practice. The courses reflect Daniel's experience of learning new languages and do not use traditional grammatical terminology. The company is very successful and is approved by the British government as an educationally valuable website.



## Iceland

Daniel spends four days in Iceland in order to learn the language in a final challenge for the *Brainman* documentary. After his brief stay and a lot of intensive study, Daniel is interviewed for a two-hour television appearance. The interview is conducted completely in Icelandic in order to test how quickly and fluently Daniel is able to learn the language. He performs beautifully and is able to speak to the interviewers without any difficulty.

## Brainman

*Brainman* is the name of the American documentary about Daniel and his savant syndrome. Daniel is approached by a production team from America interested in filming him for a documentary that will air on the Discovery Channel's Science Network. Over the course of several weeks, Daniel is filmed in various locations: San Diego, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas, and Iceland. The producers introduce Daniel to Kim Peek, the inspiration for Raymond Babbit in *Rain Man*, and set up the opportunity for Daniel to play blackjack against the dealer in a casino. The documentary airs and is widely received.

## Pi

Pi is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. It is named for the sixteenth letter of the Greek alphabet and is an irrational and infinite number. Many people have attempted to memorize long sections of pi over time. Daniel decides to try memorizing over 22,000 digits in order to raise awareness for a local charity.

## Chess

Daniel's father introduces his son to chess in order to encourage his mathematical skills and increase his socialization. Daniel enjoys the chess club that his father enrolls him in because it gives him the chance to play a challenging game with other people without actually interacting with those people. Daniel takes a sheet of paper with his chess moves recorded on it home following each match in order to analyze his playing skills and improve for the next game.

## Synesthesia

Synesthesia is a rare neurological condition in which the senses mix. In Daniel's case, he mixes visual and emotional experiences. When he sees numbers, he also sees shapes, colors, textures, or motions. Daniel gives several examples of this phenomenon. The number thirty-seven is like lumpy porridge, while a person may resemble the number 117 because he is tall and thin.



## Ladybirds

Daniel is obsessed with collecting items of interest. He collects books for a time, and then chestnuts, and then one day discovers a ladybird (or ladybug) on a bush. Daniel finds the ladybird beautiful, delicate, and interesting, so he decides to collect as many as he can find. Daniel carefully places his first ladybird in a plastic tub with leaves and aphids. For a week, Daniel collects ladybirds until he has a large collection in his tub. He takes the tub to school one day to show his teacher and his class. The teacher sends Daniel out of the room on an errand in order to have another child take the tub outside and release all the ladybirds. Daniel is so upset that he runs out of the classroom and all the way home.

## England

Daniel is born in East London and, except for his nine-month stay in Lithuania, never lives outside of England. Daniel's homes are important to him and he comments on the fact that the addresses of all three of the houses he lives in as a child are prime numbers. Daniel finds this fact interesting and comforting when he must adjust to a new house.

Daniel moves from London to the town of Kent in order to be with his partner Neil. During their first summer together, Neil and Daniel move to the coastal town of Herne Bay. Daniel stays in a relatively small area all his life but takes several opportunities to explore the larger world. He establishes a comfortable home base to return to and work from.



# Themes

## Significance of Numbers

Numbers play a significant role throughout the book. Numbers provide stability for Daniel, numbers connect Daniel to the "normal" world, and Daniel's relationship with numbers creates a new language for communication between author and reader. For Daniel Tammet, numbers are more than just characters on a page used to count with or figure out how much something costs. Daniel's savant syndrome gives him the ability to transcend traditional languages and speak to others in his own form of language while still being completely understandable and relatable.

Autistic children often have difficulty adjusting to daily life unless they can establish routines. Patterns provide comfort and regularity that an autistic child can easily understand and expect. Accordingly, mathematical equations and numbers follow established rules that an autistic child may find comforting. Daniel has the added enjoyment of experiencing numbers in combination with his visual and emotional senses. The predictability of numbers is encouraging when everything else around him seems loud and chaotic. Daniel can control his world by collecting it and ordering it according to numbers.

Socialization is extremely difficult for Daniel. He does not perceive the delicate balance necessary for conversations and his attention wanders when the topic is not of interest to him. However, his relationships increase when he is able to communicate through numbers. One of the first social environments Daniel feels comfortable in is the chess club his father introduces him to. Daniel enjoys chess because it is a calculated game requiring skill and thought, much like solving a mathematical equation. As an adult, Daniel memorizes over 22,000 digits of pi for a charity event. His numerical feat creates a media frenzy around him that grows into an American documentary. These experiences increase Daniel's comfort level with social situations. Although he still prefers the quiet solitude of his own home, Daniel has learned to appreciate interaction with other people. If Daniel had not found a way to connect to the world outside his room, he may not have ever written his life story.

## Social Growth

Socialization is a difficult thing for many autistic children to achieve. For unknown reasons the autistic child usually lives in a world of his own. He is unable to communicate his own emotions or understand the emotions of other. Daniel notes that he has difficulty sensing his mother's feelings and he does not talk about her as much as he refers to his father. Daniel does not interact much with his siblings and the children at school are viewed as nuisances. There is a potential for Daniel not to learn how to interact with other people.



However, Daniel's parents are continually supportive and he is blessed with several teachers who encourage his efforts. One of the biggest steps in Daniel's road to socialization is his volunteer work in Lithuania. This is a huge undertaking for an autistic person. Daniel is lucky that he is high functioning and able to travel without assistance. By leaving all the comforting routines of his daily family life, Daniel is taking steps towards becoming a normally socialized adult. It is during his time in Lithuania that Daniel learns to reach out to others in an effort to make friends. Without this experience, Daniel may not have been comfortable meeting a stranger from an online chat room and he would have missed out on the love of his life.

Neil is also a large part of Daniel's social growth. Neil is also a homebody but enjoys spending quality time with a group of close friends. Through his relationship with Neil, Daniel learns to make friends and participate in group activities without anxiety. The continual exposure to social settings increases Daniel's ability to concentrate on a conversation and to distinguish the various nuances of personal dialogue. All of these seemingly big steps eventually lead to the ultimate social experience: several public interviews and television appearances. It is unlikely that without encouragement first from his parents and later from Neil that Daniel would have been willing to take part in *Brainman* or appear on David Letterman.

## Refusal to Accept Differences

Daniel was born in England at a time when little was known or understood about autism or savant syndrome. Since his parents were young and poor they could have easily decided that a child like Daniel was too much for them to deal with, especially given his constant crying and head banging behavior. However, his parents refused to give up on their son and this attitude persists throughout Daniel's life.

Instead of choosing to limit their son, Kevin and Jennifer Tammet patiently spend hours rocking their son to sleep and when they discover that routines keep him calm they make every effort to abide by those routines. Daniel never recalls a moment when his parents try to discourage him from doing something. When Daniel chooses to spend time playing quietly in his room while his brothers and sisters are playing outside, his parents do not shove him outside into an uncomfortable situation. This accepting attitude continues during Daniel's school years and after.

Daniel's parents are nervous about his trip to Lithuania, but encourage his participation instead of trying to talk him out of the opportunity. They support his adventure by helping him pack and taking him to the train station. Daniel's parents are an unrelenting supportive force in his life that helps him continually move forward. Because Daniel's parents treat him as a "normal" child and encourage his personal strengths, he is able to achieve a great deal in his life. The reader never gets a sense that Daniel is different or needs special consideration.

Many people do not show tolerance or understanding for those who are different from them. Daniel Tammet is able to function normally in society as long as those around him

are willing to adjust their lifestyles to accommodate some of Daniel's idiosyncrasies. It seems that there should certainly be a place in society for someone of Daniel's intelligence and abilities, but it is the intolerant attitude of fast-paced businesses that prevents him from working in a traditional setting. People prefer to ignore those who exhibit differences instead of taking a moment to discover the potential hidden behind their disabilities. Daniel and Kim Peek show the world that every person has something to contribute to the betterment of society. The biggest contribution that these two individuals make is the sharing of their lives.

# Style

## Perspective

Daniel Tammet is undeniably an expert on himself. He is also a man very educated on a variety of other things. He understands the intricacies of his savant syndrome almost better than the many notable researchers who study it. Throughout the book, Daniel provides the reader with explanations of certain aspects of savant syndrome and Asperger's syndrome. He does so in a mostly non-clinical, conversational tone so that the reader is able to gain a better understanding of his world.

Daniel tells the reader why he decided to write a book about his life. In the final few paragraphs of the first chapter, Daniel states that writing this book has given him "some perspective" on how far he has come in his life despite numerous obstacles. When Daniel was born, the doctor's held out little hope that he would progress to become a highly functioning adult. At the time the book was written, Daniel is a twenty-six year old man involved in a healthy relationship, he is the owner of a successful business, and he has traveled the world bringing awareness about savants to millions of people. Beyond being able to reflect on his own success, Daniel hopes that his younger brother, Steven, who has also been diagnosed with savant syndrome, will be able to learn from his struggles and overcome challenges.

The reader is certainly affected by Daniel's story. The things that he has achieved in such a short amount of time may make many readers feel like they have not accomplished anything, especially considering that the road to success has not been an easy one for Daniel. However, it does not seem that Daniel intended to make the reader feel upset about his own lack of achievement or to evoke sympathy for those with savant syndrome. Daniel Tammet's purpose in writing the book was for his own pleasure and personal exploration. A positive by-product of the book is the understanding and, hopefully, greater tolerance the average person will have for those with disabilities.

## Tone

The tone of the book seems to be a mix of subjective and objective. The author's autism gives him an objective tone towards most things that average people assign emotions to. In fact, the author notes several times throughout the book that he has no particular feelings about his siblings or schoolmates. Daniel does not enjoy socializing with other people. He views his classmates as nuisances and prefers to spend recess alone. Instead, he prefers objects like books, and concepts like numbers. Daniel's world seems backwards; towards people, he is objective, towards objects, subjective. Numbers and routines comfort him. He describes languages as friends and peers as frustrations.



However, the overall feeling that the reader gets from the book is a sense of warmth and caring for everything and everyone described. As Daniel matures, he develops an understanding of empathy and compassion for others. He learns to make friends and interact with them on a personal level. Daniel's relationship with Neil does much to further his social growth. Neil's compassion and understanding for Daniel's differences slowly show Daniel how to treat others. Similarly, the natural process of aging seems to affect Daniel's feelings for his family. While the reader is sure that Daniel always loved his family, he does not say so until the final chapter of the book.

Throughout the book, the reader senses the immense comfort that Daniel finds in numbers. Even a reader who despises math is able to appreciate the relationship between Daniel and numbers. This reversal enables the reader to gain a wider understanding of how different things can be special to different people. It is not often that a person considers traditionally hard, cold ideas like numbers friends. Daniel's mix of objective subjectivity opens the reader's eyes to another way of living and viewing the world.

## Structure

The story is told in twelve chapters. Each chapter is numbered and has a title that describes what the chapter is about. The beginning of each chapter has a small drawing usually made up of lines or dots. The relevancy of the pictures is not clear to the reader but almost certainly have something to do with the way the author views either the number of the chapter or the events in the chapter.

The chapters move quickly because the author's style of writing is clear and concise. There are few extraneous details and the order of events moves along chronologically. The only notable exception is chapter nine which the reader may find clinical and dry, as well as not contributing to the natural progression of the story.

Since several of the chapters involve precise discussions of numbers, the author includes drawings and equations to further help explain what is being told. The author also seems conscious that many readers may not have the same ability to comprehend mathematical equations and languages as he does. In order to aide the reader's understanding when discussing these things, the author takes extra care to provide plenty of examples and to use language that is clear and understandable. However, this care may not be taken in consideration of the reader but because of the author's personal connection to numbers and languages. Whatever the reason behind the style of writing, the book is quickly and easily read but still allows the reader to understand everything that the author is trying to convey.



## Quotes

"I know it was a Wednesday, because the date is blue in my mind and Wednesdays are always blue, like the number 9 or the sound of loud voices arguing." Chapter 1, p. 1

"Numbers are my first language, one I often think and feel in." Chapter 1, p. 7

"My parents did not want to label me, to feel that they were holding me back in any way." Chapter 2, p. 19

"My mother made bargain hunting in the local charity and secondhand shops and markets into an art, while my father proved himself very handy around the house." Chapter 4, p. 57

"I was never comfortable at school and rarely felt happy, except when left alone to do my own thing." Chapter 4, p. 67

"From the age of eleven I knew that I was attracted to other boys, although it would be several years before I considered myself "gay." Chapter 6, p. 109

"The cacophony of different noises - magazine pages being flicked and Walkmans playing loud, thudding music and people coughing and sneezing and talking noisily - made me feel unwell and I pressed my fingers into my ears when it felt as though my head was about to shatter into a thousand pieces." Chapter 7, p. 117

"But there was something else as well: excitement, that I was finally taking charge of my life and my destiny." Chapter 7, p. 119

"I hadn't ever had to cook for myself before and made do at first with eating lots of sandwiches and bowls of cornflakes. I would soon have to summon up all my courage to make my first journey to the center." Chapter 7, p. 123

"A part of me was sad to be leaving, but I knew inside that I had achieved everything - personally as well as professionally - that I could here, and that it was time to move on." Chapter 7, p. 139

"Neil did not find it difficult to accept me for who I was." Chapter 8, p. 145

"Neil is a part of my world, part of what makes me "me," and I could not for one moment imagine my life without him." Chapter 8, p. 158

"The relationship I have with a language is quite an aesthetic one, with certain words and combinations of words being particularly beautiful and stimulating to me." Chapter 9, p. 160-61



"We walked out into bright mid-afternoon sun and then stood, Kim once more clasping my hands in his. Standing close to me, he looked into my eyes and said: "One day you'll be as great as I am." Chapter 11, p. 202

"Only a few years before it would have seemed impossible that I would be able to live such an independent life: to fly to and travel around a country as huge as the United States, meet all sorts of people and visit all kinds of places, and have the confidence to share my innermost thoughts and experiences with the world." Chapter 12, p. 211

"It was the strangest thing: the very same abilities that had set me apart from my peers as a child and adolescent, and isolated me from them, had actually helped me to connect with other people in adulthood and to make new friends." Chapter 12, p. 211



## Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast Daniel Tammet's mathematical abilities with those of John Nash, the subject of the film, *A Beautiful Mind*.

At the very end of the book, Daniel mentions his Christian faith. Why do you think he waits so long to mention religion and why does he comment on it at all?

Even though the entire book is based on Daniel's syndrome and his limitations, do you view him as "disabled" or "handicapped" after finishing his story?

Daniel lives in England. Do you see any advantages or disadvantages to his geographical location that may have affected his personal/professional growth? Would he have different treatment if born in America or Lithuania versus England?

Daniel met Kim Peek, the basis for Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rainman*. How does Hollywood marginalize the emotional capacity of people with Autism?

Daniel accomplishes a great deal despite his preference for being a homebody. In what ways could he increase his contribution to society if he were not afraid of social interaction?

Even though Daniel does not cite any research on the topic, and there may be none, do you think that homosexual relationships are easier for people with Autism to engage in because of the familiarity with ones own sex?