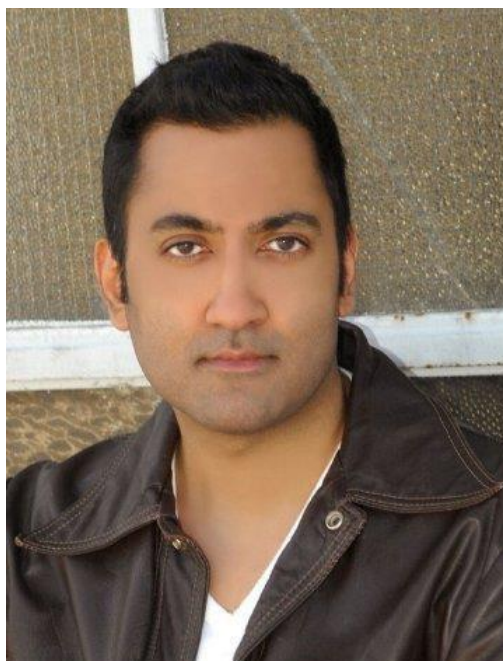


# ALL ABOUT

Ashok Rajamani's  
**THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED: A TRUE STORY**

*BARNES AND NOBLE'S DISCOVER GREAT NEW WRITERS  
PICK 2013*

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*Best Books of the Month Selection (January 2013)*

*Booksellers' Picks Selection*

*Biography Picks Selection*

– *Barnes & Noble*

ALGONQUIN PAPERBACK ORIGINAL



ASHOK RAJAMANI

## THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED

A TRUE STORY

**A sudden, near-fatal massive cerebral hemorrhage is no laughing matter, until Ashok Rajamani puts readers inside his head as he struggles to put his life back together.**

After a full-throttle brain bleed at the age of twenty-five, Ashok Rajamani, a first-generation Indian American, had to relearn everything: how to eat, how to walk and to speak, even things as basic as his sexual orientation. With humor and insight, he describes the events of that day (his brain exploded just before his brother's wedding!), as well as the long, difficult recovery period. In the process, he introduces readers to his family—his principal support group, as well as a constant source of frustration and amazement. Irreverent, coruscating, angry, at times shocking, but always revelatory, his memoir takes the reader into unfamiliar territory, much like the experience Alice had when she fell down the rabbit hole. That he lived to tell the story is miraculous; that he tells it with such aplomb is simply remarkable.

More than a decade later he has finally reestablished a productive artistic life for himself, still dealing with the effects of his injury—life-long half-blindness and epilepsy—but forging ahead as a survivor dedicated to helping others who have suffered a similar catastrophe.

**ASHOK RAJAMANI** lives in New York City. His work has appeared in dozens of publications, including *Scholars & Rogues*, *South Asian Review*, *Danse Macabre*, and *3:AM Magazine*. This is his first book.

## The Day My Brain Exploded



A TRUE STORY

Ashok Rajamani

JANUARY 2013

MEMOIR

256 pages, 5½" x 8¼"

ISBN 978-1-56512-997-9

\$13.95 TRADE PAPER ORIGINAL

NO. 72997

WORLD



# PRAISE FOR "THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED"

"A new literary talent to watch:  
Outrageously funny and seriously  
courageous."\*



*Discover*  
GREAT NEW WRITERS

2013 inductee

**BARNES & NOBLE**  
BOOKSELLERS

Best Books of the Month Selection\*\*

Booksellers' Picks Selection

Biography Picks Selection

**HARPER'S**  
MAGAZINE

"...good-humored and self-deprecating... deals with drama elegantly.

**PUBLISHERS  
WEEKLY**

"First-time author Rajamani delivers a fascinating look at his life and  
recovery as a brain-injury patient that is both heartbreaking and  
uplifting."

## Booklist

*"In this frank and witty account of his own brain 'explosion,' Rajamani describes in vivid detail the circumstances leading to the injury, and its devastating aftermath on both his family and himself, including chronic epilepsy and a freak form of blindness affecting the left side of each eye.*

*With disarming drollery, the author also recounts his racism-tainted upbringing as an Indian American in white-dominated Suburban Chicago. Shedding much-needed light on a little-known medical trauma,*

*Rajamani's sharp-edged prose is both informative and inspiring, especially for the many marginalized sufferers of brain injury and those close to him."*

**BBC  
RADIO**

"A pretty wild book."



*"...a frightening, raw, droll, and hopeful book about what life is really like for a twentysomething who falls down a rabbit hole but doesn't end up in Wonderland. Instead, he finds a nightmare that won't end without the strength of character that he never knew he had."*

**CBS RADIO**

"Extraordinary...very personal."

SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

*"Brilliant and Engaging. Perfect sarcastic humor... a hilarious, irreverent, fascinating Holden Caulfield-esque story of a 25-year-old 'brain-damaged, Indian American redneck."*

**The Washington Post**

*"With a self-deprecating tone that vacillates between humor and anger, Rajamani details the cerebral hemorrhage and the damage it caused. The book jumps back and forth in time, from the 'brain explosion' that left him epileptic and partially blind, to his childhood growing up as a first-*

generation Indian American in suburban Illinois, and to his post-college years working in New York. Rajamani describes what it is like to relearn the most basic of skills — how to walk, to eat, to speak — as an adult.

"True, what I went through was terrible and, true, I wasn't always patient with those around me," he writes. "But I realize now, looking back, I am one of the luckiest people alive, and in telling my story I am hoping to give a voice to others who were not so fortunate."

## The Courier-Journal

*"The hope Rajamani offers is simple yet profound. His wisdom is gained from such clarity as is often borne of catastrophe."*



*"Rajamani doesn't hold anything back in his memoir; his honesty is commendable... readers who enjoy raw and unflinching journeys of self-discovery will appreciate his 'no-holds-barred' writing style."*

## the Atlantic

*Featured Memoir, [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com), dec. 2012*



*"It's a marvel that he survived—most people don't make it after such traumatic injuries. It's a miracle that he recovered to write such an eloquent book about his ordeal."*

## LibraryThing

*"This memoir is heart wrenching with raw emotion and honesty. After suffering an aneurysm, Ashok Rajamani begins the recovery process with pain, anger, wonder, and discovery. Ashok portrays his experience and rehabilitation with clarity and honesty, which most of us will never endure."*

+++++



"A fierce, funny, fascinating memoir of a man's battle back from a brain injury that damaged his body but resurrected his spirit and the meaning of his life."

--Wade Rouse, author of "At Least in the city Someone Could Hear Me Scream"

"With piercing prose, Rajamani beautifully captures an experience unknown to most. He reminds us that the body is remarkably adaptable and that new values surface after physical changes occur. The Day My Brain Exploded will take you to new places within yourself—it will leave a lasting imprint in your consciousness."

-Belo Miguel Cipriani, author of "Blind: A Memoir"

"The story unfolds like a flower blooming. Powerful, hardcore honesty, and humor all make this a book I would recommend to anyone... thanks to Ashok for opening up and sharing so honestly. Shocking, amazing, powerful -- it makes for a superb book."

--Melinda Gustafson Gervasi, author of "Illness, Death, and Taxes for the Middle Class"

"The Day My Brain Exploded is a memoir of epistemology. Ashok Rajamani shares how a man rebuilds a life of the mind. His prose is at once witty and probing, persistent and clear. If the brain could write an autobiography this would be it."

-- Stephen Kuusisto, author of "Planet of the Blind"

"Rajamani is clearly a new literary talent to watch: he deftly mixes dark, Sedaris-like comedy with surreal drama, thus capable of being outrageously funny and seriously courageous (especially when it involves cultural taboos) -- while also remaining emotionally authentic."

-- Jason Michel, Paris, Editor-in-chief, Pulp Metal Magazine and author of "Confessions of a Black Dog"

"A uniquely humor-filled memoir."

--Open City Magazine

"Rajamani's tale is a memoir describing the course of his life before and his recovery following a rather catastrophic hemorrhagic stroke. It's full of irreverent rapier wit and artfully written prose, and speaks to a lot of issues that are seldom acknowledged—including life as a second-generation American struggling to assimilate in a society that will never truly accept him, and the stigmas and perceptions that surround afflictions of the brain and mind. Rajamani does his best to underscore the importance of all that with a healthy dose of gallows humor."

--"Time-out-of-life," Tumblr

"Rajamani painstakingly records his advance back into the world through actions, therapy and a very strong will to succeed. Through it all, he keeps a sense of humor, though extremely edgy at times, that I believe is so integral in healing and moving on. This is a great book. "

--Dew on the Kudzu Magazine

"Rajamani takes you through your own gamut of emotions as you share his story of the event and the therapy and recovery which is continual. You cry. You laugh. You feel pity, sympathy and empathy. What a diary to be able to read."

--Rebecca Holland, author of "From the Nightstand"

"Quite frankly, a miracle."

--Joe Donohue, host of "The Roundtable," NPR/National Public Radio

"This memoir is so important... for anyone who is suffering a disability, especially a brain-related disability."

--David McMillan, "Strategies for Living" Radio

"An articulate biography written from the heart."

--garamchai.com

"Ashok inspires our community."

-- Craig Sicilia, Washington, Founder and Director, International Brain Injury Survivors Network

"Rajamani mostly tells his story with humor and irreverence, but his recounting of his painful recovery period is moving and heartfelt. He is an inspired survivor who weaves a revelatory tale of overcoming enormous odds."

--PositScience.com

"Pure emotion: Raw and Real. It's a very accurate portrait of what happened before, during, and after his brain bleed."

--Leigh Pafford, Hometowne Television



# HARPER'S

M A G A Z I N E

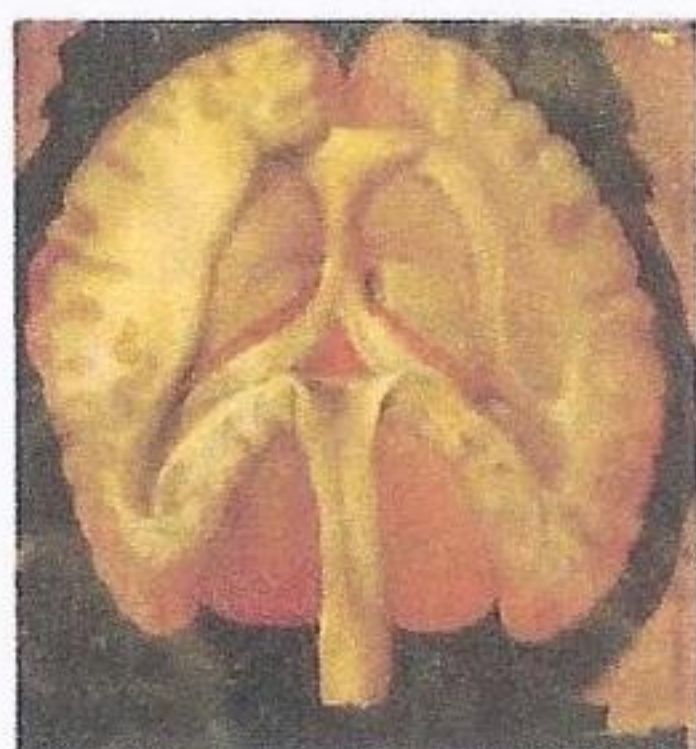
## NEW BOOKS

By Jane Smiley

**A**shok Rajamani would like to show you what happens when 100 billion neurons are suddenly overwhelmed by bursting blood vessels. In June 2000, at the age of twenty-five, Rajamani is passing the time in preparation for his brother's wedding masturbating in his Manhattan hotel room while the rest of his family is out sightseeing. Unbeknownst to anyone, Rajamani suffers a congenital defect in the way arteries and veins in his brain are connected—an arteriovenous malformation—which leads to what he calls a "Hiroshima" hemorrhage the moment he climaxes. ("Those rumors about jerking off were right," he remembers thinking before he passed out.) The AVM hemorrhage was, according to his doctor, bound to happen sometime, but in his good-humored and self-deprecating memoir, *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED* (Algonquin, \$13.95, [algonquin.com](http://algonquin.com)), Rajamani persists in feeling culpable—for being blinded by God, for ruining his brother's wedding, and for switching jobs without signing the COBRA form that would have extended his health insurance. The months, then years, following the hemorrhage are

Jane Smiley is the author of many works of fiction and non-fiction. Her most recent novels are, for adults, *Private Life*, and, for young adults, *Pie in the Sky*. She won a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1992 and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1997.

a chaos of change, misunderstanding, adaptation, and revelation. Bacterial meningitis, hallucinations, a ventriculostomy, a craniotomy, and a plummeting white-blood-cell count, as well as a savior complex, follow. ("I'm the body of love, I'm the body of love," Rajamani babbles to his family for weeks on end.)



His recovery takes him to religion—Christ, Krishna, Kali—and to the offices of speech, physical, occupational, and cognitive therapists. *The Day My Brain Exploded* chronicles his return, not to his normal life (a life in which he had been bullied for being "brainy" before becoming a public-relations whiz and inveterate alcoholic), but to what he calls "a brand new life." His brain is deceitful, fooling him time after time into thinking that everything has stabilized—even as he suffers seizures and migraines, short-term and emotional memory loss. When, after several years, he starts seeing the people around him, as well as his own reflection, as figures so distorted he can't bear to look at them, no epileptologist or psychiatrist can cure him; hiding out at home, he comes up with his own diagnosis by means of the Internet—Alice in Wonderland syndrome, also known as lilli-



putian hallucinations. The doctors pooh-pooh it, but Alice's adventures help him to decipher his warped visions. Rajamani's book deals with his drama elegantly, by maintaining a calm tone, and though he initially thinks of himself as a "science class earthworm"—regenerated, but with only a portion of his old self intact—he eventually derives pride from his altered state. "I loved that old guy profoundly," he sighs. "But I think I love this new fucker just as much. Perhaps even more."

**I**t only takes a solitary, single, massive explosion to create a completely new universe," Rajamani tells us; *PHYSICS IN MIND: A QUANTUM VIEW OF THE BRAIN* (Basic Books, \$28.99, [basicbooks.com](http://basicbooks.com)) by Werner R. Loewenstein, an emeritus professor of biophysics at Columbia, explores our universe's alpha explosion, the Big Bang. Loewenstein begins by relabeling the mysterious quantum unit sometimes called energy and sometimes called matter as "information," explaining that the moment before the Big Bang was the "moment when the information of the universe was concentrated in a minuscule

A lithograph of Alice watching the White Rabbit disappear down a hallway, 1865, by John Tenniel  
© Mary Evans Picture Library. The human brain, from *Tabulae Pictae*, by Girolamo Fabrici  
d'Acquapendente © The Art Archive/Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana Venice/Collection Dagli Orti



# SALON

SATURDAY, JAN 19, 2013 10:00 PM UTC

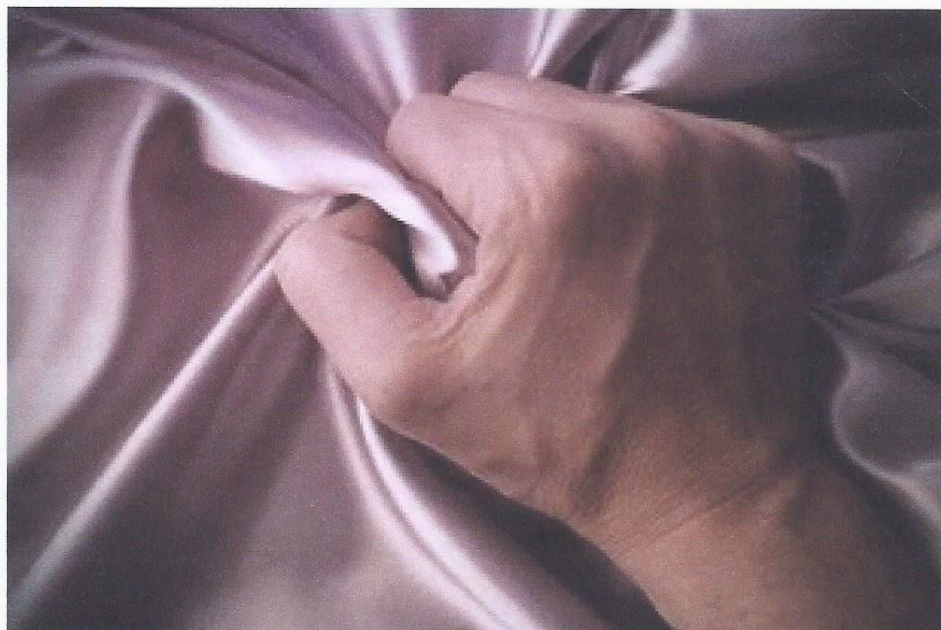
## An orgasm almost killed me!

It was my brother's wedding day, and I was practicing some bored self-love. It ended with an explosion in my brain

ASHOK RAJAMANI



TOPICS: BOOKS, EDITOR'S PICKS, LOVE AND SEX, NEUROSCIENCE, LIFE NEWS



(Credit: Gancey M. Emin via Shutterstock)

*Excerpted from "The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story"*

Perverted. Masturbating on your older brother's wedding day is perverted, isn't it? Well then, call me a perv. Because that's what I was doing in my hotel room a few hours before the ceremony.

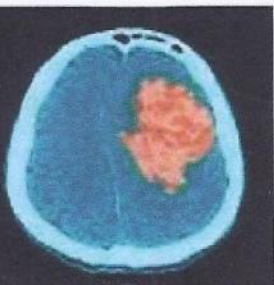
March 17, 2000. Twenty-five years old.

The day before, I had flown from New York City to Washington, D.C., where my older brother, Prakash, and his fiancée, Karmen, lived and were to marry. At the time of my spontaneous onanism, the rest of my family was out playing tourists. My brother Prakash was in the room next to mine, preparing for his big day.

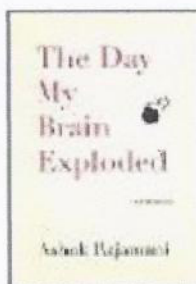


# la Repubblica

scienze  
DANNI COLLATERALI

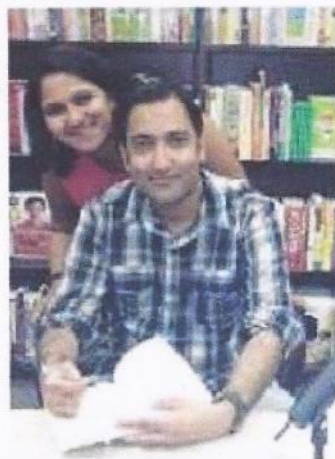


A destra, la copertina del libro autobiografico *The Day My Brain Exploded* di Ashok Rajamani (sotto). A sinistra, cervello con emorragia cerebrale



## L'uomo a cui esplose il cervello

UN'EMMORAGIA GLI HA TOLTO METÀ VISTA E IL RICORDO DELLE EMOZIONI. IN COMPENSO GLI HA LASCIATO UN SIBILO NELLE ORECCHIE, EMICRANIE, ALLUCINAZIONI, CRISI EPILETTICHE... HA DOVUTO **reinparare** A CAMMINARE E A PARLARE. MA, DICE, OGGI LA SUA VITA È PIÙ PIENA DI PRIMA. LEGGERE PER CREDERE



dal nostro inviato **Riccardo Staglianò**

**N**EW YORK. Alla vigilia del grosso grasso matrimonio del fratello, un venticinquenne indo-americano in carriera smaltisce l'eccitazione del momento nel bagno di una camera d'albergo di Washington. È solitariamente intento, per dirla con Woody Allen, a fare «sesso con qualcuno che amo». Sul più bello sente come uno schianto dentro la testa. Tutto diventa buio, si affloscia sulla moquette come un burattino a cui hanno tagliato i fili. «O mio Dio, pensai, sono fottutamente cieco. Ecco che cos'era quel botto. Le cose che ci dicevano sui rischi della masturbazione erano vere» scrive Ashok Rajamani in *The day my brain exploded*, il giorno in cui il mio cervello è esploso, tragico memoir sulla sua morte e risurrezione.

Ashok 1,0, il talento delle pubbliche relazioni che ha appena ottenuto un nuovo posto lautamente retribuito, finisce il 17 marzo 2000. Sul workaholic da quattordici ore e una bottiglia di Absolut o Smirnoff al giorno cala un sipario di tenebre. Quel groviglio di vasi sanguigni che non sapeva neanche di avere in testa, una condizione rara (l'1 per cento della popolazione), congenita e asinto-

matica che i medici definiranno malformazione arterovenosa (Avm), si è rotto, inondando di sangue i tessuti circostanti. Miracolosamente riesce a chiedere aiuto ai genitori nella stanza accanto. Il quadro che il neurologo si trova davanti è critico. Un fiume di fluido cerebrospinale esondato è andato a finire negli organi interni. Il cervello, la zona più protetta del corpo, diventata di colpo contaminatissima. Dopo l'emorragia gli viene una meningite, che da sola potrebbe ucciderlo. Il tour della sfiga non è ancora finito. Rilevano anche un *Campylobacter*; un batterio ormai quasi inesistente nel mondo sviluppato, che generalmente viene trasmesso dal pollame andato a male («Raccontai di aver mangiato del pollo all'aglio non tanto buono in un ristorante cinese. E i medici mi dissero che potevo averci a che fare»). L'unica misura radicale per aggiustare quel disastro è operare. Vari rischi sanitari: cecità, sordità, paralisi delle gambe o quadriplegia. E un rischio economico: Rajamani non aveva ancora firmato l'assicurazione medica del nuovo lavoro e l'intervento costava alcuni milioni di dollari che non aveva. L'operazione va bene, nei termini relativi che tra poco vedremo, e suo fratello avvocato convince il nuovo datore di lavoro a coprire le spese.



La ricostruzione di Ashok 2.0 non è un lavoro da niente. Tra le cose che mancano all'appello del sopravvissuto Rajamani c'è metà vista. Si chiama emianopsia, ed è appunto la perdita di metà del campo visivo. Non è facile neppure da immaginare, tant'è che, pur avendolo letto, quando incontro Ashok nel suo studentesco bilocale di Chelsea mi siedo davanti a lui, e mi chiede di spostarmi di lato, all'estrema sinistra, perché solo da questa prospettiva obliqua potrà vedermi quasi per intero. Nella vita quotidiana significa sbattere contro i muri, i pali, gli oggetti. È solo l'inizio. Le terminazioni danneggiate dei nervi degli orecchi gli provocano un acufene permanente. Non pensate al sibilo occasionale che sperimentiamo dopo un concerto fraccassone. «È come sentire le sirene dell'ambulanza tra un orecchio e l'altro» dice. Da impazzire. «Col tempo e una gran disciplina impari a non pensarci. Non sparisce, ma si attenua».

I primi tempi dall'apertura della calotta cranica, richiusa con quattro placche di titanio, portava i capelli corti che mostravano uno squarcio orrendo. Ora li ha lunghi e non si vede più. Ma anche per il resto, se non sapeste cosa ha avuto, non vi accorgereste di nulla. Quello davanti a me è un trentanovenne con una sofisticata proprietà linguistica e un gran senso dell'umorismo che si rammarica solo perché la sua memoria non è più quella di una volta e per questo si è dimenticato di prendere la sua dose giornaliera di pillole. Sono farmaci antiepilettici, l'altra pesante eredità di questa vicenda. Constatata: «La cicatrice lasciata dalla rimozione dell'Avm è un fattore irritante per il cervello. Che ogni tanto reagisce con una crisi». Gli è successo al lavoro, per strada e, l'ultima volta, due anni fa, durante un colloquio per un nuovo posto, che non ha mai ottenuto. Dice: «La cosa più inquietante è l'aura, una serie di sensazioni olfattive, un puzzo come di avanzati andati a male, che precedono gli attacchi. E che ho imparato a riconoscere». Nella sua lunga convalescenza ha avuto anche una fase non breve di emicranie: «Mi dicevano di annotarle, attribuendo loro una scala di intensità da 1 a 10. Neanche a dirlo, erano tutti 10». E un periodo intenso di allucinazioni: «Non vedevo il mio naso allo specchio.

**Ricordo quello che è successo ma non le sensazioni: se sono stato felice o triste e perché**



Due opere di Rajamani: **Self-portrait: tentacles** (Autoritratto: tentacoli, sopra) e **Self-portrait: in utero** (Autoritratto: in utero, sotto)



I miei denti diventavano così grandi da coprire il resto del viso. Oppure il mio corpo sembrava più piccolo del mio pollice».

Questi sono alcuni dei danni collaterali quando la tua materia grigia è diventata un campo di battaglia. Non gli unici. La conseguenza più strana, più difficile da spiegare anche per lui che con le parole e l'introspezione ha familiarità, è la perdita della memoria emotiva: «Ricordo i dati, ma non le sensazioni. Quando sono tornato nel mio liceo sapevo di esserci stato ma è come se stessi sfogliando un catalogo perché non riuscivo a rievocare se in quelle stanze ero stato felice, triste e per quale motivo». Perché ciò accada, perché ai fatti venga strappata la pelle delle sensazioni, non si comprende bene e ha forse a che vedere con la definizione stessa di anima, di quella coscienza del pensiero che Kant chiamava appercezione. Ciò che invece non è difficile

capire è che perdita immane sia questa amputazione del sé. Rajamani lo dice benissimo: «Ci vuole una combinazione paradossale di resistenza e accettazione. Serve brandire una spada, non arrendersi davanti alle gigantesche frustrazioni di quando devi reim-

parare a camminare, parlare, pensare. È innaturale ridiventare bambino con un corpo di venticinquenne. Ma serve anche il flauto della resa, per capire che certe cose non torneranno più e non è il caso di farne una tragedia, soprattutto quando scopri che gli altri superstiti a incidenti come il mio sono rimasti quasi tutti in condizioni molto, molto peggiori».

Forse la spiritualità indiana aiuta. Scherza: «Alla fine ho avuto due vite al prezzo di una». Il trauma ha scremato gli amici («Neha 2-3 che vedo spesso») e l'ha reso più sensibile ai problemi altrui («Il pr è un lavoro superficiale e cinico, che non rimpiango di aver perso. Dare speranza, con la mia storia, a vittime di danni cerebrali importanti dà tutta un'altra soddisfazione»). Resta il sempre fastidioso problemino di come campare. «Avevo dei risparmi dalla mia vita precedente. Ho fatto vari lavoretti, alla Croce Rossa e come insegnante di inglese. I miei mi hanno aiutato. Il libro è uscito all'inizio dell'anno scorso e sono stato molto impegnato con il book tour. Ora sto lavorando al secondo, ancora autobiografico ma assai più allegro, su crescere da indiano negli Stati Uniti». Per lui è stato quell'apprendistato di discriminazioni, da secchione dal nome impronunciabile per gli standard fonetici dell'Illinois della sua infanzia, per di più dalla sessualità ondivaga («queer è il termine giusto»), ad averlo reso capace di affrontare ora questa prova. L'evoluzione gli sembra evidente: «All'inizio era la rabbia a prevalere. Ero capace di prendermela per niente, litigare soprattutto con quelli che mi stavano vicino, tipo mio fratello. Poi mi dimenticavo tutto, non perché sia saggio ma solo perché la mia memoria a breve termine faceva cilecca. Come se non fosse mai accaduto. Ora mi sembra che questa perdita, come tutte quelle che si vivono con consapevolezza, mi abbia costretto a guardarmi meglio dentro e a tirar fuori risorse che avevo trascurato. Nonostante la minaccia dell'epilessia e di altre funzioni dimezzate mi sembra di vivere ora una vita più vera, più in pace con me stesso».

Ci sono maniere meno devastanti per conoscersi. Lui dice che era il suo karma: perdere un pezzo per trovare il tutto. Da mandare a memoria quando ci si imbestialisce per un treno ritardatario, un raffreddore persistente o altre pinzellacchere.

**Riccardo Staglianò**





# THE TIMES OF INDIA

One day the ticking time bomb in Ashok Rajamani's head went off. In an 'anti-Oprah' memoir, he talks about how he put his life together again

VRUSHALI HALDIPUR

At age 25, Ashok Rajamani (below) had what he calls 'a bad day' when he experienced an extreme, near-fatal traumatic brain injury. Now, after more than a decade of overcoming brain damage, he recounts his experience in his memoir, *The Day My Brain Exploded*.

His injury was caused by the sudden explosion of an undetected Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM) in his brain, a result of a rare congenital birth defect, seen in less than 1 per cent of the population. After this injury, he went through a roller coaster of traumatic consequences — partial blindness, hallucinations, visual distortion and Grand Mal epileptic seizures. While his condition can be fatal, he has fought through it and is back leading a normal life.



Rajamani's account is personal, inspiring, terrifying and funny, finding humour in his situation, and also in his family members, who, while being firmly supportive, were also pragmatic as only middle-class families can be. His injury occurred on the day his brother Prakash married Karmen. His mother resolutely decided that the show must go on, even as the bride and bridegroom wanted to call it off.

"Trust me," she told him. "It's going to be difficult, true. But your brother will be okay. This wedding will go on as planned. After all, Karmen is wearing Vera Wang" — she paused for emphasis — "and it's not a rental! Think of the eighty guests!"

At times, he felt like Alice in Wonderland, where everything appeared too big or too small. Also, the blindness was such that his mind was unaware of missing vision. The former public relations executive had to re-route his life to his new reality, learning walk, read and paint again. Many survivor tales can be heart-wrenching but in his writing, he

## When his brain exploded

says he prefers to go for tears of laughter rather than those of pain. "I wanted to show that you can go through suffering and pain without making it sentimental," he says. "By making it humorous, I wanted it to be an anti-Oprah book and not mawkish."

At a café in New York's Chelsea district, the 38-year-old writer spoke candidly about adjusting to his new life and the challenges of writing a memoir.

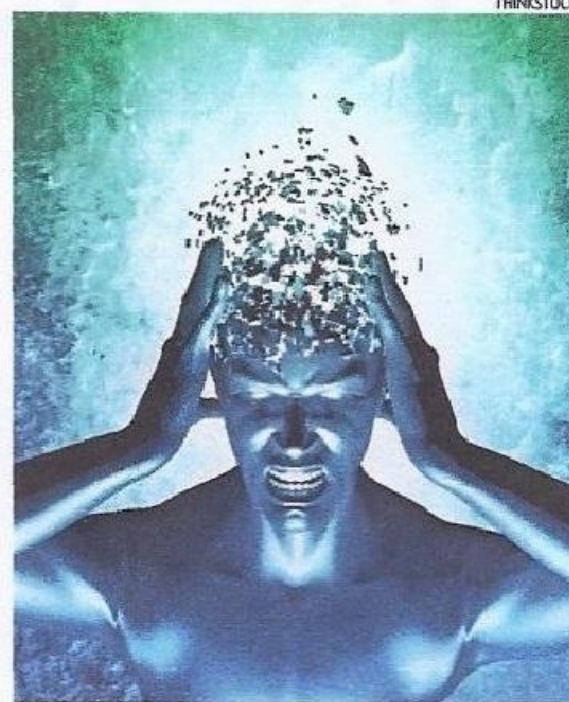
**What are some of the challenges of memory that you still face today?**

I have erratic short term memory, retrograde amnesia — it means that I can see you now but it would be very difficult for me to recall you after this meeting is over. I won't remember what you looked like. I'll remember what we spoke about, but visually I may not remember. It's weird; I can remember things that happened when I was ten, but I can't always remember what happened ten minutes ago. So to counter this, I create in my head a kind of safety-deposit box. Every word you say — I can store it in that safe and recall it. Otherwise, it would be swept away into an ocean of what they call 'senior moments' — and yes I have plenty of those!

**Can you tell us about the kind of blindness that was a result of the AVM?**

It's called hemianopia or hemianopia — blindness in half of both of the eyes. The problem with this is, I think I see everything, when actually all I can see is half your face and half of everything. For instance there are times when I go to a public restroom, I end up going to the women's room as all I could

**If I was an amputee, I could recognise that I have lost a limb, but with a brain injury there are no outward signs. Then I would see people my age, my friends leading their normal lives and I would get very angry**



see is the 'men' part of the word. I can see a bunch of stalls, suddenly women will scream and it's only then that I realise I have made another mistake and walk out. Things like this are very hard, because you can intellectualise some things but when you live through it, it's hard to remember that all the time. It's something that one has to live with every single day.

I went to a support group recently and some people with my condition walk with a cane, dark glasses and seeing-eye dogs and I don't want to do that.

**You also have written about the racism you experienced growing up in small-town America and at the workplace — a fact that is often swept under the carpet in the Indian-American diaspora.**

Most books talking about race are attached to the Black or the Latino experience and we don't read enough about the Asian,

South Asian or East Asian side of it. Many Indian-Americans like to think it does not happen because they are financially prosperous, and in a way, they can forget the societal problem of race — but I wanted to bring it up. Indian-Americans experience bigotry just like any another non-white group here and I wanted to address that.

**Do you feel like you have integrated into 'normal' life again?**

I think the challenging aspect is to realise that life has changed — to keep looking into the mirror and say, 'You look normal, nothing is wrong with you. Why don't you have a proper nine to five job? What happened to your life?' In that respect, it's difficult to move on in life because physically I look the same. If I was an amputee, I could recognise that I have lost a limb, but with a brain injury there are no outward signs. Then I would see people my age, my friends leading their normal lives and I would get very angry.

It's frightening for anyone going through an ailment that seems to have no answers. When things began appearing visually distorted, I was mortally terrified, doctors couldn't tell me what it was. It took me a long time to get over it. I first had the haemorrhage, then blindness, then epilepsy and then vision distortion. It never ends — I was thinking of it as a title for the book actually!

It is a strange point in my life — I was used to having a 9 to 5 life, and now it's different. One never knows what is going to happen next, so I take each day as it comes.

I am also working on my second book — I like to call it *These Saris Could Talk* — it's based on the women in my family and the zany lives they have underneath the prim and proper façade. It's so wacky that my grandmother would kill me if she saw it!

**The book reveals many extremely private moments in your life. How did your family react to seeing this in print?**

We are South Indian Brahmins, so we are very private! My relatives in India are equally private, so I was so worried when I wrote this — worried about how my parents would feel, but I think they knew that I have always been a big mouth! I gave an advance copy to them on Christmas Day. They surprised me — they're extremely proud of me and have liked what I have written. ■

The tsunami took everything — her husband, her two sons, her parents. Sonali Deraniyagala contemplated suicide, turned briefly to alcohol, and then began to write. 'Wave' was her raft to survival

SMRITI DANIEL

By the time I heard Sonali Deraniyagala's voice on Skype, I had been waiting for months to talk to her. In that interval, I had read and re-read her unbearably poignant memoir *Wave* while watching the reviews proliferate online. Praise abounded (Michael Ondaatje dubbed it "the most powerful and haunting book" he had read in years). It had been launched in March without fanfare, its author having previously reached an agreement with her American publishers that she would do only a few interviews and no TV talk shows. Still

*Wave* didn't seem to need much promotion — almost effortlessly, the slender tome has become one of the most extraordinary accounts of the 2004 tsunami.

That December, Deraniyagala, then a lecturer in economics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and her husband Steve were vacationing with her parents and her children in Yala on the south-eastern coast of Sri Lanka. Eight-year-old Vikram who "knew heaps about birds", loved the white-bellied sea eagles that soared in the skies



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**Though it started as an exercise suggested by her therapist, Deraniyagala did not consider her writing cathartic. She wasn't working her family out of her system — she was drawing them in. She brought her two boys to life, and then she began on her husband and parents. They are there on the page, thrumming with life**

turned the jeep in which they were attempting to escape and separated her from her

being terrifying and mostly being extremely painful physically." These first pages and

So she proceeded chronologically, through the chaos that followed the tsunami where hundreds upon hundreds were missing or unaccounted for in Sri Lanka alone. Vikram's body and those of his grandparents were identified in January but Steve and Nikhil were yet to be found — that news would take four months and the help of a lab in Austria to identify them from bodies exhumed from a mass grave.

While Deraniyagala waited for confirmation of what she already knew to be true, she planned her suicide, shielded away from all recollections of her family and for a brief

**APOCALYPSE NOW:** The tsunami tore through their hotel, overturned the jeep in which they were attempting to escape, and separated Deraniyagala (far left) from her family

colleagues, casual acquaintances and even her neighbours in New York didn't have a clue. That's all changed with *Wave*. People approach her in supermarket queues and out on the street. "They mostly just want to talk," says Deraniyagala, sharing her "relief that people know and I don't have this false identity... On the other hand I'm not at ease with the details that people do know. I don't know, I have to work that one out."

Readers are finding that *Wave* is as much about love as it is about loss; it is not one but two stories. One is the deliberate and unflinching examination of her own grief and her passage through it and the other the story of the life she once had. Though it started out as an exercise suggested by her therapist, Deraniyagala did not consider her writing cathartic. She wasn't working her family out of her system — she was drawing them in. She brought her two beautiful boys to life, painstakingly recording all she could of them and then she began on her husband and her parents. They are all there on the page, alive with detail, thrumming with life.

In *Wave*, Deraniyagala has an extraordinary memorial to the people she loved, allowing us first to know and then to care for these strangers through her words. The book feels like an invitation into their home in Friern Barnet, which Deraniyagala keeps much as it was. She imagines that her boys would cringe to know their playroom was the same, their notes and unopened Christmas presents still intact. She loves that people stepping in can imagine that Vik and Malli are in the other room, her husband perhaps out at the store.

Explaining her instinct to stockpile her memories, she writes: "I can only recover



## OPEN CITY

BLOG STORIES INTERVIEWS OPEN CITY – DRUNKEN BOAT ISSUE #16 ABOUT OUR CHINATOWN



Ashok Rajamani at a recent book signing | Timothy Bellavia

Q&A With Ashok Rajamani: The Man  
Whose Brain Exploded

Kyla Cheung talks to Ashok Rajamani about his uniquely humor-filled memoir recovering from an aneurysm at the age of 25.

BY KYLA CHEUNG

MARCH 7, 2013 | [ASHOK RAJAMANI](#), [BRAIN DAMAGE](#), [KYLA CHEUNG](#), [MEMOIR](#)Excerpt from Ashok Rajamani's *The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story*

When the pain grew too intense, Ashok-as-Christ emerged. When I watched my family members—all sitting in chairs, their faces wearing looks of deep agony and despair—I realized I had to save them.

So began my romantic affair with my corporeal self. I would rant daily, "I'm the Body of Love, I'm the Body of Love," as my family looked on in mute, helpless horror. In those moments, I inhaled the world's suffering. All of humanity's dreams, hopes, fantasies, and nightmares lay inside of me, and I never let the doctors and nurses forget it. Whenever they performed their routine tasks, I said solemnly, "Go ahead. My body is ready for you."

My mind whirled through erotic nightmares and dreamscapes as well, involving different genders, fluids, and bleeding and sucking. I recall one hallucination vividly: in my mind, the hospital had a secret orange room, a room of depravity, a room of liberation. It was packed full of women and men of different colors...I remember seeing a gorgeous Indian girl and sucking her nipples till she ripped them off herself out of pain. And when the Latino started exploding in my mouth, his juice wasn't white, but red. It was blood. I was so turned on, and the more aroused I became, the bloodier the room became.

The Day  
My  
Brain  
Exploded

Ashok Rajamani

Book cover courtesy of  
Workman Publishing

**Left in the Dark: Inside the Buildings of Chinatown After Hurricane Sandy**  
An illustrated dispatch.

**Magical Mystery Tour: Chinatown's Underbelly with Novelist Ed Lin**  
"My strength is writing about Chinese people and dirtbags, and Chinese dirtbags."

**Post Sandy, Day 4: Hester Street in Lower Manhattan**  
Community organizers distributed supplies and canvassed buildings for two days before FEMA showed up to offer aid.

**Election Day in Flushing, Queens: From the DREAM Voter to the Poll Workers' Dream of Decent Work**  
Part one of a two-part series on local Asian-American engagement in electoral politics in New York City.

**Lakshmi's Night: A Muslim Woman Honors Diwali**  
I recall the monkey god's gaze at the Ganapati Temple and my own impulsive desire to offer him a coconut.

**Art Rock City: Looking for a Boulder in Flushing Meadows**  
It's the second largest park in New York City, and it hosts the U.S. Open. But when the world isn't watching, what lies beneath the park's borders—and what does it say about Queens?

**Got Moochh?**

**The Story Behind Great Taste's 'Five Dumplings for a Dollar' Deal**  
This Sunset Park eatery is known for dishing up the best dumplings in New York City. So why is its owner, Mr. Chen, barely breaking even?

**Dollar-Bin Punk**  
It all started with Beijing rock band The Fly—a cross between the Sex Pistols and Nirvana, but, you know, in Mandarin.



**OC: Your memoir opens with a quote from the poet Rabindranath Tagore, a quote from Lewis Carroll, as well as a quote from Charo, the Spanish 1970s comedienne. What did you mean by including all three? What artists inspire you?**

AR: Tagore, Carroll, and Charo all inspire me. If we were to ask if I existed in the high-brow world or the low-brow world, then I would say, without question—both. I dig Dolly Parton and Frida Kahlo. I like to call my book the anti-Oprah book. Yes, it is the story of surviving a tragedy, lending itself to mawkishness and over-the-top sentimentality. But, this is not that type of book. My book revels in comedy, tragedy, bawdiness, and flat-out vulgarity, and redemption all at once. But it does not implode into sentimentality, that’s for sure. As for which artists and people who inspire me... there are too many to name. But here are just a few off the top of my head: Frida Kahlo, Gautama Buddha, Malcolm X, Madonna, Swami Vivekananda, and of course Jem (the cartoon character).



Joyce Anderson

“New York City reminds me of a friend that had a miscarriage.”

**OC: Your book is funny considering the sobering material. Was that something that surprised you?**

AR: My book is written with comedy because that reflects who I am. Before my hemorrhage, I’d always found humor in even the darkest of circumstances. Luckily, I have retained that baseline personality trait even after the brain explosion. I’m convinced that humor saved my sanity.

**OC: What are your thoughts on how your many identities—as a traumatic brain injury survivor, an Indian-American and a person of color, interact with one another? How did these affect your approach to writing?**

AR: Being brown is visible, but being brain-damaged isn’t. Sadly, both issues are not discussed enough in pop culture. The circumstances of racism toward Indian-Americans are never fully dealt with in literature, and brain damage is not historically a major-league subject in books. I’m glad to bring out these issues. In my acknowledgements, I give props to little brown kids in America’s Heartland and to brain-damaged warriors as well. I hope I can represent them well, and by publicizing my life, I hope I can publicize theirs.

**OC: One of the funniest parts of the book is when you, as a 5th grader, get into a shouting match with your classmates after you show-and-tell a bronze statue of Krishna with them yelling “Jesus” and you yelling “Krishna.” It’s a comedic and also insightful moment of how early on Americans recognize and participate in identity conflict.**

AR: I don’t think kids are inherently racist. They fought with me not because they hate brown skin, but because they are curious. Once teen-hood begins, the racism kicks in.

**OC: Your relationship with your family members plays a very present role in the memoir. The letters your mother wrote are some of the most touching moments in the book. She writes to you as you lay in the hospital bed and pleads with God, “Why did it all have to happen?” Did your perspective change as you wrote the memoir and included your family’s voices? How has your family reacted to the book?**

AR: When I wrote the book, I realized my family never gave up, even when they could have. My mother’s letters were the most challenging to include. They not only voiced her love and support for her child, but also her fears, and of course, her pain. I gave my folks advanced copies of the book for Christmas. To my surprise, they loved it right away! I was shocked, because South Indian Brahmin families are usually the first to disavow sharing private matters.

**OC: You mention in your memoir how you witnessed a marked change how you were treated after 9/11, recounting how your father’s close friend, a Sikh man, was killed in a hate crime. You still live in the city and have often, in the case of your seizures, have been on the receiving end of the kindness of New Yorkers. What is your relationship to the city now? Has it changed?**

AR: New York City reminds of a friend I knew that had a miscarriage. She was freaking out, depressed, sad, and angry for the months before-and-after her pregnancy. After many, many months she returned to normal and life went on. With 9/11, New York City suffered its own miscarriage, or more fittingly, a brain hemorrhage, and survived it. It took a while to move on, and even though it has some scars, it has moved on. Yes, it was a tough time to be a brown male from 2001 to 2002, but New York soon came back to the city I remembered—the one without xenophobia and fear of brown men.

**Searching for Soca Paradise: An Afternoon With DJ Rekha**  
The Basement Bhangra deejay revisits the neighborhood of a legendary Hollis nightclub that flourished in the 90s.

**Scenes From Sandy: South Queens Recovers, Slowly**  
Dispatch from Far Rockaway and Jamaica in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

**Photographs: The Captain Briggs Farmhouse in Queens**  
Back in 1830, Richmond Hill was a farm.

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**AAWW** The AAWW: in The Margins: @dapwell's interview series continues, this time with actor, comedian and father Randall Park  
<http://t.co/v8MyDqI0U1>  
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**AAWW** The AAWW: "Will a sexual revolution follow the political revolutions that have rocked the Arab world?" On 'Sex and the Citadel'  
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**AAWW** The AAWW: "because of avian flu my stupid cunt cousin could not get an education on your stupid cunt shores" - poet Jenny Zhang  
<http://t.co/dP5y56yDGn>  
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# India Abroad

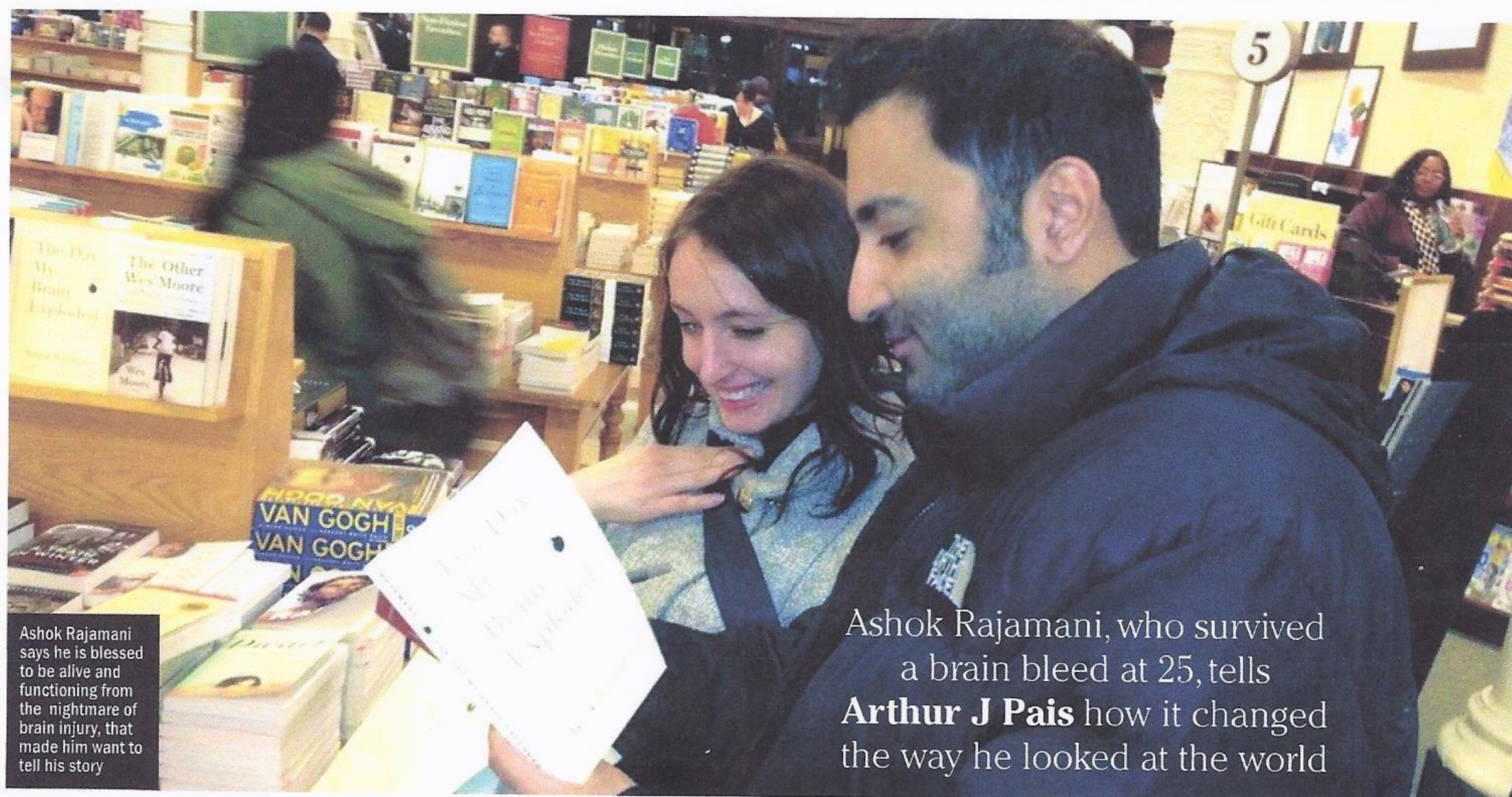
THE MAGAZINE

India Abroad February 22, 2013

EXTREME SURVIVOR



M5



Ashok Rajamani says he is blessed to be alive and functioning from the nightmare of brain injury, that made him want to tell his story

Ashok Rajamani, who survived a brain bleed at 25, tells **Arthur J Pais** how it changed the way he looked at the world

## 'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

**T**he handsome man, around 38 years old, walked into the ladies room and came out in no time before the shrieks started. "Oh, I did it," he muttered as he apologized for his mistake.

Can you really blame him? Ashok Rajamani, survivor of a full-throttle brain bleed at the age of twenty-five, could only see the words MEN outside the WOMENS toilet because the hemorrhage had left him with lifelong bisected blindness, epilepsy, in addition to distorted hearing, erratic transient amnesia, metal staples in his brain, and ultimately, a carved skull because of open brain surgery.

*The Day My Brain Exploded: A True Story* — a confessional book — full of raw stories and dark humor, is the consequence of his body's very own 9/11, says Ashok.

It is also the story of an immigrant family and its two America born sons, and the racism they had to face in an all white school near Chicago. The book has received praise and media attention for the first-time author who has lived in New York City for over 17 years.

He graduated from New York University in journalism and attended Columbia University for advanced cultural

studies.

Now a brain injury rights advocate, Rajamani has been a regular host for Brain Injury Radio and is a board member of the International Brain Injury Survivors Network, as well as a subject matter expert for the Brain Injury Association of America.

**Your book is titled *The Day My Brain Exploded*. Tell us about that day.**

The actual bleed that provoked the explosion that day, was, shall we say, something not suitable for children to hear; you'll have to read the book to find out!

The hemorrhage was caused by the explosion of a hidden birth defect called an arteriovenous malformation — a congenital birth defect — that is hard for doctors to detect until it explodes, as was my case.

An AVM can exist anywhere in the body, but is most frequently detected in the brain. Mine had nestled in my brain from birth, awaiting its explosion.

In other words, my AVM was a ticking time bomb. Perhaps most shocking: the event took place in the most surprising of situations — my brother's wedding.

**Was this the original title of the book?**

The original title was actually *Brain Karma*, but after some thought, my editor and I realized we wanted something more in your face. *Brain Karma*, we felt, sounded more like a book of brain puzzles, or even a book of yoga

instructions.

The title *The Day My Brain Exploded* is colorful, blunt, and vivid, and perfectly mirrors my no-holds-barred writing style.

**Your mother felt you were too young to write such a memoir; what was your answer?**

I told her, quite simply: "I've died already. I think that's more than old enough."

**Why did you choose to tell your story?**

There are not enough memoirs by brain-surgery and brain-injury survivors. In many cases, these survivors have become too mentally challenged or face other severe handicaps.

Plus, they are often killed by their injuries. I once asked my brother, "How come there aren't many 'brain injury pride parades in contrast to parades with survivors from other health conditions?" He told me, deadpan, "That's because the marchers are either too damaged to walk, or, they're dead."

I've been blessed to be alive and functioning from the horrendous nightmare of brain injury. I have to tell my story.

I also haven't found enough memoirs by Indian Americans dealing with the issue of race. Americans of Indian and South Asian descent must contend with as



# 'You mean your God is metal? That's dumb'

Although I was, of course, aware of my somewhat different appearance, I was raised to be proud of who I was as well as of my cultural heritage, something that occasionally created a bit of tension in the environment.

I had to go to Avon Center School, Not too painful. The main problem was my name. Realistically, "Ashok" is only two syllables; it shouldn't be a problem. But on the first day of every school year, the teacher found a new, more inventive way to fuck up my name.

Some variations included Uh-Sheek, Ah-Shook, Ass-hock. Even my classmates were sick of it. With a collective yell at the teacher on the first day of the school year, they would clarify: "It's UH-SHOK!"

The new teacher, flushed with embarrassment, would then say it correctly. By the next day, though, it would be forgotten and we would start all over.

\*\*\*\*

In first grade, our teacher was a Latina named Mrs Marquez. The kids tried to depict her in their Christmas cards. As they did, one after the other called out. "She's not our color!" They held up the peach-colored crayons, which the box had conveniently labeled as "Flesh."

"We can't use the flesh color to draw her," they exclaimed. So they used the black crayon from their boxes.

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The statue I was bringing to school was of Lord Krishna as the Vishwaroopa, his multi-headed, twenty-armed avatar, representing God as the ultimate power that controlled the creation, preservation and the destruction of existence itself.

Of course, I did not know how to articulate all that at the age of ten, so Mom explained to me in understandable terms.

"Why does he look like that, Mom?" I asked the day earlier, confused by Krishna's multi-limbed appearance.

"All of his arms and heads equal all the people in the world," she said. "It means God is everywhere."

"So is that the statue of God?"

"Not exactly," she said with a chuckle. "It just shows what God means. But it's still holy."

Mrs Swenton, a fifty-year-old white

## The Day My Brain Exploded

Ashok Rajamani

woman who excelled in frumpiness, introduced me.

"Ashok is next," she said, her needle-thin, unpainted lips in action, "to show what he brought. Everyone pay attention."

Just before me, a boy showed us his pet puppy, a golden retriever named Demon. The class, of course, loved the presentation, their "oohs" and "aahs," flooding the small yellow-tiled room. It was a tough act to follow.

I went to the front, gussied up in my au courant gray turtleneck and plaid pants chosen by Mom.

"Everyone," I said, "this is Lord Krishna."

The kids, still panting over Demon, shut up and listened. They all seemed intrigued.

I had my speech prepared.

"He's God and this..."

Before I could continue, Leslie interrupted, her blonde pigtailed bouncing. "Ewww! You mean your God is metal? That's dumb!"

"Jesus is a man," said Mike, who looked like a sweet, cute version of Curly from *The Three Stooges*.

"You should love Jesus!" some other classmates boomed.

"How stupid," Leslie snickered. "How can God be for show-and-tell?"

"Here is what's stupid," I said. "You think your Jesus is great. I've seen his pictures. He has only two arms. My God has so many arms he can kick your stupid God's butt!"

I had unlocked the door to an invisible sports stadium. Three of the kids, as though rooting for one of the teams in a football game, started cheering, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"

"Krishna! Krishna! Krishna," I countered, trying to yell above the impromptu pop rally. "You know my God can beat up yours!" ■

Excerpted from *The Day My Brain Exploded*, published by Algonquin Books. Copyright, Ashok Rajamani.



'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

◀ M5

PARISH GANDHI

much bullying, bigotry, and racism as any other non-white community in our nation. We need such stories that address this fact.

**Your resurrection from such extreme brain trauma is quite rare. How would you say you've contended with your survival?**

I tell other brain-injury survivors that we shouldn't feel so morose, because I feel we've been given two lives for the price of one. That's how I look at it.

I know I am lucky to have survived well enough to speak, to think, to read, and to write, and to do everything offered in the land of the living.

I try to find humor in the pain of my journey. As I often say, my laughter is far stronger than my tears. When one undergoes a hellish experience, they can either cry or laugh. I chose to laugh.

**Tell us about your trauma of dealing with doctors.**

Unfortunately, I learned that some in the medical profession have a sordid 'god-complex.' They feel just because they heal your physical ailments, they can belittle your self-worth.

In the book, I mention how a surgeon cruelly dismissed questions about my operation. It was then that I realized a patient's health is only as good as his doctor's humanity. That said, I have also had some wonderful doctors, who have treated me warmly, lovingly, and humanely. I owe much of my recovery to them.

**Your memoir details your spirituality. How would you describe your belief system?**

I am a proud Hindu. Specifically, I am enraptured by both the aggression and surrender I must ingest to survive. This aggression is symbolized by Shakti, the Goddess Durga.

Surrender is a mindscape created by the loving, passive embrace of Lord Krishna. I survived because of the conflation of the two. This made me rely on a belief in something bigger than myself, a force so great and perfect which would protect me and ensure that I could never be destroyed entirely.

Hinduism is a banyan tree — we can worship God all the way from meditating on God through the path of representative idols and the path of *bhakti*, to the way of *karma yoga*, in which our daily work brings us to the divine, all to the way to *jnana yoga*, a developed view of Vedanta, in which we do not personalize God, but understand in energy and the concept of Brahman, which exists everywhere — an idea that some actually call a form of atheism.

My death and rebirth made me even more a believer of forces beyond control. Whether one calls it 'universe,' 'god,' 'energy,' I know there is something bigger than all of us, as individuals. And each one of us has different paths to discover it. Hinduism maintains, all rivers, all yogas, lead to the same ocean.

**The narrative of the book is not chronological. Instead, it slides back and forth between different years and spaces of time. Why did you recount your story this way?**

Our thought processes are far from linear. The ways our brain retrieves memories and envelops fresh thoughts are never predictable. I wanted my memoir to conflate both order and disorder, reflecting such mechanics of the brain.

The back and forth motion also forces the reader to be energetic, whereas a chronological narrative does not. Rather, it enforces eventuality: The reader can guess where the timeline of the story is headed, and this can be disinteresting. Many memoirs, unfortunately, take a route as bland as that.

**In most memoirs, the writer discusses his or her families. How is yours dealing**

▶ M9



# 'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

4 M8

## with their compromised privacy due to the book?

Actually, my parents have been totally supportive. South Indian Brahmins so supportive over such raw self-revelation! I was rather surprised.

My mom's late mother was obsessed with the words 'privacy' and 'dignity,' like the Queen of England. She was a devout Brahman woman who insisted on privacy. I'm sure if she were still with us, she would be wringing my neck, or probably choking me with her sari.

## Describe your parents, especially your mother whom you describe as the strongest woman you have ever known.

My mother would come to the hospital, sit on a blue plastic chair, and would be with me all during my days of torture.

I never understood why until I saw the movie *Passion of the Christ* and watched Mary watching her son being crucified, in agony.

I realized that most mothers, no matter what pain their children are going through, will not leave them.

My mother is an incredible woman. She had an arranged marriage and had to learn to be a part of a very quirky family. She then was forced to live in an all-white Midwest town without any Indians, and she was quite the outsider.

But she looked after us very well and gave us a lot of moral support. My father has a very big heart and a great sense of humor, all of which helped me survive the nightmare of my journey.

## You write at length about the support you received from your parents. Could you tell us about your brother Prakash and the role he played in the community of supporters?

Like I say in my book, Prakash was my first responder and savior. I couldn't have made this journey without him. He is a lawyer, so practically speaking; his guidance and input were invaluable in any legal matters we had to deal with it, like my medical health insurance.

Emotionally, it was his strength, along with his humor,

which carried me through my journey. Most importantly, throughout my entire life as Ashok 1.0, brain explosion or no brain explosion, he has been my protector, guide, companion, and rival, all rolled into one.

My deep relationship with Prakash is evidenced heavily in the book. The reason is simple: He is my big brother, and whether he knows it or not, we are tied for life, sharing a bond that only two brothers, in our cosmos, could ever share.

## Writing this book must have taken a long time. Do you have a 9-5 job? How has your daily living changed since the hemorrhage?

Being a writer is a full time job, but it's not stable, and unfortunately, I don't have a 9-5 job currently to provide such stability.

I volunteer for the brain-injured community as well as write articles, teach English as Second or Other Language to those in need, and hold other odd jobs.

I realized a few years after my brain explosion that it was tremendously difficult to explain my long absence from the work place. Most references I can provide to future employers are over a decade old.

It's so hard to explain the large gap in my resumé now. Sadly, many years ago I had a seizure right in the middle of an interview, which has scarred me entirely. Ever since it has been difficult to effectively seek jobs without certain anxieties.

I now live my life day-to-day. The fateful day I had my brain explosion I had no idea that I would face death when all I did was leave for a wedding.

Also, now that I've been left with epilepsy, I can have fears of having seizures in inopportune moments. This, as well as knowing death can happen at any time... these are issues I never had before the hemorrhage, and now often make me feel that every time I leave my house, it might be for the last time. So the good news is, now I don't leave my apartment messy.

It's like your mother always warns, never leave home with

unclean underwear. You know what? She's absolutely right. You never know if you'll be caught dead in it!

When I had the brain hemorrhage and long hospitalization, to my shock I had discovered my father had cleared out my apartment in Manhattan, and to do that he had to check out everything in it, and take all of my belongings, everything which constituted my life at the time, to his house in New Jersey where I would be staying for a long time.

Naturally, I felt violated. After all, my private life had been torn open. I had arguments with him over that, but later I realized that he had done what he thought was the right thing.

It took me a while to get over my anger, but I forgave him. After all, he is the only Dad I have and I love him dearly. He has been a great support in my journey through recovery.

## You write about Ashok 1.0 and Ashok 2.0. Who are these Ashoks?

Ashok 1.0 was a 25 year old more affected by the material world, who basically went for the more visible things — clothes, money and career. He was a heavy drinker, making a lot of money in the public relations world, but not quite living a life rewarding to him.

Ashok 2.0 has been resurrected. He has risen past death, overcome painful surgery, had to fight tremendous amounts of guilt and anger, but he has ultimately been transformed.

He is more spiritual than ever, and he is sharing the concerns of many in the brain-injured community, all the while realizing his main contribution to himself lies not in external successes but within his internal breakthroughs.

## What kind of guilt, envy, and anger did you go through soon after your surgery?

Looking at my brother, I would be angry, thinking, why didn't he have a birth defect like me? We were born from the same womb!

At the same time, I was irrationally consumed by guilt of ruining his wedding ceremony by having my brain explode right at that moment.

My mother went through a guilt phase too. She blamed herself for my misfortune, which was the result of a congenital condition.

I told her she should not blame herself but a few months later, it was I who was accusing her for causing the hemorrhage. And yet I knew she was not responsible. She did not drink, she did not do drugs.

I asked her for her forgiveness soon.

Much of my anger and frustration would happen when I would look at myself in the mirror. I looked perfectly normal while knowing that inside me everything had been destroyed.

Coming to terms of my condition helped resolve my anger, and became a big part of my transformation.

## As you were recovering from surgery, you gave up two friendships. Why was that?

One friend of many years was a great help to my family and was behind me solidly when I had to go through very complex surgery three months after my bleed. But I came to feel that she had become a Tragedy Queen.

She saw herself as a martyr and I heard her telling a friend that she had to take care of me. I began to feel she was getting off on the fact that I was seriously sick. Her helping me in fact was less about helping me than about her needs, and the need to make her feel important. The friendship has since ended.

Ashok 1.0's closest friend was a brother-figure in every way possible. He was my drinking buddy and we had enjoyed each other's company enormously. We parted ways after my hospitalization though, after it became obvious that our lifestyles were no longer the same.

I've now found kinship and friendship with the Brain Injury Community. We are all wacky and loud. 'Loud' being the operative word! Sure, from time to time I've felt angry and envious of others, but I know now how to handle it.

My friends in the brain-injured community know a lot about these feelings. What surprised me in the hospital was that some of the doctors did not understand how, after losing parts of my brain, I could be uncouth or temperamen-





Ashok Rajamani with his parents Sheila and Puthucode Rajamani. Below, Ashok's older brother Prakash with his daughter Lakshmi

## 'The tears came gushing like a waterfall'

**Arthur J Pais** finds out how Ashok's family dealt with the aftermath of his illness

Sheila Rajamani would sit on a plastic chair in a DC hospital and write letters to God in her journal as she watched her 25-year-old son Ashok Rajamani battle for his life.

"Dear God, It has been less than a week since Ashok's in the hospital, nothing makes sense to me," Sheila, who had worked as a kindergarten teacher in a small town in Illinois when her two sons were very young, wrote in March 2000.

Referring to her first born, she added, "We had all come to share in the joy and happiness of Prakash and (his fiancée) Karmen on their wedding day, and Ashok is in ICU fighting for his life. Why did all have to happen at this time? Ashok has just started his new job, and off to a great start. I hope I'm providing him with some solace and comfort, and I hope he knows I'm there in the room."

A few days later she would write to God again. "Please spare his eyes. He's an artist. Spare his eyes. I know God, I am asking a lot from you."

God surely must have listened. Ashok retained half his vision, and a lot of his former life.

She says the most important thing she told her sons while

they were growing up was to be proud of who they were.

"Their experiences growing up were many times quite difficult. But it built in them the resilience to survive, gave them strength of character, made them fearless, emboldened their resolve and enlightened them early on. These qualities have made them the wonderful men they are today, and I am proud of them," she adds.

As Ashok was fighting for confidence and strength after a very difficult surgery, she told him, "There is a reason why you survived. To enjoy the sun, blue skies and a beautiful rainbow, remember not to take things for granted? You've got a second chance for life. Love everything about it"

What kept her going in the hospital and following months?

"Keeping a journal, penning my innermost thoughts and

feelings, frustrations and hopes for Ashok, my daily letters to God," she says. "It was a very difficult learning process. No one prepares you in the recovery of a brain-injured person. It is a journey, coping, nursing and dealing with the physical, emotional, mental well-being of a loved one round the clock."

Sheila says when she read the book she couldn't believe how far Ashok had come since "those months restrained in bed in the hospital. I feel pure joy that he is with us, and has triumphed beyond my wildest dreams. The tears that I held back these dozen years came gushing like a waterfall."

Her husband Puthucode Rajamani, who after working for major pharmaceutical companies for over 35 years, has his own pharmaceutical-related business, says Sheila is a woman of extraordinary strength and was a very important player in his son's recovery.

"We were tested all of a sudden and I wonder if there are many families who had to undergo ordeals like us," he says.

He recalls the day Ashok had the brain bleed. His oldest son Prakash rushed in his tuxedo to the hotel suite where he found his brother in great physical agony. "He carried his brother to the nearby hospital, as he did not want to wait for the ambulance as he feared it might take its own sweet time to arrive," Rajamani Senior says. Of course, Prakash or the immediate family did not have an idea what had happened to Ashok.

The hospital people called the insurance and were told that Ashok, who had just started a new job, was not covered. That was a bureaucratic nightmare, as the family had started suspecting the treatment might run into couple of millions of dollars.

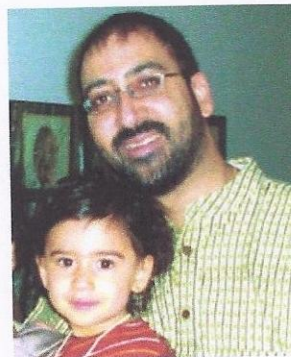
The three Rajamanis had to educate themselves about Ashok's condition, and often they found the doctors not ready to discuss things at length. "Today, I think we have become experts on his health problems," his father says, with a wry laugh.

Though his brother felt several times that he had ruined the wedding ceremony, Prakash says, he himself never felt that way. "We had to do everything we could to help Ashok. He is the only brother I have."

The family was always convinced, he adds, that Ashok had been saved so that he could answer a higher calling and be an inspiration for those afflicted with what might initially seem a hopeless case.

"Many people in his position would have gone into deep depression, a few might have committed suicide," Prakash says. "It is not that Ashok did not have huge problems adjusting to his new reality, and deal with anger and frustrations, but he was able to overcome much of all that because he has a generous heart and an inner life. He

knows he has been saved for a reason and God has plans for him." ■



4 M9

tal at times. In fact, there was one doctor who loved to look at me and point 'Inappropriate! Inappropriate!' Looking back, I realized he was in the wrong profession. He should have been a librarian.

Bullying continues across schools in America, and Indian-American students continue to be affected. What are your thoughts today about dealing with school bullying?

Indian-American students are affected, yes. But so are all students perceived as 'different' by their peers — be they be brown, or yellow, or gay, or small, or puny, or overweight, or poor, or too-intelligent, or not-intelligent-enough, or black, or Hindu, or

## 'I try to find humor in the pain of my journey'

Jewish, or Muslim, or anything at all perceived as the 'other.'

Bullying is an acceptable hate-crime in schools, in which the victims are rarely able to fight back.

I was bullied often, be it because of my race, ethnicity, religion, name, intellect, 'wimpiness,' and other issues.

I would like to say I can foresee a cure, but as long as children bully those who are different, there might be no end.

I am hoping we will have more nationwide legislation to help control bullying like the Dignity for All Students Act in New York state. I'm hoping that parents will raise their children by teaching the

virtues of tolerance, and not the fears of difference.

What will your next book be about?

It's going to be fun and frothy: a funny, comical collection of semi-autobiographical stories about the zany, crazy, and eccentric women in my family in India: a sort of Desperate Housewives in Mumbai! There is even a daughter-in-law who falls in love with her mother in law!

The working title of the book is *Adventures in Curd Rice*. For those unaware, Curd Rice is a yummy South Indian dish, containing rice, yogurt, ginger and other spices. I'm very excited about this project. It is more humorous than *The Day My Brain Exploded*. No bleeding brains involved ■



# BARNES & NOBLE

## BOOKSELLERS

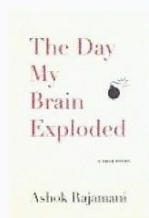
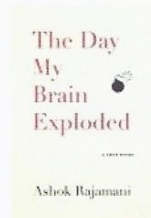
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Discover

## Everything Offered in the Land of the Living: A Conversation with Ashok Rajamani

Posted by Miwa Messer × February 15, 2013



Dear Reader,

Ashok Ramajani's memoir, *The Day My Brain Exploded* (A Spring '13 pick) is the astonishingly true (and shockingly funny) story of what happened after the author suffered a massive, near-fatal cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 25. He discusses the continuing, daily consequences of his traumatic brain injury, why he chose to structure the book

as he did, and how his sense of humor helps him survive, among other things with Discover Great New Writers.

**The Day My Brain Explodes begins on the day of your brother's wedding, the day your brain "explodes." Can you tell us about that day?**

Unfortunately, I can't; people have to buy the book to find out! What I will say, though, is that the hemorrhage was caused by the explosion of a hidden birth defect called an AVM, an arteriovenous malformation, a congenital birth defect that is hard for doctors to detect until it explodes, as was my case. An AVM can exist anywhere in the body, but is most frequently detected in the brain. Mine had been nestled in my brain from birth, awaiting its explosion. In other words, my AVM was a ticking time bomb. The event took place in the most surprising of situations, and the actual bleed that provoked the explosion, was, shall we say, something not suitable for children to hear.

**Not for children? Sounds provocative!**

Provocative is a good word to describe it.

**Your resurrection from such extreme brain trauma is quite rare. How would you say you've contended with your survival?**

I tell other brain-injury survivors that we shouldn't feel so morose, because I feel we've been given two lives for the price of one. That's how I look at it. I know I am lucky to have survived well enough to speak, to think, to read, and to write, and to do everything offered in the land of the living. Well, that's not the total truth. I can't ride roller coasters.



**You've made an amazing recovery. Are there issues that you still have to face and overcome each day as a result of this injury?**

There have been quite a few consequences from my hemorrhage. I now have erratic short-term amnesia as well as seizure disorder, otherwise known as epilepsy. Although I have not had a seizure in years, sometimes I still worry about getting another one. This is a fear faced by most people with epilepsy; no matter how long we go without seizures, we fear another incident is just around the bend. I also suffer from tinnitus, which is a consistent ringing in the ears, a sound that happens nonstop. In the book, I call the problem "chasing ambulances in my head."

Worst of all, I now have permanent blindness in half of both my eyes. This is a condition called hemionopsia, and it is a dreadful ailment. I can only see half the world now. The trouble is, there is no demarcation in my sight, such as some sort of black line, which tells me my field vision has ended. So I truly think I see the whole world, when in fact, I don't. You wouldn't believe the number of times I've accidentally walked into a women's public restroom since I don't see the "women" sign on the door, but only see the word "men." Then, when I enter and see a roomful of stalls with no row of urinals, I realize I have made a mistake yet again! My visual therapist once ordered me to consistently turn my head around like an oscillating fan. Since it's hard for me to always be conscious about the blindness, I often forget to do this. And when I keep my head in place and scan an area by moving my eyeballs left to right, I end up looking like a shifty-eyed villain from an old black-and-white movie.

**Your memoir details your spirituality. How would you describe your belief system?**

I was always spiritual, but my survival has made me even more a believer of forces beyond control. Whether one calls it 'universe', 'god', 'energy', I know there is something bigger than all of us, as individuals. And each one of us has different paths to discover this. Rivers lead to the same ocean, don't they? After all, Love is love around the world, even though it has different names in different languages.

**The narrative of the book is not chronological. Instead, it slides back and forth between different years and spaces of time. Why did you recount your story this way?**

Our thought processes are far from linear. I wanted my memoir to conflate both order and disorder, reflecting such mechanics of the brain. The back and forth motion also forces the reader to be energetic, whereas a chronological narrative does not. Rather, it enforces eventuality: the reader can guess where the timeline of the story is headed, and this can be disinteresting. Many memoirs, unfortunately, take a route like this.

**In most memoirs, the writer discusses his or her families. How is yours dealing with their compromised privacy due to the book?**

Actually, my parents have been totally supportive. I myself was rather surprised! I do know, however, that my mom's late mother was obsessed with the words 'privacy' and 'dignity', like the Queen of England. I'm sure if she were still with us, she would be wringing my neck, or probably choking me with her sari.

**Why did you choose to tell your story?**

There are not enough memoirs by brain-surgery and brain-injury survivors; for many, these



survivors have become too mentally challenged or face other severe handicaps. Plus, they are often killed by their injuries. I once asked my brother, "how come there aren't many 'brain injury pride parades' in contrast to parades with survivors from other health conditions?" He told me, utterly deadpan, "that's because the marchers are either too damaged to walk, or they're dead."

I've been blessed to still be alive and functioning. I have to tell my story, and the story of those who can't tell it themselves. I also haven't found enough memoirs by Indian Americans dealing with racism, or folks with half-blindness, or folks with psychotic hallucinogenic vision syndromes, or of folks with many other issues that I detail in the memoir. We need such stories.

Survival memoirs are often emotionally painful to write. Yet *The Day My Brain Exploded* is comical and humorous. How were you able to recount your difficult journey with such humor?

I don't take myself too seriously. And, as I often say, my laughter is far stronger than my tears. When one undergoes a hellish experience, they can either cry or laugh. I chose to laugh.

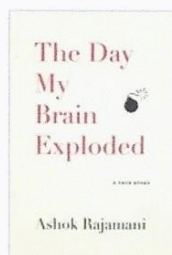
Who have you discovered lately?

Just finished Juliann Garey's *Too Bright to Hear Too Loud to See*. It is, simply, one of the best books I have read recently. The writing is bold, vivid, and moving. Details the issue of madness perfectly. Terrific work.

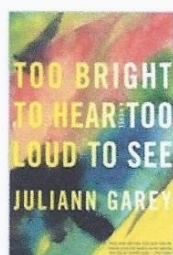


Miwa Messer is the Director of the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers program, which was established in 1990 to highlight works of exceptional literary quality that might otherwise be overlooked in a crowded book marketplace. Titles chosen for the program are handpicked by a select group of our booksellers four times a year.

#### FEATURED TITLES



**The Day My Brain Exploded: A...**  
Ashok Rajamani  
Paperback: \$9.83  
NOOK Book: \$10.49



**Too Bright to Hear Too Loud...**  
Juliann Garey  
Hardcover: \$19.53  
NOOK Book: \$10.49





## Life After Your Brain Explodes

By Ashok Rajamani

0

Tweet 4

Share Dec 17 2012, 10:29 AM ET

*When I was 25, I had a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. I later joined a brain injury support group -- reluctantly.*



LadyDragonflyCC/Flickr

"Don't compare apples to oranges. All of you are in different areas in life. Remember that. Different categories completely."

Kari, the moderator and social worker of the brain injury support group, was trying to give us a pep talk.

"You need to understand that your lives changed after your brain injuries. Understand that point, and you won't get jealous or hurt," she continued.

It didn't work. Out of the twenty attendees in the room, four, including me, were still morose, sad, and bitter. I was there because, following several months of treatment for a brain aneurysm that wiped out much of my memory and left me partially blind, everyone -- neurologists, therapists, counselors -- told me to join a group as soon as I was released from the hospital. But it took almost four years for me to actually attend a meeting. I had never planned to go, but finally I was so lonely and depressed that I felt I had no choice. Most of all, I had become painfully envious of everyone around me. To live in the outside world again, I needed to cope with non-brain-injured folks, whom I called "norms" a la old-school carnival-freak patois. These norms, with their goddamn unscarred heads, were pissing me off. They would never understand what had happened to me.



Ashok Rajamani - Ashok Rajamani is a writer based in New York City. His work has also appeared in *Scholars & Rogues*, *South Asian Review*, *Danse Macabre*, and *3:AM Magazine*. *The Day My Brain Exploded* is his first book.



# The Washington Post

Health & Science

## Rapper 50 Cent's fitness tips; rebuilding the mind after a brain 'explosion'

By Maggie Fazeli Fard February 4, 2013

HIP-HOP FITNESS

Get fit or die tryin'

### Most Read

1 'We failed,' New York police commissioner says of sergeant fatally shooting 'emotionally disturbed' woman



Forget getting rich. Rapper 50 Cent — who became a household name in 2003 with the album “Get Rich or Die Tryin’ ” — is now interested in helping you get fit. The hip-hop star known as much for his abs as his rhymes has released a new book, sharing workout tips and advice for getting ripped. “Formula 50: A 6-Week Workout and Nutrition Plan That Will Transform Your Life” details workouts and nutrition tips modeled on 50’s own regimen. It promises that body fat will decrease by 10 percent, energy will increase by 20 percent and strength endurance will improve by 20 percent — a total gain of 50 percent, according to 50.

### How one man rebuilt his mind

#### “The Day My Brain Exploded,” by Ashok Rajamani

Ashok Rajamani was 25 years old when his brain “exploded.” The result of a rare congenital birth defect that had lain in wait for more than two decades, a tangle of veins and arteries ruptured at a most inopportune of moments: while having sex, and on the day of his brother’s wedding. “A bad day, to put it mildly,” writes Rajamani in “The Day My Brain Exploded.” With a self-deprecating tone that vacillates between humor and anger, Rajamani details the cerebral hemorrhage and the damage it caused. The book jumps back and forth in time, from the “brain explosion” that left him epileptic and partially blind, to his childhood growing up as a first-generation Indian American in suburban Illinois, and to his post-college years working in New York. Rajamani describes what it is like to relearn the most basic of skills — how to walk, to eat, to speak — as an adult. “True, what I went through was terrible and, true, I wasn’t always patient with those around me,” he writes. “But I realize now, looking back, I am one of the luckiest people alive, and in telling my story I am hoping to give a voice to others who were not so fortunate.”

— Maggie Fazeli Fard



# neelthemuse

## EVERYBODY'S POET



27 Jun 2013

**What motivates you to write? This is a question that I would like to ask all the writers of the world. Ashok Rajamani's life story is closer to fiction than non-fiction; yet he has lived the story and now written about it.**

Ashok Rajamani is an internationally published writer and poet in New York City. His recently-released, critically-acclaimed memoir, *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED* (Algonquin Books) is currently available in bookstores worldwide. The book, an irreverent and electric account of his amazing survival from a full-throttle brain aneurysm, is the first of its kind by any Indian American author in history.

**Put aside everything you know and just focus on this interview.**

Did your brain injury lead you to writing more seriously? Tell us about your amazing journey to the *THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED: A TRUE STORY*.



It was not a question about being more “serious” with my writing. I have always been serious about this craft. The difference in my writing, since my brain injury, rotates around one word: ‘authenticity.’ It took this horrible near-fatal incident to make me realize the extreme limitations of our lives — in other words, it made me realize, fully, the simple cliché: life is short. As such, an artist must do what s/he can to create inspiring work which rings true for the reader. It took years to write this memoir, and I hope I’ve been able to bare my soul in the process. I am extremely proud of the end result.

You write poetry, essay and books. How do you shift so seamlessly from one form of writing to the other?

I actually change my identity as the written word dictates. For instance, at one point I am Ashok the Poet, one point I am Ashok the Memoirist, and so on. I unconsciously alter myself to fit whatever media or expression I pursue at the time. I am also an artist, so Ashok the Artist is another identity too.

What do you think new writers should do to be successful in 2013 and beyond? What shouldn’t they do?

Plain and simple: new writers should never give up. Publishing is an incredibly horrifying profession; the rejections are countless. To be successful you have to be strong enough to face the criticism. More importantly, you have to be strong enough to break the rules. Many writers hear about how important it is to have an agent, or how to do queries and other such things. But, believe me, don’t listen to them! All those rules are a bunch of crap. I got a deal without an agent. I simply cold-called the editor. I wrote queries in my own strange way. I never followed – nor follow – rules. To be successful from here and beyond, don’t listen to the rules. Write what fulfills you – and stop at nothing at getting your words out. Self-publishing, digital publishing and other possibilities, are all new ways books are read. No more do we have to fear the old “establishment” of publishing houses. Be bold, be brave. But no matter the hurdles, keep on writing.

Keep on Keeping on. We should always realize that, in order to get where we want to go, persistence is a must. No book, or poem, can exist without a full narrative.

As a writer who has dealt with brain injury, what kind of advice do you have to give to writers who want to deal with difficult health issues? Is there anything like too much honesty when you write about the darkest moments of your life?

First off, I want to say that the book was difficult to write because of my motor skills (my hands would often quiver on the keyboard), cognitive disability (I had to keep writing and reading notes due to my amnesia), and my visual handicaps (the hemorrhage left me blind in half of both my eyes, and I have faced multiple sight distortions). But I kept moving forward.

I swiveled the mirror so I could see; I made comprehensive outlines; I used a ruler to help me delineate the margins; I did whatever it took to keep writing. So, to all the disabled writers who don’t think they can do it – you’re only as good as the limitations you set for yourselves.



Now, to answer your question: writing about one's health issues is a personal matter. What happened to me is not unique – brain injury is faced by many. I think what made the difference is that I had a compulsion to document it. It takes a certain motivation (some would say derangement) to write about your health nightmares. So I can't advise other survivors or patients on how to move forward with writing their experiences. All I can say is that it is not easy to revisit the terrors you've experienced. Be prepared to have meltdowns in the fight to write about your life.

As for being honest, I don't think there is such a thing as "too much" honesty about disclosing a health crisis. Even a lie always reveals the truth. The main problem is trying to convince your family not to hate you for revealing family secrets!

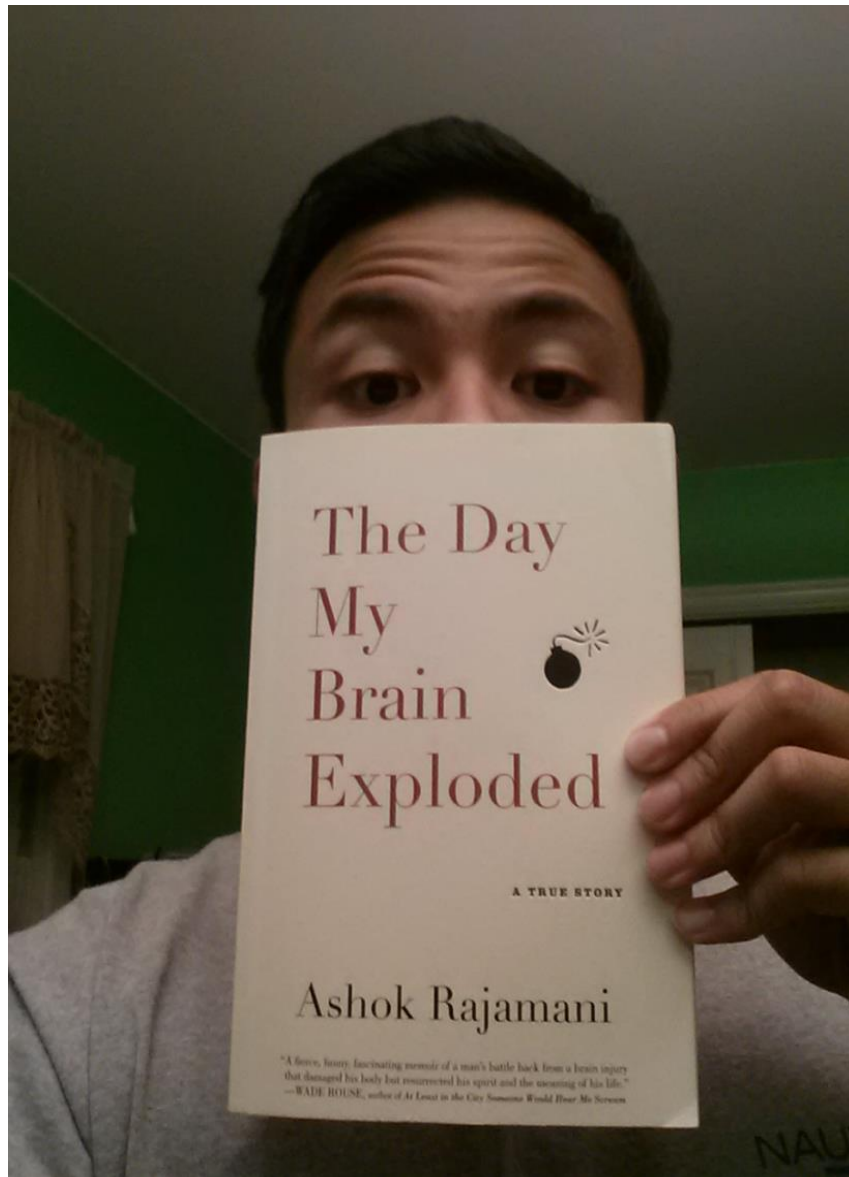
Is there any writer who has inspired you more than your life?

There is not just one writer who inspires me. There are many, all of whom have been able to conflate sorrow with humor. My memoir never gets too mawkish; laughter is stronger than sorrow. Tears of joy carry more power than tears of pain, so I adore poets, novelists, and memoirists who understand the importance of mixing comedy with drama. Faves include the following writers: Katherine Dunn, David Sedaris, Augusten Burroughs, T.S. Eliot, and Herodotus. On a grander scale, you can't beat the fictional or non-fictional Vyasa, the mythical wordsmith credited for writing the greatest poem ever made: The Mahabharata.

Thank you Ashok for your time. Your advice is invaluable to writers who procrastinate and those who try, and to people world over who have encountered rebellions of the body. Hope your book gets all the success it deserves!

neelthemuse@ 2013





The Day My Brain Exploded by Ashok Rajamani.

Arteriovenous malformation or AVM for short, is a very rare brain condition with just about a tenth of 1% of the population suffering from it. The author, Ashok, has it, and one day it takes its toll on him. This book discusses his life journey before, during and after that fateful day.

This book brings forth many positive things. Being that the condition is so rare, the book raises awareness about it. It also reveals the shocking neglect that AVM patients, along with other Traumatic Brain Injury patients, endure. But, I think the most valuable thing this book has to offer is the mindset of someone who has suffered brain damage.

Sure, there are things that we as outsiders can guess. But, then there are things that we think we know which turn out to be way off. And then there are some things we could never have imagined on our own. From the daily struggles to the emotional pain, Ashok leads the reader through it all, and it's fascinating.



# BOOK NOTES

# MUSIC PLAYLIST



## largehearted boy



### about lhb

largehearted boy is a music blog featuring daily free and legal music downloads as well as news from the worlds of music, literature, and pop culture.

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antiheroines  
atomic books comics preview  
book notes  
book reviews  
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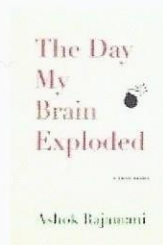
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January 23, 2013

### Book Notes - Ashok Rajamani "The Day My Brain Exploded"



In the *Book Notes* series, authors create and discuss a music playlist that relates in some way to their recently published book.

Previous contributors include Bret Easton Ellis, Kate Christensen, Kevin Brockmeier, George Pelecanos, Dana Spiotta, Amy Bloom, David Peace, Myla Goldberg, Heidi Julavits, Hari Kunzru, and many others.

Ashok Rajamani's memoir *The Day My Brain Exploded* is a captivating account of his rehabilitation from a traumatic brain injury.

### Booklist wrote of the book:

"In this frank and witty account of his own brain "explosion," Rajamani describes in vivid detail the circumstances leading to the injury, and its devastating aftermath on both his family and himself, including chronic epilepsy and a freak form of blindness affecting the left-side of each eye. With disarming drollery, the author also recounts his racism-ringed upbringing as an Indian American in white-dominated suburban Chicago. Shedding much-needed light on a little-known medical trauma, Rajamani's sharp-edged prose is both informative and inspiring."

Stream a Spotify playlist of these tunes. If you don't have Spotify yet, sign up for the free service.

### In his own words, here is Ashok Rajamani's *Book Notes* music playlist for his memoir, *The Day My Brain Exploded*:

*The Day My Brain Exploded* is the true story of my survival from a massive brain hemorrhage – an atomic explosion within my skull -- provoked by an untimely orgasm, stemming from an unknown birth defect which proved to be a ticking time-bomb. As such, this is a story of destruction. But, in actuality, it is a story of resurrection. The songs which inspired my memoir, then, reflect birth and death, the divine and the profane, and the world of the living battling the hell underneath.

### "Dying" by Hole

"You see the cripple dance," Courtney Love drones in this rock masterpiece of a funeral dirge.

This is where it all began after my brain exploded. I was dying.

### "Bedtime Story" by Madonna

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*Traveling, leaving logic and reason  
Traveling, to the arms of unconsciousness  
Traveling, leaving logic and reason  
Traveling, to the arms of unconsciousness  
Let's get unconscious honey  
Let's get unconscious*

Let's get unconscious honey," Madonna pleads to us in this techno-mad. Considering I was now slipping in and out unconsciousness, traveling past logic and reason, this song defined my state at this point, the early days of my hospitalization.

#### **"Peek-a-Boo" by Siouxsie and the Banshees**

This dark and vivid tribute to S&M reflected my own experience with the devastating pain I was now facing. I had to start lusting for the skull drillings and restraints or else die from the fear. Among the best lines:

*She has many guises  
She'll do what you want her to  
Playing dead and sweet submission*

I think I actually sang that to one of the doctors.

Oh, yeah, one other thing. The title is also the phrase chirped by my brother to neighborhood gawkers while we were growing up Brown and Indian in All-White Small Town USA.

#### **Good Times television theme song**

My brother sang this to me while I was restrained to my hospital bed. I was a dying figure with my eyes closed, semi-conscious, restrained to my bed, visibly dead to the world. He probably thought I couldn't hear him. But I did.

#### **"Today" by Smashing Pumpkins**

"Today is the greatest day I've ever known" is the gem of a verse from this song. It is also the way I felt the day I left the hospital.

#### **"The Perfect Drug" by Nine Inch Nails**

Being diagnosed with epilepsy after both surviving the hemorrhage and leaving the hospital was catastrophic. Trying to find the perfect drug to control my seizures proved to be even more catastrophic.

#### **"Natural Blues" by Moby**

*Oh Lordy, trouble so hard  
Oh Lordy, trouble so hard  
Don't nobody know my troubles but God  
Don't nobody know my troubles but God*

Thus goes the thumping refrain of Moby's "Natural Blues," the beat-heavy electro-sample of the old negro spiritual "Trouble So Hard."

While I continued my mournful search for 'the perfect drug,' the unexpected terror of seizures and the new nightmare of epilepsy spontaneously combusted with the residual head pains of my craniotomy. The pain and fear of it all left me in tears on many days. Don't nobody know my troubles but God, indeed.

#### **"White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane**

After finding 'the perfect drug' for my epilepsy, I started feeling some ease in my road to recovery. That changed, however, when I developed 'Alice-in-wonderland syndrome,' a visual condition that left my sight skewed with hallucinogenic distortions, and brought me to therapists who diagnosed me as psychotic and schizophrenic.

#### **"No More Drama" by Mary J. Blige**

Surviving all the distress and challenges, I made a vow to try to say goodbye to all of my drama, no matter how long it took



**"We Hate It When Our Friends Become Successful" – Morrissey**

At this point on my road back to life, I became keenly aware that all of my friends had moved on. They were now busy with big jobs, starting big families, getting big promotions, buying big homes, while I struggled just to smile even a big smile.

**"Long Hard Road Out of Hell" by Marilyn Manson**

*I wanna live I wanna love  
But it's a long hard road out of hell.*

Ain't it the truth.

Getting back to life wasn't as easy as I thought it would be.

**"I Remember You" by Skid Row**

I was now Ashok 2.0. But I could never forget Ashok 1.0.

**"32 Flavors" by Alana Davis**

Two lines in this brilliant anthem, a bluesy remake of Ani DiFranco's epic, say it best:

*god help you if you are a phoenix and you dare to rise up from the ash  
a thousand eyes will smolder with jealousy while you are just flying past*

I had been burnt to ashes entirely, and now I was flying again.

**"Life" by Desiree**

Joy. Serenity. Optimism. I conquered death.

**"Let It Be" by Beatles**

The day my brain exploded was a day that exploded my universe. Trying to understand why I survived, and why I was chosen to survive, still confounds me. As does trying to understand why I traveled through hell, and why I was chosen to travel through hell.

Perhaps, as the song says, there will be an answer. One day.

But as for now, I will let it be.

**"Keep on Movin'" – The Brady Bunch**

*Gonna keep on, keep on, keep on, keep on dancing all through the night  
Gonna keep on, keep on, keep on doing it right  
Gonna keep on, keep on, keep on movin' Gonna keep on, keep on, keep on  
groovin'  
Keep on singing and dancing all through the night*

As always, the Bradys said it best.



## BIOGRAPHY



Ashok Rajamani is an internationally published author, poet, artist, essayist, radio host, voice actor, and activist in New York City.

Heralded by Barnes & Noble as one of the "Great New Writers of 2013", he is a nationwide speaker, having conducted multiple reading engagements in events and venues such as the United Nations International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy; "Masala in Words: A Night of South Asian American Writers," New York City (headliner); Barnes & Noble, New York City; Barnes & Noble, Princeton NJ; Barnes & Noble, Holmdel NJ; Words Bookstore, Maplewood NJ; Decatur Book Festival, Atlanta GA; "Explosion of the Explosion" Brain Injury Book Launch, New York City; "Ashok Rajamani: Brain Injury as Confession," New York City; "Brain Injury Warriors," New York City (headliner); and Brain Injury Association of New York State.



In 2000, at the age of 25, he suffered a sudden, near-fatal, massive cerebral hemorrhagic stroke due to an undetected birth defect. Though surviving, he was left with lifelong bisected blindness, epilepsy, distorted hearing, erratic transient amnesia, metal staples in his brain, and ultimately, a carved skull courtesy of open brain surgery.

The final consequence of his body's very own 9-11: an irreverent and decidedly unconventional memoir about a day that exploded not only his brain, but the world around him, entitled THE DAY MY BRAIN EXPLODED: A TRUE STORY.

The memoir received worldwide acclaim, hailed by multiple global media outlets, including Publisher's Weekly, Harper's Magazine, The Times of India, Washington Post, Booklist, The Atlantic Monthly, BBC, and more.

He also performed the unabridged audio production of the book, which was called by Dr. Gregory O'Shanick, Medical Director of the Brain Injury Association of America, a "groundbreaking masterpiece."

After the hemorrhage, he emerged as a proud brain injury rights advocate, and became a board member of the International Brain Injury Survivors Network, as well as Subject Matter Expert (SME) for the Brain Injury Association of America.

In addition to his memoir, Ashok has been a featured writer in other books/journals/magazines including: South Asian Review, Three Line Poetry, Mantram, Catamaran, 50 Haikus, Monsters of the Rue Macabre, Armageddon Buffet, Pulp Metal Literary Magazine, and dozens more. He has been host for Brain Injury Radio worldwide, and belongs to the Authors Guild, New York Writers Coalition, Asian American Writers Workshop, and South Asian Journalists Association.

A self-acknowledged Hindu hick, Ashok grew up in a town near a cornfield in Illinois, before fleeing to The Big Apple at the age of 17, where he's lived ever since.

He is a Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa graduate of New York University, where he received his Journalism degree with Kappa Tau Alpha honors. He attended Columbia University for advanced cultural studies.

His turn-ons include: Kathy Bates in Misery. His turn-offs include: tomato chunks.