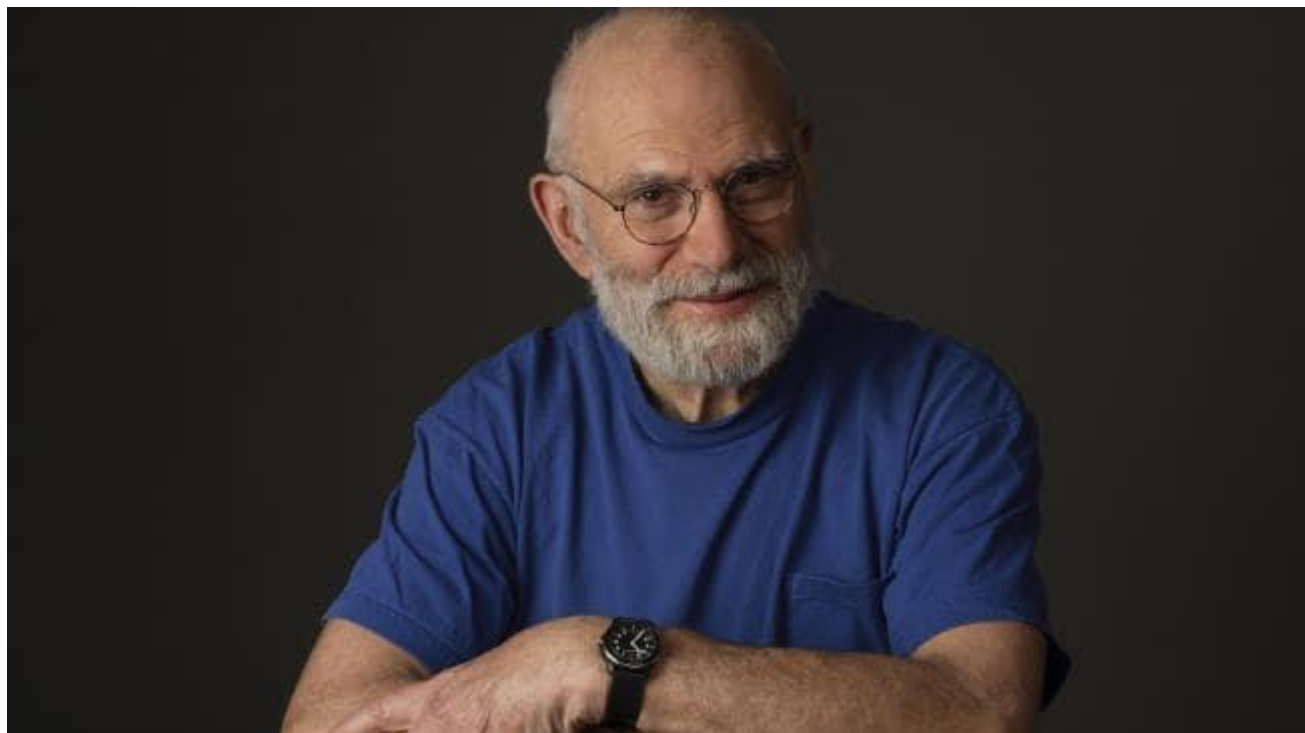


REVIEW

The River of Consciousness by Oliver Sacks



Author and neurologist Oliver Sacks. Picture: Elena Seibret.

- TINA ALLEN
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Our personal perception of time does not always correspond to “clock time”. We can go on elaborate mental journeys, visit foreign lands, say, or relive periods of our lives, only to discover mere minutes or seconds have elapsed.

In contrast, a professional baseball player may report having all the time he needs to hit a ball travelling towards him at 160km/h. The apparent slowing of time experienced by athletes “in the zone” results from their powers of intense concentration to reduce the number of frames they experience per second.

Research conducted in recent decades has provided a powerful model of experience and learning shaping the neural connectivity and function of our brains.

These and other exciting insights about human perception and consciousness are included in Oliver Sacks’s posthumous essay collection *The River of Consciousness*.

This book demonstrates the breadth of the eminent neurologist’s knowledge and interests. It covers topics such as plants and worms, creativity and plagiarism, memory and its failings, while nodding to scientific heroes including Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin.

Woven into the essays are mentions of many of Sacks's memorable patients and his dozen other books, making it the perfect introduction for newcomers, or bookend for devotees of a literary career in which millions of books were sold and several stories were adapted for the stage and screen.

The Oscar-nominated 1990 film *Awakenings* tells the moving true story from the summer of 1969 when a young Sacks, played by Robin Williams, used a new wonder drug, L-dopa, to rescue, briefly, a group of post-encephalitic patients at a Bronx hospital where they had been in frozen states lasting several decades.

Sacks, who was born in London in 1933 and completed his medical degree at Oxford, treated thousands of patients during 50 years in New York, working mainly in chronic care facilities. He struggled to find mentions in psychiatric charts of the neurological conditions he encountered, and the narrow case studies he could find lacked the novelistic qualities he admired in those written the previous century.

Beginning with his first book, *Migraine* (1970), Sacks used a combination of scientific accuracy and human feeling to write intriguing short-story collections about his patients. These appealed to his peers and a general readership, whom he introduced to neurological conditions such as autism, Parkinson's disease and Tourette's syndrome, in which patients such as Witty Ticky Ray experience involuntary tics and utterances.

Sacks is perhaps best known for *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), in which the titular story is about Dr P, a gifted singer and musician who suffered from visual agnosia and was no longer able to recognise people and common objects.

While the subject matter of these stories may sound grim, Sacks sees human beings coping with dignity, and focuses on what they can achieve despite their deficits and dysfunctions.

Sacks could have been accused of voyeurism had he not woven into his writing, including this book, anecdotes from his own life and the conditions he shared with his patients, namely flickering migraines and prosopagnosia (the inability to recognise familiar faces).

An essay titled *A General Feeling of Disorder* recounts his discovery in January 2015 that the ocular melanoma that had cost him the sight of his right eye nine years earlier had recurred and metastasised to his liver.

The next day, after his usual swim, Sacks picks up his fountain pen to work on essays destined for two collections. This gentle man, whose habits were "not of our time", as his partner Billy Hayes expressed it, never owned a computer or mobile phone.

The opening essay, *Darwin and the Meaning of Flowers*, reminds me of Sacks's memoir *Uncle Tungsten*, about his eccentric family of doctors, including his mother, who was also "botanically inclined". Darwin came from a botanical family but became a botanist himself only after writing *On the Origin of Species*.

I was surprised to learn it was Darwin who discovered the role of bees, moths and beetles in the pollination of plants. He dispelled the belief that flowers were self-fertilised, leading Sacks to comment: "What had once been a pretty picture of insects buzzing about brightly coloured flowers now became an essential drama in life, full of biological depth and meaning." Following that essay is one on Freud's early work as an anatomist and neurologist,

which is of interest to a professional audience but lacks the indelible imagery of those bees whose legs are “yellow with pollen”.

There is some unevenness in the accessibility of the essays for a general readership. However, this is also understandable given the scant seven months Sacks had to write and compile the collection from essays previously published in *The New York Review of Books*. He died at age 82 in August 2015.

The River of Consciousness is the gift of a dying man to his considerable fan base of readers around the world. These essays constitute the final chapter in the body of work of a literary writer who helped us to understand the myriad complexities of the brain.

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her debut book is Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon.

The River of Consciousness

By Oliver Sacks

Picador, 256pp, \$44.99 (HB), \$32.99 (PB)

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