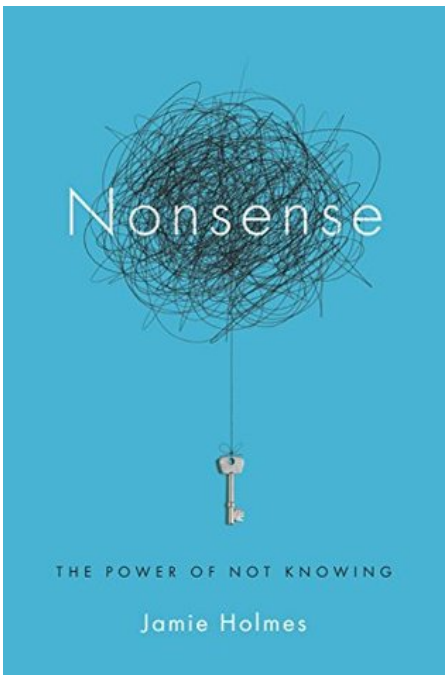

Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing

Jamie Holmes

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Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing Jamie Holmes
An illuminating look at the surprising upside of ambiguity—and how, properly harnessed, it can inspire learning, creativity, even empathy

Life today feels more overwhelming and chaotic than ever. Whether it's a confounding work problem or a faltering relationship or an unclear medical diagnosis, we face constant uncertainty. And we're continually bombarded with information, much of it contradictory.

Managing ambiguity—in our jobs, our relationships, and daily lives—is quickly becoming an essential skill. Yet most of us don't know where to begin.

As Jamie Holmes shows in *Nonsense*, being confused is unpleasant, so we tend to shutter our minds as we grasp for meaning and stability, especially in stressful circumstances. We're hard-wired to resolve contradictions quickly and extinguish anomalies. This can be useful, of course. When a tiger is chasing you, you can't be indecisive. But as *Nonsense* reveals, our need for closure has its own dangers. It makes us stick to our first answer, which is not always the best, and it makes us search for meaning in the wrong places. When we latch onto fast and easy truths, we lose a vital opportunity to learn something new, solve a hard problem, or see the world from another perspective.

In other words, confusion—that uncomfortable mental place—has a hidden upside. We just need to know how to use it. This lively and original book points the way.

Over the last few years, new insights from social psychology and cognitive science have deepened our understanding of the role of ambiguity in our lives and Holmes brings this research together for the first time, showing how we can use uncertainty to our advantage. Filled with illuminating stories—from spy games and doomsday cults to Absolut Vodka's ad campaign and the creation of Mad Libs—*Nonsense* promises to transform the way we conduct business, educate our children, and make decisions.

In an increasingly unpredictable, complex world, it turns out that what matters most isn't IQ, willpower, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand.

From the Hardcover edition.

Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing Details

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From Reader Review Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing for online ebook

Terri says

Nonsense was hyped as a book for those, like me, who like Malcolm Gladwell's writing so I was enticed. And it is like Gladwell's books in that Jamie Holmes includes a lot of examples that draw the reader in and allow us to understand through stories, the concept he is conveying.

For example, "we all have an innate ability to form impressions based on limited information… Our urge for resolution is vital both for managing complexity and for learning." Holmes uses examples to explain what he means; vodka doesn't have much taste or smell and as a result is hard to hype. Add to that it's from Sweden, not Russia. Absolut in 1979 was selling five thousand cases, after the ads ten years later, annual sales were at 2.5 million cases. Their ads with a touch of humor and a bit of a mystery to solve had turned sales around. Simple compelling ads featured the bottle as a person or a thing. "In 'Absolut Perfection,' the bottle was an angel (or a haloed rascal.) In 'Absolut Elegance,' the bottle was sporting a bow tie. 'Absolut Profile' showed the bottle turned ninety degrees to one side." Absolut advertisers treated the consumer as smart enough to figure out the riddle. And it worked. The viewer had a puzzle to solve using just two words and people were hooked.

Holmes explains that we can't be confused unless we have at least a little knowledge. When Bill Cosby did his show, Kids Say the Darndest Things, it worked because there was humor in seeing the child with a bit of knowledge able to make sense of the world by extrapolating his limited knowledge onto the bigger more mysterious world, right or wrong:

Cosby: "I have a cut. See it? What do you do for that?
Kemett: (without hesitation): You've got to put a little Neosporin on it. And then put a bandage over it. Then it'll go away.
Cosby: Where does it go?
Kemett: It go, um, it go… down here (he points to his finger)… in your blood.
Cosby: And where does it go?
Kemett: Then it'll go in another country.
Cosby: What country do you think mine is going to go to?
Kemett: Uh, China

This book is fascinating in its telling. There's also Ducati's humiliation which would eventually lead to the 2007 Grand Prix Championship title. Steve Jobs describes how prosperous companies can be ruined by their own success because the executives stop questioning, for example, why exactly a particular product was a huge hit and then their next product is a failure.

This is a readable enlightening book.

Angie says

Holmes' Nonsense should be titled Ambiguity, or perhaps Uncertainty, and I can only guess that those titles

do not poll as well, since the word "nonsense" is used only in the introduction and never again, whereas ambiguity and uncertainty dominate the text. That might seem a trivial distinction, but it's actually pretty important to me. Nonsense is information of little value -- data without meaning. Ambiguity is data with meaning but without a clear conclusion. And it is ambiguity that Holmes' really tackles, with sparkling results.

About 2/3 of the way through the book, Holmes provided a moment of clarity on the structure of the book, which I appreciate and I'm going to quote it here:

"We've looked at the dangers of a high need for closure, whether spurred on by trauma or unrelated anxiety, a high-stakes negotiation, inconclusive medical results, or a changing business environment. In Part 2, we focused on avoiding mistakes under pressure -- those situations in which we're forced to react to ambiguity -- and often feel compelled to avoid uncertainty. Part 3 will spotlight moments where uncertainty can be useful. Rather than explore how to minimize the harm that can come from dismissing ambiguity, we're going to look at how to maximize the benefits of harnessing ambiguity."

That would make an excellent back-of-the book blurb, but perhaps, again, it wouldn't poll well. But it definitely works for me. This book is full of anecdotes that support bigger points, and so is in the style of Gladwell and other pop-psychology books, but I actually think it's better written (I like Gladwell -- he's just a little too repetitive for me). Holmes has many stories to make his points, but he acknowledges the nuance in each one, which allows him to advance and evolve his argument, rather than just saying the same thing over and over. And since he's writing about the importance of nuance and shades of grey (no, not those shades of grey... just living in a world that isn't black and white), that's a fantastic and effective approach.

I felt the last part, in which he focuses on the benefits of recognizing and using ambiguity, was the most intriguing. He focused on people who, for various reasons, grow up dealing with different worldviews held simultaneously. These people are healthier mentally and more creative in general. He makes a good argument for multiculturalism from the brain's point of view. It's very convincing.

The first two parts work together to warn us about how desperately our brains want to avoid ambiguity and the mistakes we feel pressured to make in the face of uncertainty. While he focuses on anecdotes outside the world of politics, the applications to our current political culture are clear and pressing. Hopefully as this book spreads through the market, we can get shaken out of our internet-accommodated tribalism and recognize good arguments on both sides of the political divide, which make working together seem like a good idea rather than traitorous. Here's hoping.

I got a free copy of this book through the First to Read program.

Leland Beaumont says

After the destruction of hurricane Hugo caused 24 counties in South Carolina to be declared disaster areas, there was a sharp increase in both marriages and divorces among couples affected by the storm. Apparently the disruption of the disaster caused many couples to reappraise their uncertain romantic relationships and seek comfort in a new certainty.

This book explores the many important human effects of ambiguity. One thesis of the book is that after experiencing physiologically acute threats, humans crave decisiveness. “A subtle physical anxiety is in fact

the engine motivating us to reestablish order after encountering disorder." "We're endlessly reducing ambiguity to certainty." Another thesis is that embracing ambiguity can result in better, and often more creative outcomes. "Dwelling calmly among feelings of uncertainly…will help you make a more rational decision."

The book relies on many diverse examples to develop its thesis. Anecdotes include stories about: learning languages, advertising, perceiving reverse colored playing cards, inventing Mad Libs, humor, pattern recognition, commitment to existing beliefs, cognitive dissonance, meaningful lives, aftermaths of natural disasters, decision making, cults, hostage negotiations, intelligence briefings, finding Osama bin Laden, medical testing and diagnosis, midi skirts, inventory planning, CEO tolerance for ambiguity, designing motorcycles, learning, creative writing, science, digital currency, innovation, jigsaw puzzles, art, stereotypes, problem solving, bilingualism, culture, prejudice, and creativity.

These many examples illustrate the general concepts the book explores, but are sometimes presented in a somewhat disjointed narrative structure. It is not always clear what point is being illustrated by each example.

Author Jamie Holmes makes it clear our response to ambiguity has important consequences. Grasping prematurely for closure can solidify our resolve to purse wrong action and leads to prejudice. "The roots of prejudice can be traced to a general cognitive outlook characterized by the hunger for certainty." Fear can preempt our search for alternative solutions or explanations and propel us toward false certainty and false choices. "Feeling threatened is often all it takes to raise our desire for certainty." "Just as the great artists or scientist are inspired by contradictions, the prejudiced person seeks to eradicate them." The good news is that dwelling in complexity, ambiguity, and nuance can increase creativity and improve problem solving. Quoting Eric Fromm, "The capacity to be puzzled is indeed the premise of all creation, be it in art, or in science." We can learn profound lessons from failure.

The book begins to present approaches we can use to increase our tolerance for ambiguity and harness ambiguity to increase our creativity, tolerance, and innovation. Examples include: "Thinking about prejudice as entrenched in a high need for closure might help us see the problem in a slightly different light." "Culture is a…collective denial—of ambiguity." "Eras of artistic creativity often follow periods of openness to outside influences." "We can't always resolve ambiguity by seeking out more information." And "having a playful disrespect for norms…can be very valuable."

This is the only book I am aware of dedicated to exploring the topic of ambiguity. The book highlights a topic that deserves more exploration, attention, and understanding.

This easy to read book makes a credible argument supported by 77 pages of endnotes as it introduces and explores an important topic.

Damon Glassmoyer says

Ambiguity and uncertainty are a big part of life, and the author encourages his readers to embrace it and live with it to enhance creativity and make better decisions. Great examples throughout.

Sarah says

I got this as a Goodreads Giveaway and read it out loud with my husband. We both thought it was a very intriguing premise. It's core thesis is how we deal with ambiguity in our lives. It outlines how humans have a natural tendency for the most part to try to eliminate ambiguity as much as possible. To search for answers and not just answers but to remove doubt. Over the course of several chapters Mr. Holmes shows how individuals who are more comfortable with ambiguity and not made anxious by it are able to problem solve better and are more creative and ultimately it seems gain wisdom faster. The first chapter and the last were the most powerful I thought. The last one describes a school in Jerusalem that is composed 50/50 of Arab and Israeli children. These children learn each other's language and understand that they are unique and learning to navigate their divided universe in a different healthy way. The description of 7 year olds navigating the Arab and Israeli quarters together giving each other tips on when to speak which language to avoid conflict and attention is really astonishing. I have recommended this book to friends and family because it is so accessible and interesting. I will read it again too...something I rarely do. Not all parts are equally compelling but there is enough here to justify a reread. First and last chapters are musts though.

Casey Schmitz says

I received this book through a Goodreads First Reads giveaway.

Nonsense is built on the relatively intuitive concept that humans are not, as a general rule, fantastic at dealing with ambiguity. As it goes with so many of our evolutionary specialties, our relationship with uncertainty has a tendency to enrich us while simultaneously tormenting us. On one hand, our ability to form patterns and filter out unnecessary information is a tremendous advantage in maximizing brain-space. On the other hand, our distaste for the unknown has the potential to make us inflexible, reactionary, and fearful. In *Nonsense*, Holmes challenges us to develop a healthier respect for those uncomfortable grey areas.

The word “rich” is appropriate to describe this book. Holmes does a phenomenal job of introducing layer after layer of approachable academic research and real-world case studies that illustrate the impact of ambiguity. By exploring the role of uncertainty in all sorts of unexpected places – a marketing campaign for Absolut vodka, the Branch Davidian debacle in Waco, a deck of playing cards with the power to reinforce our beliefs – *Nonsense* provides insight into our psychological response to ambiguity, how it holds us back, and how we can use it to our advantage.

Now that I have finished the book, I find it amusing how ambiguous our responses to ambiguity can be. I score above average on the “need-for-closure” test in the chapter about Waco, but I recognize that I’m pretty good at dealing with ambiguity in the context of process improvement described in the chapter on Ducati motorcycles. **chuckles**

Ultimately, whether you’re naturally adept, inept, or somewhere in between when it comes to navigating the unknown, this book will teach you something important about yourself. *Nonsense* is a highly satisfying and illuminating read that is easy to recommend.

Ran says

Based solely on the title, "Nonsense" is a tough book to get through in a conceptional manner. Jamie Holmes set himself up with a daunting task: "I'll hope to convince you of a simple claim: in an increasingly complex, unpredictable world, what matters most isn't IQ, willpower, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand." Excellent, that sounds extremely intriguing!

Except, then he launches into examples using Mad Libs, 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the Waco Branch Davidians Siege, misdiagnoses in modern medicine, fashion, motorsport, jigsaw puzzles, etc. While the stories he relates are intrinsically fascinating, he at times loses his point. The winding chapters of "Nonsense" do seem like nonsense. Maybe that was entirely the point and I simply missed it.

Amy Neftzger says

This book brings together several different cognitive theories to help understand how different individuals deal with ambiguous information. While some individuals have a high need for context, others are more comfortable when new information doesn't neatly fit into their current understanding of the world. This is a great book for learning how to understand different points of view and how some individuals choose to interpret events differently from others.

Note I received a free ARC of this title from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

SundayAtDusk says

From start to finish, Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing is a highly readable, engrossing book that explains how important it is to be able to deal with ambiguity, and not to be always seeking closure. Author Jamie Holmes points out early in the book that successfully dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty does not require a high IQ, but requires that one learns to master the emotional challenge of figuring out what to do when one has no idea what to do. He states that he hopes to convince the reader of "a simple claim": "In an increasingly complex, unpredictable world, what matters most isn't IQ, willpower, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand."

Those who don't or won't master that ambiguity challenge are more likely to "jump to conclusions", "deny contradictions", be mentally rigid, be prejudice and "revert to stereotypes", assert control elsewhere when losing control somewhere, be less creative, be more confident about an erroneous course of action, and be trusting of those who don't deserve trust and not trusting of those who do. There are also three things that tend to make individuals less likely to successfully deal with uncertainty and, thus, need a quick closure--fatigue, urgency and stress. States Mr. Holmes: "We have to reduce the messy world to manage it. But resolving something--fitting it into a metal box--also means that you stop scrutinizing it. Recognition means closure, and it marks the end of thinking, looking, and listening."

Embracing uncertainty, on the other hand, helps creativity and invention, deepens empathy, improves your "odds of making rational decisions", makes you less likely to fixate or clutch to "one aspect of a complex and shifting reality", and opens you to outside influences and traveling . . . which in turn feeds creativity and invention. As the author quoted Jerome Bruner: Creativity often results "when the ambiguity wins". Even

mind traveling in books can be a big help, according to Mr. Holmes. He says: "And it's why reading fiction--which puts us in other people's shoes--can both lower our need for closure and make us more empathetic." (Interestingly, in novels, I prefer stories with closures, not stories where it appears the author simply stopped writing in order to end the story.)

On page 87 of Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing is a "closure test" that the reader can take. But don't imagine this book is a self-help one, because it's not. It's more a book for those who like to think. The author provides many interesting stories, too, to help the reader visualize both successful and unsuccessful attempts to deal with ambiguity. Those stories include ones on: A doomsday group in the 1950s; the incredible increase in marriages after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco; the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff; the 1993 Waco standoff; the 1973 Yom Kippur War; and the fallacy of more and more medical testing because "the culture of medicine has little tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty".

In addition, there are stories about: The use of brain scans in criminal cases; the failure of the midi-skirt to replace the mini-skirt in the early 1970s; how ambiguity aversion leads to higher insurance premiums; Toyota; the Zara fashion store in New York; Alexander Graham Bell; the Hand To Hand school in Jerusalem; bilinguals; Anton Chekhov; puzzles ("The act of puzzling is a protest against the mind's reduction of ambiguity."); and how in the business world "strategies with the greatest possibility of success also have the greatest possibility of failure". (While reading that part of the book, I thought it was a shame Mr. Holmes did not look at Paul Reichmann and the Canary Wharf project--The Reichmanns: Family, Faith, Fortune, and the Empire of Olympia & York. In fact, Paul Reichmann's entire career as a builder would have been most interesting to explore in this book; since it is believed that the reason he took on so many projects with so many uncertainties was because, for him, there were no uncertainties where his religious beliefs were concerned.)

When I reached the epilogue of the book, I was surprised. One, because there were so many pages left. It turns out the book has approximately 75 pages of notes. Two, because it didn't feel like the book was concluding. But I guess that is appropriate for a book that is proposing it is not good to constantly seek certainties and closures. Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing actually reminds me in some ways of Kevin Ashton's How to Fly a Horse: The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery. Both books were about creativity, both books made me think quite a bit, and both books used up a lot of my supplies in my Post-It Study Kit. (Kevin Ashton, though, sounded more like Thomas Edison, from Mr. Holmes' description, than Alexander Graham Bell. :) I also felt the great need to quote both authors in the reviews of their books. Hence, let me end this review with two quotes that I liked from Jamie Holmes: "The heroes of this book are all protesters, and they are protesting the premature destruction of the world's mystery." And: "Owning our own uncertainty makes us kinder, more creative, and more alive."

(Note: I received a free copy of this book from Amazon Vine in exchange for an honest review.)

Thomas Emerson says

Jamie Holmes's *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* is brilliant. I was expecting it to be somewhat dry, as nonfiction often is, but it was a fast read. This is partly due to the fact that Holmes expresses and elaborates on psychological and cognitive studies through real life applications and events. Often I would pause after reading an argument Holmes makes because I can remember times in my life that I was affected by the principles described in the book. *Nonsense* was both thought provoking and fun, and I found myself entirely intrigued throughout. This book has the potential to change the way you think about the world around

you...First, in the way that your brain understands; Second, in the way your brain perceives ambiguity; Third, how to utilize the benefits of said ambiguity.

I received this book in a Goodreads giveaway.

Taryn says

> "You are not so singular in your suspicions that you know but little. The longer I live, the more I read, the more patiently I think, and the more anxiously I inquire, the less I seem to know. . . . Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly. This is enough."

I have always loved the preceding John Adams quote, written in a letter to his granddaughter Caroline. I struggle with feeling that I know less as time goes on, especially when it seems that most everyone around me is so certain about everything! *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* by Jamie Holmes appealed to me because of its premise: it is not about what you know, but how you handle what you **don't** know.

This book is surprisingly short! It ends on page 232 (72%) and the remainder of the pages are endnotes. *Nonsense* deals exclusively with the topics of ambiguity and uncertainty. It has a similar feel to books by Malcolm Gladwell (*The Tipping Point*), Dan Ariely (*Predictably Irrational*) and Steven Levitt/Stephen J. Dubner (*Freakonomics*), in that it uses case studies and experiments from a wide variety of fields to justify its thesis. Throughout the book, the author provides possible solutions to counteract our intrinsic need to avoid ambiguity.

> *Let's say for example, you see a white crow. At first you're a little surprised. You peer at the bird with heightened attention, and then eventually you switch into the more domineering mind state that making decisions requires. You can assimilate the experience and decide the bird is a dove. Or you can accommodate it and recognize that albino crows exist. The rub, as Proulx's collaborator Steve Heine told me, is that "assimilation is so often incomplete." We act as if we're sure the bird is a dove, but the feeling that it's not is still there in the unconscious, leaving us trapped in a similar middle ground as the doomsday believers were, stuck between assuming we've understood and sensing we haven't. One way we respond to these lingering anxieties is by finding comfort in our social groups and passionately emphasizing our ideals. Proulx and Inzlicht called this reaction affirmation. Affirmation is the intensification of beliefs, whatever those beliefs might be, in response to a perceived threat.*

The book is divided three parts The first part is about how the human brain responds to uncertainty. This section was really interesting because of the experiments showing that humans automatically seek order after being exposed to randomness, even when they are not consciously aware of the exposure. Not only did the test subjects find patterns more effectively after seeing incorrectly colored playing cards, their political positions intensified.

> *When the world is less predictable, people are more likely to jump to conclusions or entrench their existing views. That's the problem with striving for certainty or making rashly informed judgments of trust to escape from ambiguity. Urgently fixating on certainty is our defense mechanism against the unknown and unstable. However, what we need in turbulent times is adaptability and calculated reevaluation.*

Part 2 explores the hazards of denying ambiguity. The author uses the 1993 Waco Siege as an example of how confusing natural ambivalence with duplicity can end in avoidable tragedy. He also discussed how highly sensitive tests that doctors overutilize for quick closure may actually create bad and/or unnecessary outcomes for patients.

> *"Openness to outside influences and the frequency of travel abroad, he found, was correlated with simultaneous gains in achievements in business and religion. Most strikingly, he also discovered that the more diversity there was in Japanese society, the more creative the society was two generations later in the areas of medicine, fiction, poetry, and painting. Diversity can be painful initially, it seems, but it pays off decades later. While at first most immigrants occupy a marginal position in society, as Simonton explained, "after a generation or two not only do they become integrated but their culture becomes part of the 'melting pot'—as we start eating pizza or chow mein."*

Part 3 highlights how embracing ambiguity can be asset. My main takeaways from this chapter were that it is important to investigate your successes as well as your failures and that deconstructing objects to their most form can lead to great ingenuity.

Nonsense is definitely relevant to today's world. The need to reconcile ambiguity is probably one of the driving forces behind the growing divisiveness in the United States, which seems to get more heightened as the 24-hour news cycle and the internet makes the world feel more chaotic. On a lighter note, it also might explain the intense emotions during the white/gold or blue/black dress debacle! Like any book of this nature, it is not a complete picture and it relies heavily on anecdotes. However, it does provide yet another lens with which to see the world and makes one much more comfortable with the concept of uncertainty. It made me view the contentious arguments that erupt on social media in a different light and has made me more reflective over my own knee-jerk reactions. It is a fun and quick read and I think it would be a useful book for everyone to read.

> *For Chekhov, morality lay not in our relationships with what we know, but how admirably we deal with what we don't…It's a morality distinct from IQ and common notions of confidence or self-control. Chekhov showed that not knowing doesn't leave us without a compass, in some relativist nether land. Owning our uncertainty makes us kinder, more creative, and more alive…"It is time for writers to admit that nothing in this world makes sense," [Anton Chekhov] once wrote. "Only fools and charlatans think they know and understand everything . . . and if an artist decides to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees—this in itself constitutes a considerable clarity in the realm of thought, and a great step forward."*

I received this book from Penguin Random House in exchange for an honest review.

Nada says

Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing by Jamie Holmes is a review of literature dealing with the topic of ambiguity – how and why we avoid it, what happens when we do, and why it's important to embrace it. The premise of the book is clear. However, the structure of the book is more focused on diverse examples rather than its overall paradigm.

Read my complete review at: http://www.memoriesfrombooks.com/2015...

Reviewed for the Penguin First to Read program

Maria Lasprilla says

Although it took me forever to finish this book, it had nothing to do with its quality. It is interesting, brief and well-written enough to complete it in way shorter time, so don't take my timing as a bad sign of the book.

The book was about how "not understanding", about "Nonsense", right? But my cherry on top of the cake was the nice appearance of "Diversity" towards the end. A very dear topic to me, the one of diversity.

Overall, here's what I understood:

It seems that, while it is natural and convenient for us to put things in boxes and categorize them quickly based on our past experiences, and we recur to this (unconscious?) strategy especially when faced with ambiguity, this aversion to things that we don't understand can also have tragic consequences (in business, in relationships, in life...). While it is difficult and uncommon to do, accepting and being OK with ambiguity can be much more beneficial. We should always be looking to learn more -lifelong learning, another topic very close to my heart- and take the time when confronted with ambivalence to clarify before making any decision.

Interestingly enough, another area of my life where this can be useful is at work. In another set of materials not related to this book, I learned about cognitive overhead, which is defined as how many steps it takes for us to get to understanding something. When building products, we should aim at reducing this overhead or avoid it, so that the person using the product gets to do what they wanted to do without much effort. Simplicity.

So what I have learned about how our brains work when faced with "not knowing" is that:
1) I can use that to solve problems in a way that adapts to that way of people thinking so I keep things simple for them, but at the same time.
2) I can work on becoming aware of my "not knowing" and take the time to try and learn more, and hold decisions until a better time or avoid prejudices by doing this (I actually already applied this last point to my relationship when reading a book about marriage ambivalence).

But what was that about diversity that came at the end? Well, it turns out that when people are exposed to more than one language (e.g. bilinguals) or more than one culture long enough to understand them and accept them even if they are different, they are more likely to tolerate or be okay with ambiguity. They are less prejudiced. Meaning? While too much not knowing is bad, diversity in our lives is good! Sounds obvious, doesn't it? :)

Azita Rassi says

Beautifully written, brilliantly organized, and very thought-provoking.

Gaylord Dold says

Holmes, Jamie. Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing, Crown Publishers, New York, 2015 (322pp.$27)

“It is time for writers to admit that nothing in this world makes sense,” Chekhov wrote to a friend. “Only fools and charlatans think they know and understand everything…and if an artist decides to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees—this in itself constitutes a considerable clarity…” What Chekhov the artist knew instinctively is now confirmed by a half-century of research by social, cognitive and evolutionary psychologists, as well as considerable laboratory work by neuroscientists. Having first dug Freud’s scientific grave, modern science is now demonstrating how human brains fly largely on automatic pilot, exercising “control” over a world of sense impressions by imposing preconceptions and automatic response systems in the face of a life that is largely uncertain or ambiguous.

Read if you will, the following paragraph: “Aoccdrnig to research at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn’t mttaer in what oerdr the ltteers in a word are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can still raed it wouthit porbelm.”

If you’re like most people, reading the two sentences is a piece of cake, even though the individual words are nonsense. In every practical sense, we should be happy that the brain works this way—filling in gaps, resolving discrepancies, and making small conjectures because, as psychologist Jordan Peterson explains, “The fundamental problem of life is the overwhelming complexity of being.” As humans we eradicate vast swathes of information, data, perception and detail in order to defer to working brain theories about what we’re going to encounter. “Belief,” as Flannery O’Conner once said, “is the engine that makes perception operate.”

Jamie Holmes’ new book, “Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing” is a fascinating and high-speed romp through the latest research about how the brain processes our encounters with uncertainty (Which course of treatment will best cure my cancer?) and ambiguity (What does that expression on my wife’s face mean?) Holmes, a Future Tense Fellow at New America and a former research coordinator at Harvard’s economics department, holds an MIA from Columbia. His writing has appeared in major magazines, including “The Atlantic” and “Foreign Policy”. “Nonsense” is an easy-to-read but compelling gem of popular science writing that manages to functionally survey a broad range of research, while conveying surprising solutions to vexing questions of psychology by reference to such popular topics as disaster response, medical diagnosis, Absolut Vodka advertising, the Waco-Branch Davidian negotiation disaster, problem solving in Ducati motorcycle construction, mini-skirts in fashion and our modern-day fixation with conspiracy theory and radicalism in politics. Amazingly, each of these subjects is directly connected with our very human desire for clarity and certainty at any cost—in psychology, the so-called “functional fixedness” hard-wired into our heads.

Our urge towards clarity is prompted by physical pain. It hurts not to know. It is stressful. So it is that psychological pressures compel us to deny or dismiss inconsistent evidence, to seize and freeze on ideas and beliefs in areas of life completely unrelated to that source of anxiety. Sometimes we make decisions to resolve ambiguity by perceiving genuine ambivalence as calculating duplicity instead of realizing that ambivalence is more a natural state of mind that we realize. We might consider that wanting and not wanting something at the same time is so common that it is almost a baseline condition of human consciousness. Taking examples from the everyday world, Holmes’ book illuminates these ideas in practical ways not

readily apparent at first glance. Our reliance on medical technology, for example, will never resolve the inherent ambiguity of treatment—in fact, the search for certainty carries its own risks. In politics, there are most often no “silver-bullet” solutions to problems like terrorism or poverty.

If there is a popular psychology “page turner” to be found, “Nonsense” is it. One brilliant modern experiment follows after another. Logic puzzles, mind games and perception challenges are all on display (What would you make of a deck of cards in which every spade was red and every heart was black?), making “Nonsense” both enjoyable and serious. But in important and significant ways, “Nonsense” transcends the popular bounds of its brief by exploring some genuinely troubling issues.

Our modern understanding of belief now shows that group decisions under a high need for closure mirror individual ones. In today’s ultra-uncertain world, with shifting economic and cultural realities, some groups naturally grab for far-fetched conspiracy theories while others fall back on hardline core beliefs. Experiments show that under time pressure to resolve an issue, groups marginalize members who voice opposition to a given consensus. Another study found that when stressful noise was introduced into decision-making group discussions, group members tolerated no opposition to their core beliefs. One 2012 study showed that the heightened need for closure has links to “support for militancy, torture, the use of secret prisons in foreign countries, and the notion that national security is more important than individual rights.” One can only see militant Islam as the quest for certainty in an uncertain modern world.

If this sounds familiar, it should. Voters regularly lend an ear to any demagogue who offers simple solutions to profound problems by easing their supporters into a comfort zone of core beliefs and deep conspiracy. “The Jews”, Hitler told the Germans, “are the source of your problems.” “Let’s destroy Saddam Hussein,” said George W. Bush, “and create a bright shining democracy in Iraq.” To counteract our need for immediate clarity, all of us should pause in our deliberations and dwell amid our feelings of uncertainty and confusion. Revisit our problems in different moods. Embrace confusion.

Henri Matisse once said that when he ate a tomato he looked at it like everyone else, but that when he painted a tomato, he saw it differently. By seeing the tomato as a collection of colors and shades, Matisse painted it faithfully.