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## Brainman, at Rest in His Oasis



By Sarah Lyall

BROOMFIELD, England

**BULLIED** by other children and bewildered by ordinary life, Daniel Tammet spent his early years burrowed deep inside the world of numbers. They were his companions and his solace, living, breathing beings that enveloped him with their shapes and textures and colors.

He still loves them and needs them; he can still do extraordinary things with them, like perform complicated calculations instantly in his head, far beyond the capacity of an ordinary calculator. But Mr. Tammet, who at the age of 25 received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism, has made a difficult and self-conscious journey out from his own mind.

“I live in two countries, one of the mind and one of the body, one of numbers and one of people,” he said recently. Slight and soft-spoken, dressed in a T-shirt and casual combat-style pants, he sat cross-legged in his living room and sipped a cup of tea, one of several he drinks at set times each day.

Not so long ago, even a conversation like this one would have been prohibitively difficult for Mr. Tammet, now 28. As he describes in his newly published memoir, “Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant” (Free Press), he has willed himself to learn what to do. Offer a visitor a drink; look her in the eye; don’t stand in someone else’s space. These are all conscious decisions.

Recently, some friends warned him that in his eagerness to make eye contact, he tended to stare too intently. “It’s like being on a tightrope,” he said. “If you try too hard, you’ll come off. But you have to try.”

Mr. Tammet’s house, a small cottage in a sleepy cul-de-sac in this quiet Kent town, is a refuge from the sensory assaults of the world outside — the city, big supermarkets, crowds — which tend to overwhelm and unnerve him.

“The house is like my oasis,” he said. “I structured it — the colors of it, the way the furniture is laid out. The way it feels, and the way I work — it’s very much a matter of routine, and it makes me feel calm and comfortable.”

Mr. Tammet’s book is an elegant account of how his condition has informed his life, a rare first-person insight into a mysterious and confounding disorder. He is unusual not just because of his lucid writing style and his ability to analyze his own thoughts and behavior, but also because he is one fewer than 100 “prodigious savants” — autistic or otherwise mentally impaired people with spectacular, almost preternatural skills — in the world, according to Dr. Darold Treffert, a researcher of savant syndrome.

He wears his gifts lightly, casually. When he gets nervous, he said, he sometimes reverts to a coping strategy he employed as a child: he multiplies two over and over again, each result emitting in his head bright silvery sparks until he is enveloped by fireworks of them. He demonstrated, reciting the numbers to himself, and in a moment had reached 1,048,576 — 2 to the 20th power. He speaks 10 languages, including Lithuanian, Icelandic and Esperanto, and has invented his own language, Manti. In 2004, he raised money for an epilepsy charity by memorizing and publicly reciting the number pi to 22,514 digits — a new European record. In addition to Asperger’s, he has the rare gift of synesthesia, which allows him to see numbers as having shapes, colors and textures; he also assigns them personalities. His unusual mind has been studied repeatedly by researchers in Britain and the United States.

Mr. Tammet sees himself as an ambassador and advocate for people with autism.

“Autistic people do fall in love,” he said. “They do have joy; they do have sorrow; they do experience ups and downs like everyone else. We may not have the same ability to manage those emotions as others have, but they’re there, and sometimes our experience of them is far more intense than the experience of other people.”

Mr. Tammet grew up in east London, one of nine children. He suffered a series of early epileptic fits that he believes brought on his synesthesia. Through his childhood troubles — a lack of friends, the tendency to block out the world, an incessant counting of everything countable — he was buoyed by a loving family whose size ensured, he said, that “I could never close inside myself.”

Until his diagnosis, Mr. Tammet never understood what separated him from other people, even when he saw the film “Rain Man,” in which Dustin Hoffman plays a severely autistic man with extraordinary mental gifts. “I didn’t think automatically, ‘this is how I am,’” he said — for one thing, the “Rain Man” character’s social impairments are profound, far from his own — “but it did stay with me,”

Mr. Tammet met Kim Peek, the inspiration for the character, several years ago, during filming for a television documentary about himself (the result, “Brainman,” has been broadcast in 40 countries). Although the two function at drastically different levels, they recognized each other as kindred spirits and spent part of their time swapping historical facts, a shared interest.

The success of the documentary spurred Mr. Tammet to embark on his book, which he did in a huge burst of work in the summer of 2005. The book, which the newspaper Scotland on Sunday said has a “strange, quiet beauty,” has been on the New York Times best-seller list for two weeks. He met Neil Mitchell, his partner, online, and the two have lived together for six years. They both like being at home: Mr. Mitchell, who is 30 and writes computer software programs for a living, is perhaps even shyer than he is, Mr. Tammet said. They grow fruit and vegetables in their garden, play with their two cats and cook meals as a team.

“These sorts of tactile experiences really root me,” Mr. Tammet said. “If I know that I have a meal to cook or that a vegetable needs pulling, it forces me to engage with normality.”

But he is not an easy person to live with, Mr. Tammet said. He is discomfited by disturbances like a suddenly ringing telephone, a last-minute change of plans or a friend’s unexpected visit. When he gets upset, he paces in circles. He splashes water on his face exactly five times each morning, and cannot leave the house without first counting the items of clothing he is wearing.

On the mantelpiece of the house is a collection of cards Mr. Tammet received on his latest birthday, including one from Mr. Mitchell, signed with six kisses. “I don’t think I’d be here today if it weren’t for his love and support,” he said.

But he still speaks of numbers with affection and says that for him they have individual personalities, particularly the smaller ones. The number four, for instance, is shy, and reminds him of himself; nines are scary and imposing. Ones are shiny and bright, eights are blue, fives are loud, and 333 is beautiful.

His decision to memorize and recite the digits of pi was an important turning point. Racked by nervousness the night before the recitation, he fell into a deep sleep and dreamed that he was walking through the landscape of pi — that he was actually deep inside the number, enveloped by its sights and colors and textures.

The recitation took place at the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, lasted five hours and nine minutes and was monitored by students from the department of mathematical sciences at Oxford Brookes University. Mr. Tammet made no mistakes.

“I wanted to go as far into the other place as I could go,” he said, speaking of the world of numbers. “Having reached that point, I felt a kind of release because I could look back and in my mind’s eye I could see all the numbers — all 22,000 numbers in my head — and I actually turned around in my head and waved them good-bye, because I knew that I wasn’t going to see them again, I wasn’t going to do something like that again.

“It’s still with me,” he said, “but it’s not any longer something I have to go into to feel happy and comfortable. I can feel happy in the world of people. My partner makes me happy. My friends make me happy. Numbers are still a part of my life, just not all of it.”