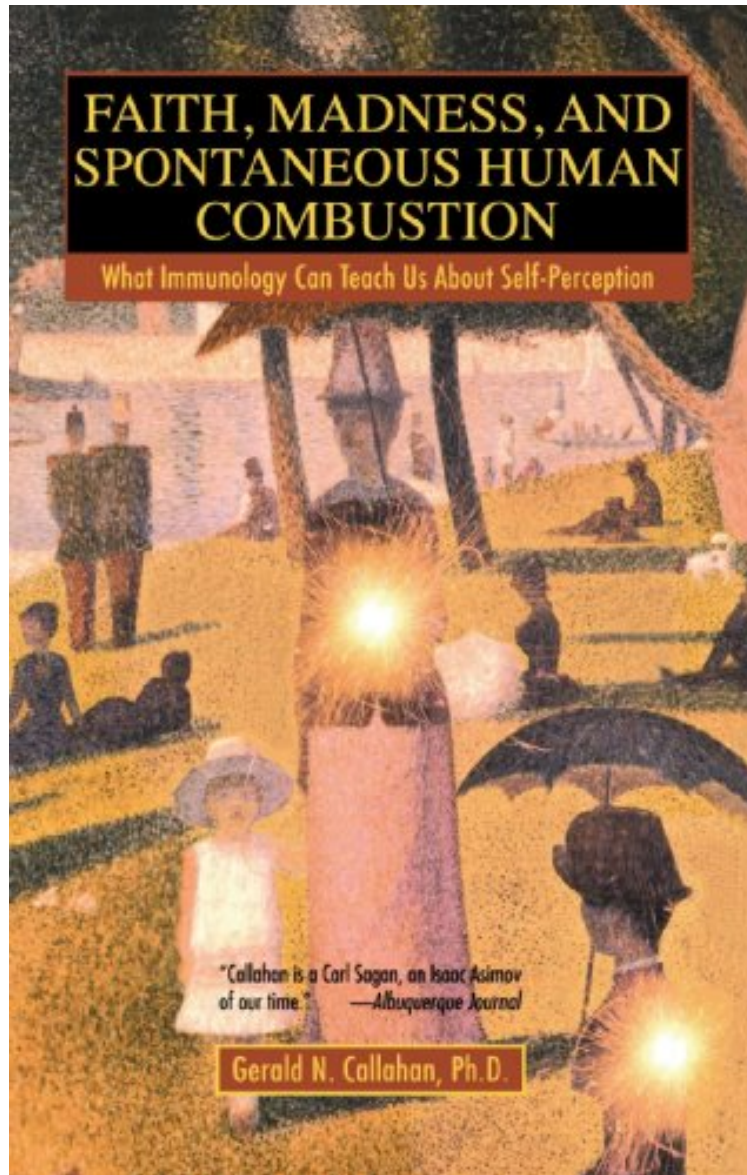


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Faith, Madness, and Spontaneous Human Combustion: What Immunology Can Teach Us About Self-Perception

Gerald N. Callahan

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By A. Spadola Written by an immunologist, this book draws the reader into an unknown realm of consideration that widens the intellectual and spiritual view of our bodies' defense system. It explores how our minds and environments effect our health, and delves into terrain not normally considered in the doctor's office, but nonetheless, a one we should all be intimately aware of.. It is a stimulating and very interesting read. I had heard of actual cases of spontaneous human combustion so picked up the book, and was not disappointed!

Intensely personal and brilliantly scientific, Faith, Madness, and Spontaneous Human Combustion reveals the startling ways in which science especially immunology and pathology shapes our destinies, and how something as intimate as our own identities can be connected to the intricate workings of the machines known as our bodies. Each of the dozen essays in this far-ranging collection could be expanded into a book...
Analogizing to striking effect, Callahan conveys both science and sympathy. It is hard to think of a type of reader who wouldn't be intrigued by this fascinating book.
Booklist Callahan is a Carl Sagan, an Isaac Asimov of our times.
Albuquerque Journal

From Publishers Weekly Combining science and personal anecdote is no easy task, and Callahan's ambitious look at the relationship between immunology and selfhood falls somewhat short of the mark. Callahan a poet, essayist and Colorado State University professor of immunology aims to show how the immune system literally and metaphorically forms the basis for our identity. Weaving together bits of memoir, case studies of unusual incidents like human combustion and virally transmitted insanity, and basic explanations of immunology, Callahan shows how the immune system's main function to distinguish between self and nonself, to defend the body from invaders not only determines the boundaries of the basic biological "self" but can metaphorically be applied to our psychological selves as well. Discussing the concept of immunological memory, for instance, Callahan writes, "Enveloped viruses... are so named because they carry with them an 'envelope' of lipids and proteins taken from the host cell.... Each time we give the flu to our wives or our cold sores to our husbands, we also give them a little bit of ourselves." These metaphors unfortunately tend to be simplistic and pat. Those reading the book for straightforward scientific information or Oliver Sacks-style medical curiosities will probably be frustrated by the impressionistic prose and meandering narrative. While there are fascinating facts here, as well as some genuinely engaging recollections from Callahan's life, these are interspersed with self-indulgent whimsy. An unusual attempt at genre crossing, the book would have been better off as a traditional memoir without the popular science conceit. (Jan.)
Forecast: Callahan is being marketed as a successor to Oliver Sacks, but he lacks Sacks's gift for engaging narrative. Not a comfortable fit in any category and unlikely to be a crossover hit.
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From Booklist Each of the dozen essays in this far-ranging collection could be expanded into a book. With one degree in protein chemistry and another in pathology, Callahan is an imaginative scientist, remarkably able to see connections between seemingly unrelated things and events. Uniting the intriguing life journey he traces is the theme encapsulated in his early observation, "We are individuals because we have immune systems." Each immune system works slightly differently from any other, which makes for individual uniqueness in body and emotions. Callahan explores historical and recent variations among individuals and cultures in life, disease, and death. "Watermarks" investigates the uses of water in humans and animals, for instance, while "The Flame Within" is virtually a detective story about the best-documented instance of human spontaneous combustion, which occurred in Florida in 1951. Analogizing to striking effect, Callahan conveys both science and sympathy. It is hard to think of a type of reader who wouldn't be intrigued by this fascinating book.
William Beatty Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "...the poet, the scientist, the philosopher, the artist. In his book, they are all wrapped up in one fascinating package." -- Leigh Rich, Rocky Mountain News
"It is hard to think of a type of reader who won't be intrigued by this fascinating book." -- Booklist