

Note that the very concept of 'human nature' is anathema to many of the postmodernists. Have no fear, because Pinker doesn't. He relishes the opportunity to burst the bubbles of political correctness, particularly with the use of hard facts and common sense. His task here is complex, since language is so complex, but his writing is always lucid and to the point. He takes verbs, for example, and examines the ways in which they can and cannot be used, the functions that they can and cannot serve and the forms of human reasoning which they undergird. This can be heady stuff but it reads beautifully as we watch a mind that is both rigorous and playful catch us in the act of being, quintessentially, ourselves. He is at his best when he is pulling together the insights of linguists, evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists--something he does with ease and clarity. After he proceeds step by step and chapter by chapter he sums it all up in a concluding chapter that is a model of transparent complexity. Although the materials are different, this book is like Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, its goal being the identification of those aspects of ratiocination that are uniquely human. The difference here is that Pinker draws specifically (and extensively) on the materials of language, draws more conclusions than Kant and does so in accessible and often amusing prose. Pinker is one of a handful of centrally-important public intellectuals in America. Don't miss his latest (and if you've missed such important, former books as *The Blank Slate*--you know now what to request for Christmas). 6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Worthwhile, but could have been shorter. By Joseph Oppenheim There were things I liked about "The Stuff of Thought" and things I didn't. I would have preferred the book to be shorter. I certainly could take away many profound observations. However, I don't think Pinker had to go into so many examples, although I am sure many readers will like that. Anyway, here are some important things which I will remember from the book. 1. We can learn a lot about people from the way they put together words. Pinker shows many examples. 2. What is an event? 9-11 was an event, however there were also many events which went into effecting it. 3. Words take on new meanings to reflect on how the world works. 4. Learning a language is really a remarkable process. Pinker discredits linguistic determination, that is the brain learning language to generate thinking. He asserts that thoughts effect language. Meanings are stored, not the exact combination of words which reflect them. Personally, I think both can work in parallel, when learning a language, but Pinker makes a good argument. 5. Metaphors are very important. They are an essential part of thought. "To think is to grasp a metaphor". He shows the use of metaphor in Leviticus, which makes one think even more that biblical scripture, at least the Torah, should not necessarily be taken literally, more like a living document which encourages deeper thinking especially as times change. 6. The chapter on profanity is certainly interesting. The amygdala, in the brain, is important in storing memories with emotion. Bilingual people react more to taboo words in their first language, rather than their second. Aphasia, loss of articulate language, victims retain the ability to swear. This shows more memories of thought formulas rather than rule combinations. Such swearing in Tourettes's Syndrome is called coprolalia. 7. The basal ganglia in the brain, when weakened, taboo thoughts are more easily released. There is a "Rage Circuit" which runs from the amygdala to the hypothalamus - limbic circuitry. 8. Implicative language, like with sarcasm and politeness, versus direct. Hierarchical and "culture of honor" societies use politeness more. 9. Pinker brings up UN Resolution 242, about the Israeli - Palestinian situation, showing how the wording was intentionally made ambiguous, so each side could more likely agree to it. Best to get some agreement, so at least there is somewhere from which to proceed in negotiations. There again, words reflect thoughts, to often encourage further thinking. So, the book is certainly worthwhile, despite its perhaps unnecessary length. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fantastic, thought provoking, instructive! By David Heitman One of the most engaging books I've ever read. A book that makes you think about thinking, and how thought processes are expressed in language, revealing both the limitations and immense potential of language. Already looking forward to re-reading.

This New York Times bestseller is an exciting and fearless investigation of language from the author of *Better Angels of Our Nature* and *The Sense of Style* and the forthcoming *Enlightenment Now* "Curious, inventive, fearless, naughty." - New York Times Book Review Bestselling author Steven Pinker possesses that rare combination of scientific aptitude and verbal eloquence that enables him to provide lucid explanations of deep and powerful ideas. His previous books - including the Pulitzer Prize finalist *The Blank Slate* - have catapulted him into the limelight as one of today's most important popular science writers. In *The Stuff of Thought*, Pinker presents a fascinating look at how our words explain our nature. Considering scientific questions with examples from everyday life, *The Stuff of Thought* is a brilliantly crafted and highly readable work that will appeal to fans of everything from *The Selfish Gene* and *Blink* to *Eats, Shoots Leaves*.

From Publishers Weekly Unless you have a reasonably good background in linguistics, you'll find this excellent book much easier to read than to listen to. Olsher is not to blame; he reads clearly and at a (slightly rapid) conversational speed. Pinker aims for the educated lay reader, using wit and popular metaphor to clarify his meanings and bring abstruse linguistic concepts to life. But his sentences are dense; you need to reread them and think them through. And the jargon, though clearly defined, requires time and thought to absorb: Though hypernyms are not really examples of polysemy the way metonyms are, their use in emotionally tinged speech is another illustration of how choice among words can make a psychological difference. Such sentences are followed by clarifying illustrations, but they require

cogitationwork that is well rewarded by a deeper and more complex understanding of language as a window into the mind. The chapter on the semantics of swearing is particularly fun and enlightening. In every culture swear words concern gods, diseases, excretions and sex, and Pinker tells us why. A person with some knowledge of linguistic theory will enjoy this audio enormously; a person without it will be enriched and delighted by the book, but have great difficulties with the audio version. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From Bookmarks Magazine
By examining our words, we can learn a lot about who we are. So argues Harvard academic and popular science writer Steven Pinker in *The Stuff of Thought*, a logical extension of his previous books. Pinker once again caters to a popular (though scientifically literate) audience, using accessible examples from jokes, Shakespeare, pop songs, and films to understand the science. One fascinating chapter explores the value of metaphors; another covers swearing (did you know that "gee whiz" is derived from "Jesus"?). A few critics tired of the myriad examples and pointed out a lack of unifying threads; others wanted more concrete answers; a couple challenged Pinker's entire thesis that language is an accurate guide to our mind. According to them, it is as if Pinker was determined to combine his broad-based, popular science acumen with his in-depth linguistics expertise—"the perfect storm" of his work. But if this book is not food for thought, then no other book of its kind is. Copyright 2004 Phillips Nelson Media, Inc.

From Booklist
Experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist Pinker is fascinated by the symbiosis between language and thought. In this stimulating volume, a continuation of the discussion found in *The Language Instinct* (1994), he argues for the "real-world importance" of "the relation of language to our inner and outer worlds." Anchoring his discussion of why semantics matter to 9/11 and other momentous public events, Pinker teases apart the gap between the literal meanings of words and their elaborate connotations, which leads to fresh explanations of humor, the importance of metaphors, and the significance of swearing. Some of the most mind-expanding chapters involve the subtlest, most taken-for-granted aspects of mind, namely our sense of time, space, and causality. Drawing on philosophy, evolutionary psychology, physics, neurology, anthropology, and jokes, Pinker presents a convincing theory of conceptual semantics, itemizing the "fundamental ideas" that form the "language of thought." From politics to poetry, children's wonderful malapropisms to slang, Pinker's fluency in the nuances of words and syntax serves as proof of his faith in language as "a window into human nature." Seaman, Donna