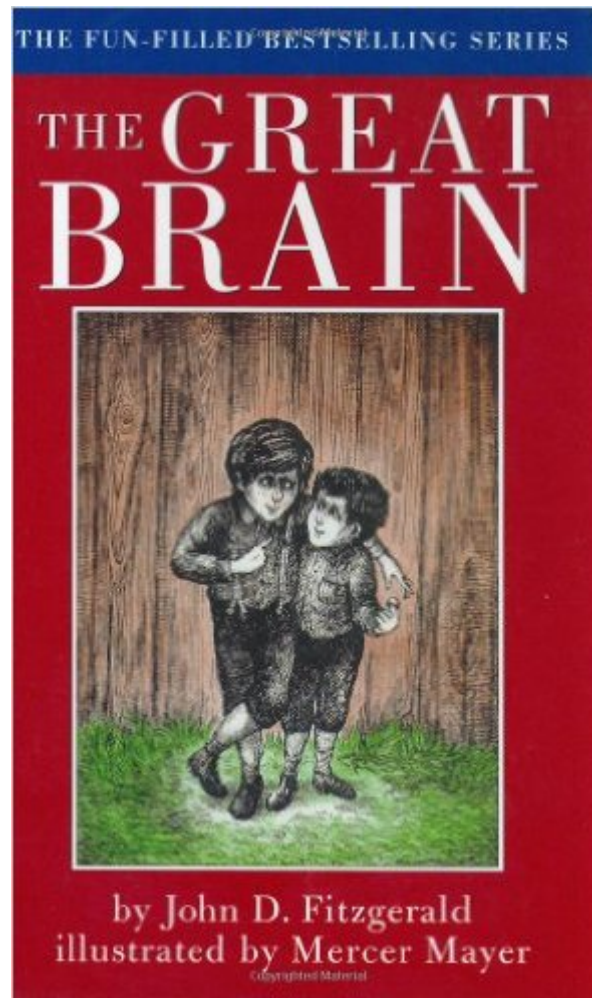


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The Great Brain



Synopsis

J. D. idolizes his older brother Tom, a.k.a. The Great Brain, a silver-tongued con artist with a genius for making a profit. No matter what the situation, The Great Brain will always find a way to turn it to his advantage--usually, his financial advantage. As boys growing up at the beginning of the 1900s, J. D. and Tom have plenty of scope for their adventures. And while J. D.'s ingenuity may not equal his conniving brother's, as a narrator he is endearingly sympathetic and wildly entertaining. First published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this classic series has been popular ever since. Now the first three books are again available in hardcover, complete with their original illustrations. Join the amazing Great Brain and his befuddled brother as they continue to captivate generations of young readers.

Book Information

Series: The Great Brain

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Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (237 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #16,294 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #37 in Â Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Humorous #447 in Â Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Action & Adventure

Customer Reviews

To my knowledge, John Dennis Fitzgerald never won any of the prestigious children's book awards or accolades for this book or any of the others in the series, but it is my opinion as an avid reader from childhood that these books constitute some of the best available children's literature. Fitzgerald was in his sixties when he started this series, but he clearly never lost touch with his childhood self and all of these books are brilliantly written so that J.d. and his big brother seem like kids you know, even though they lived in a small Utah town at the turn of the century. These books have it all: an interesting historical setting; believable characters that develop as the series progresses; plenty of humor, of both the laugh-out-loud and subtler varieties; tenderness and pathos; and even a few good scares. I picked up a copy of More adventures of the Great Brain, the second in the series, at a

book fair in elementary school. (It isn't strictly necessary to read the books in order, though of course it's nice.) I was the most avid reader in my family, though the youngest, and for some reason one summer day when we were bored I started reading the book aloud to my older sister and my uncle, who was only five years older than me (I was nine or ten at the time.) Pretty soon, all three of us were devouring the rest of the series, swapping them among ourselves. I can't be sure, but I think the books may have started my sister's love of reading, though my uncle had always been a reader and had turned me on to the Lord of the Rings. At any rate, these were favorites for years. Parents, please, please don't be put off by the fact that these books are about a mischievous boy with a penchant for swindling his pals out of their prized possessions.

I agree with the other reviewers in that *The Great Brain* is an entertaining, clever, and highly intelligent read for 4th graders and up with excellent reading comprehension. However, parents may wish to be aware that the book raises a number of challenging, troubling issues to which their children may not have been previously exposed. All are dealt with in lighthearted ways, yet for some children, it may be the first time being exposed to some of the darker concepts - like feuds between Christian sects (since it takes place in Utah at the turn-of-the-century the narrator frequently discusses fights with the Mormon kids), anti-Semitism (when a Jewish merchant sets up shop in town and is presumed to be hoarding gold), the death of the merchant, alcoholism (when a plot hatches to get a disliked teacher fired by planting empty whiskey bottles in his room), amputation (when a child gets gangrene after stepping on a nail and is forced to lose his leg), and even suicide (when that child feels that he is "plumb useless" and tries to enlist his friends to help him end it all.) Not only are these issues raised rather offhandedly, but the overall story is morally complex. It involves Tom, the narrator's brother, looked up to as a brilliant thinker, but the main focus of his *Great Brain* is how to make money from his brother, his friends, and their parents regardless of the circumstance. He is generally on the right side of each issue, but a cynical child might assume he is only in it for himself. For example, he helps defend an immigrant child from bullies. But he does it by convincing the boy's father that in order to be a "real American kid" he must learn how to fight, and that Tom is willing to teach him for a fee.

When I was in third grade or so, my mother bought a boxed set of the first five *Great Brain* books for us for Christmas. This one (the fourth in the series) was my favorite; I read it until the pages were so dog-eared that it was almost impossible to slide them back into the box, and then I read it some more until I had it nearly memorized, and then I read it some more until it fell apart. I still have the

books; I ran across them when we moved recently and realized that I need to look for hardcover editions. They are all in bad shape, despite attempts at mending them over the years. The books are still funny, and they still develop the important critical and analytical thinking skills needed to imagine a different time, place, and way of life. I think that the books are well suited to the 9-to-12 age range that is usually recommended. Each chapter is typically a separate story, which makes the series ideal for the reader who struggles with longer works. They're officially "boys' books," but the publisher's notion of the primary market segment didn't stop me or my sisters from enjoying them. (A slightly technical aside: what makes a publisher think of a book as a "boy's book" or a "girl's book" is not just the gender of the main characters (which are all boys here). It's also the style: boys usually buy action-oriented books, and girls usually buy books which invest more time in thought, dialogue, and emotion. (To give one example of this phenomenon, *Bridge to Terabithia*, whose main character is a boy, is definitely a girl's book. (While the Great Brain stories are almost always action-driven, there is a fair bit of thought analysis in these books, so I think they're a little closer to the midpoint of the gender spectrum than the typical "boy's book.

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