Books

a decision to switch as much for me as for my family. Education corresponds better to who I am; it reflects my more human side. In engineering I never felt that human relations were valued. I wouldn't have the opportunity to help people, to form relationships with kids, to guide them to success. In science it's all Cartesian. But humans are not machines. They're more complicated, and that's interesting to me. I would rather earn three to four thousand dollars less a year but feel I was open to new challenges, allowed to blossom."

Pinker concludes that, "Gifted talented women with the most choices and freedoms don't seem to be choosing the same paths, in the same numbers, as the men around them. Even with barriers stripped away, they don't behave like male clones."

This trend is backed by studies done in the UK by Catherine Hakim at the London School of Economics which show that, given the choice, 60–80 per cent of American and European women choose part-time work over full-time schedules. The arrival of kids is the key: "The vast majority of women who claim to be career-oriented discover that their priorities change after they have children," says Pinker. Women adapt their careers to cope with the demands of motherhood. Men rarely do that. They steam ahead and rarely turn down promotion.

Interestingly, it isn't only when women leave male-dominated professions or careers that the findings of different priorities become apparent. Researchers who surveyed over 200 male and female business owners in America found that, although female owners were less successful financially, they were just as satisfied with their business success, probably because they had different values - such as a greater interest in work-life balance or customer satisfaction.

There are many who find this picture both disheartening and unacceptable. Pinker, however, feels that we should be celebrating rather than blaming the system and spending futile millions on attempting to change it; that the persistent differences in the workplace "are a sign of a free and educated society - one where individuals are able to make up their own choices." She concludes with a rallying cry: "Discoveries about sex differences in human learning and development can offer insights into the best ways to help boys who need assistance. Acknowledging their preferences can help girls choose the lives and careers they want."

Bravo! I hope that those who throw the million at the wrong problems are listening.

Anne Moir


I Think There's Something Wrong With Me

Nigel Smith

Black Swan, £7.99

NIGEL Smith, an up-and-coming comedy writer aged 34, has "this numbness thing going on", suddenly, on the left side of his face and body. Unaccountably, the locum GP he sees fobs him off with a chuckle, so he phones his friend Phil Hammond for advice. Hammond, a doctor and sometime guest on Have I Got News For You, to which Nigel has contributed as a writer, is briefly and expletively frank about how serious his symptoms are and says, "Get a scan" – which Nigel ignores. But he ends up in hospital next day anyway and the radiologist, when he reads his scan, assumes it is of a man already dead.

Thereafter, our extraordinary hero remains in intensive care for months. What he goes through is often sheer hell: the unknown and never-identified lesion which blankets his brain leaves him in most respects as helpless as a baby and often in excruciating pain. Utterly dependent on others, he gives grateful credit wherever it is due but is mercilessly intolerant of the inefficiency, stupidity and thoughtlessness, great and small, around him in abundance. For instance early on, when he can still just about speak, two Filipino nurses come round every two hours, asking the same three questions: "What is your name?"; "Where are you?"; "Who is the Prime Minister?"

Like the zombie they probably think he is, each makes no attempt at even marginal human contact with a man so obviously cut off and fighting for his life, and he finds their indifference shocking and unbelievable. This, by the way, is the least of it: there are serious mistakes and muddles aplenty. But comedy, much of it surreal, is Nigel's mode and, though the humour is often of the gallows variety, the wonder is how many laughs he manages to get out of his long series of ordeals.

As the illness gets worse he can't speak or swallow or even move, except for one hand, and, as intensive care beds don't have bells (the planners didn't think patients would need them), he has to rattle a pill box to attract attention until, later on, the staff figure out he can scribble notes. Yet all he can really do is lie there observing. And because he is unsparing of himself as much as others, his observations are often inspiring – and when they are not, they are both shocking and valuable.

That he survives, it goes almost without saying, is due to the considerable skill and care of some of his doctors, one in particular, and Nigel's gratitude to them, and to the NHS, is profuse. But, even so, it is doubtful whether he would have come through without his own formidable array of strengths and resources. These include his almost total lack of self-pity (for example, we learn only in passing, towards the end of the book, that he is typing it all with one finger), his mental clarity and determination, his rage, his sense of the ridiculous, his belief in the future (at one point we find him wondering whether his now paraphrased 'equipment' will be up to it when he's back home with his wife), his fierce... I can only call it 'life force' and his unwavering bloody-mindedness. Don't try to be a 'good' patient, I discovered years ago when in hospital myself for several weeks: the ones that recover often seem to be those who insist on making their needs known, if necessary by being 'hostile' and a nuisance.

Above all, it never once occurred to Nigel that he would not survive. He describes seeing, early on, a narrow door in front of him and a black-sleeved arm trying to slide in, as if to get at the handle from the other side. Sweating profusely, he bends all his will towards keeping the door closed, to stop the arm's owner coming closer. Much later