Phineas Gage was truly a man with a hole in his head. Phineas, a railroad construction foreman, was blasting rock near Cavendish, Vermont, in 1848 when a thirteen-pound iron rod was shot through his brain. Miraculously, he survived to live another eleven years and become a textbook case in brain science. At the time, Phineas Gage seemed to completely recover from his accident. He could walk, talk, work, and travel, but he was changed. Gage was no longer Gage, said his Vermont doctor, meaning that the old Phineas was dependable and well liked, and the new Phineas was crude and unpredictable. His case astonished doctors in his day and still fascinates doctors today. What happened and what didn't happen inside the brain of Phineas Gage will tell you a lot about how your brain works and how you act human.
John Fleischman once again brings Phineas Gage to the pages of brain science history with his engaging Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science.

A frequent writer for Discover, Muse, and Air and Space Smithsonian magazines, Fleischman flexes his narrative voice as well as his scientific knowledge in this book for older children and young adult readers. The combination works wonderfully, making this almost a page-turning read. At first I was distracted by Fleischman's use of both past and present tense voices. What I decided was his use of present tense in telling Phineas story brings immediacy to the narrative—a you-are-there type of storytelling, while past tense relates the scientific story preceding and following the events in Phineas life.

One reviewer tells us that all medical and most science students know the story of Phineas Gage because of his importance in studies in brain knowledge. So what is the story of Phineas brain? In 1848 while leading his gang of railroad workers, Phineas suffered a terrible accident: his three-foot tamping iron was shot through his head, entering under his jaw and exiting through his frontal lobe. Fleischman asks the reader: Was he lucky or unlucky? You see, Phineas lived eleven and one-half more years, but everyone who knew him agreed this was no longer Phineas Gage. His personality changed.

While Fleischman relates Phineas's story, he underscores everything with what doctors knew then about brain science in particular, and medicine in general. One photograph shows a group of doctors in street clothes standing around an operating table with a patient on it. No one knew about germs at that time.

The most fascinating part of the book is how easily Fleischman weaves information about the brain, the story of brain science development, and various conclusions and theories made and discarded or enhanced. This is clearly a science book dressed out in a fantastic, but true story.

I particularly was eager to read this book because my school placed this book as required reading for sixth grade this summer. Our reading list came about this way: one teacher created a list of all suggested books for additional reading found at the end of chapters in one of the textbooks. All are young adult books. I read reviews for all the books and whittled a list of 60-80 titles to about 15. We chose Phineas as required because of our principal, a former high school science teacher. She presented information about brain science at a pre-school workshop for teachers. The staff was fascinated, so I thought this kind of knowledge would benefit students as well. Add the bizarre story of Phineas's accident and this book should be a winner.

Phineas's skull and tamping rod are on permanent display at Harvard Medical School in Boston.