

# The Wide, Wide World of Oliver Sacks

**Meet the doctor, researcher, and  
best-selling author of  
*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*  
and *Awakenings*.**

By G.K. Oswald

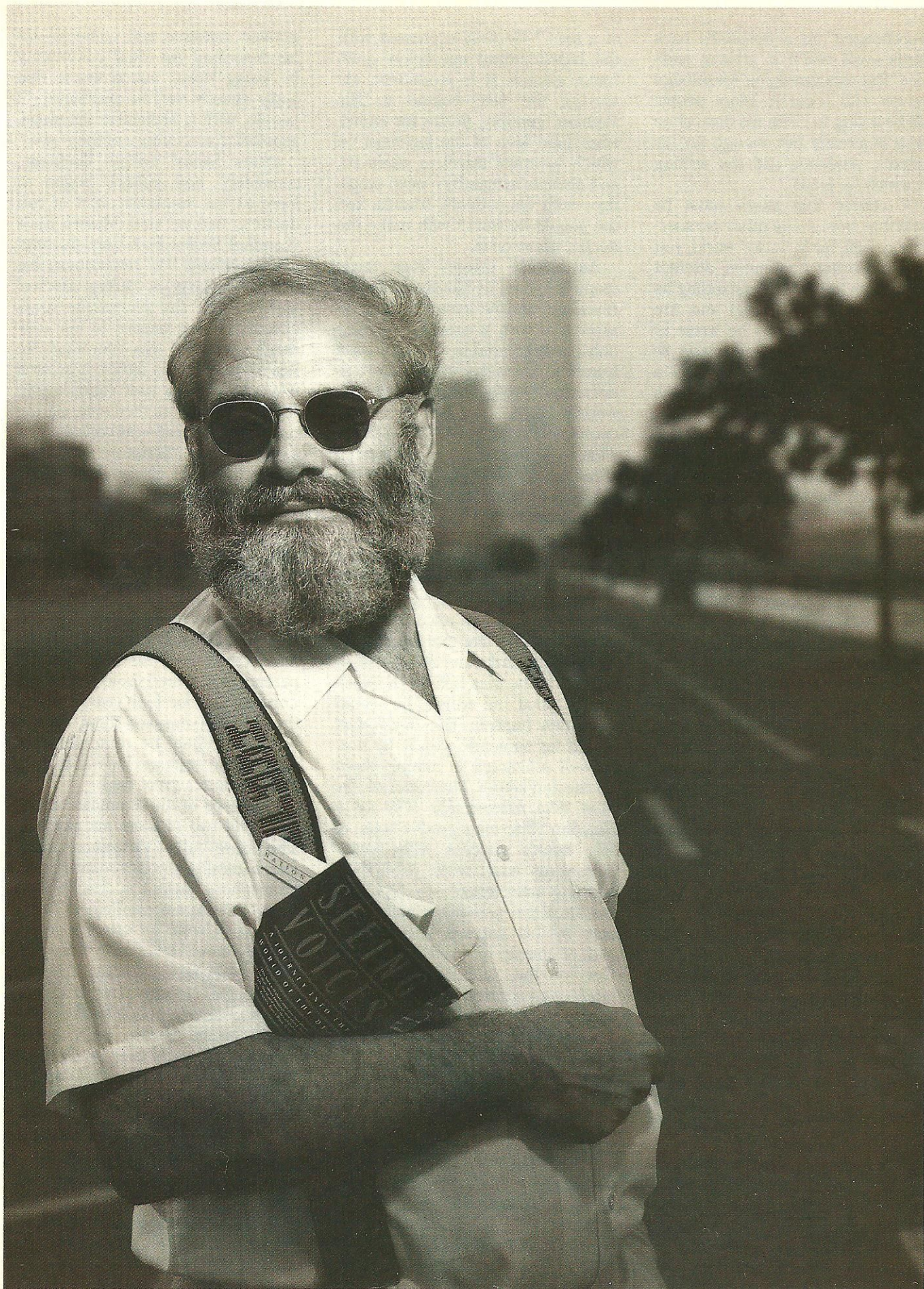
**"I** was a terrible Santa Claus," says the man who is, physically, a dead ringer for old Saint Nick. What should have been a supreme moment of typecasting became, instead, more like an outtake from a bad Monty Python skit. "I couldn't get the accent right."

Dr. Oliver Wolf Sacks finishes explaining why his cameo in the film version of his book *Awakenings* ended up on director Penny Marshall's cutting-room floor. Punctuating his tale, the gentle, polite, British tones you sometimes must strain to hear metamorphose into a laugh that tumbles into the room's every corner before spilling out the open window of his Greenwich Village office.

The laugh can be interpreted as an admission of how absurd it would be for an introspective, almost Victorian man of the mind to be captured by cinema's two dimensions. But the laugh also masks a persistent anxiety about response to his books. He admires how Robin Williams, Robert De Niro, and the others have brought a part of his work to the screen, but worries how Hollywood's need to enlarge some of the drama and simplify some of the complexity will affect perception of his writing. He is acclaimed in literary circles, but his critics do rankle, particularly those in the medical and academic establishment who denigrate him as a "popularizer," a reaction that greater celebrity is unlikely to change. Putting some space between the movie and book versions, he says of the film, "It's not mine; it's theirs."

The laugh also reflects the real pleasure that through the film his vision—and the humanity of patients







"warehoused" in a hospital's back wards—will reach a greater audience. But this gratifying knowledge arrives with a curse: More people will be trying to claim his time when there is already not enough for his patients, students, and the writing on which he feeds.

Of course that laugh must be looked at from many other perspectives as well, for in Sacks' world, you keep exploring new paths, attempt to glean as full an understanding as possible of an individual and the individual situation. As he wrote in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*: "If we wish to know about a man, we ask 'what is his story—his real, inmost story?'—for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by through and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives—we are each of us unique."

Friends and co-workers of the 57-year-old Sacks describe him as having an "extraordinary, effervescent kind of imagination"; and of being "great fun to work with"; "eccentric, demanding, and compassionate"; a "totally exceptional person"; and, perhaps most tellingly, "not easy to know." As one person remarked in commenting on his wide range of passions, "I see something different about him every time."

Robin Williams, who plays a character based on Sacks in *Awakenings* (and not, both men adamantly insist, the doctor himself), described him to a recent interviewer as "Schweitzer and Schwarzenegger, a gentle man who used to squat-press 600 pounds. He's incredibly shy, but aggressive in how he pursues an idea. He's got this amazing mind, but sometimes he can barely speak."

As a literary savant, Sacks is an "anti-illusionist," detailing for his reader ideas, even complete worlds, which were not previously apparent. In person, he stands an inch or so over 6 feet tall, and weighs enough to be labeled "a bear

of a man." He first impresses with the beard jutting out below gold-frame glasses. It is prominent, obscuring the face behind it. His shyness, gentility, desire for knowledge (and love of the journeys on which he must travel to attain it), and obvious sympathy—even empathy—with his patients, friends, and the people he works with make the deeper impression.

An intense privacy fogs those moments when he has seemed most revealing, and he leaves those who meet him with a sketch, a picture only partly colored in, of a man apart from the day-to-day world who nevertheless profoundly affects the world's imagination. He does so by completely giving himself over to what he lightly refers to as "sudden effusions of spontaneity," quiet explosions of interest focusing with a laser intensity his intellectual powers.

Dressed in a yellow guayabera shirt, gray slacks, maroon socks, and brown sandals, he is self-contained (hair in place, hands at his side, chair still) and uncomfortable, clearly wishing that this baggage of success, celebrity, and the attendant interest in the man behind the work was a load of which he could unburden himself. The discomfort is odd for someone who is by now so well rehearsed in talking about his life and labors. The editor of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Jim Silberman, credits some of that book's success with Sacks' increasing ease with publicity—allowing interviewers to highlight the attractive persona usually seen only by his patients and friends, and, of course, inferred by readers. One of the side effects of his intellectual activity, when he latches onto an idea or explanation, is a "magnetic field" riveting an audience's attention.

He is reluctant to talk of a past that seems not to bring enough pleasure in its memory. But having a hard time saying no (he will sidetrack the conversation at times and in a way that implies in retrospect a desire not to answer a question), he submits to ever more people trying to chip off a piece of him. Perhaps he succumbs not only to be polite, but with the hope that

greater attention will come to—as he described the deaf community in *Seeing Voices*, but in words that apply equally well to everyone—"a people, with a distinctive language, sensibility, and culture of their own."

Oliver Sacks' unique language, sensibility, and culture began to form as the youngest child of two doctors, Samuel and Muriel Elsie (Landau) Sacks. Both parents studied neurology. He remembers his mother, a surgeon, telling medical stories while she served the soup, and dispensing recipes to her residents while she was operating. He has a vision of his father, a general practitioner who saw patients into his 90s, away from medicine, poring over the Talmud—rabbinical commentaries on Scripture and law famous for the circles of analysis which bring them to their precise arguments. Perhaps it is there where Sacks' love of footnotes began. (He jokes about wanting a "film of footnotes.")

At the age of 6, he was exiled from his home near Hampstead Heath, outside London, as protection against the Nazi bombing. His parents maintained their practice in London, and for four years he saw them rarely, missing them from a boarding school he remembers as feeding the students little and disciplining them a great deal.

His three brothers studied medicine, and two of them are doctors. The house "full of Victorian medical and naturalist works" contained an atmosphere Sacks has described as being "of eloquent medicine." There blossomed what he terms a precocious passion for science: "Studying the periodic table, I felt that this was an eternal system. The halogens would always be a family, the alkali metals would always be a family, and nothing could ever break them up. . . . Science had the great appeal of order and stability." Indeed, science would become for Sacks "a great shield against a chaotic world," an alternative place where he could feel safer than he often does with people.

He moved on to a school founded by an aunt, where his interest in the natural world flourished (every child had a little bit of garden of his own).



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From there he went to St. Paul's, and from there, having received a scholarship, he moved on to Queen's College, Oxford, where he read physiology and received his bachelor of arts, bachelor of chemistry, and master of arts.

Taken by the intricacies of the brain, a labyrinth for adventurous researchers only, he studied neurology at Oxford's Sherrington Laboratory and earned his medical degree from Middlesex Hospital, where he studied and worked from 1955 to 1960. For recreation, he swam, lifted weights competitively, and rode motorcycles.

In 1960 he spent four months hitchhiking across Canada and down to California, where he fell in love with the state's natural beauty. He served a fellowship in San Francisco, researching Parkinson's disease from 1960 to 1961, and studied at the University of California at Los Angeles from 1961 to 1965. He has also let fall that he ministered to a California chapter of the Hell's Angels in an "unofficial capacity."

In 1965 Sacks, while also attending to patients at three New York City charity hospitals, became an instructor in neurology at the city's Albert Einstein Hospital, where he works today as professor of clinical neurology. In addition, he continues to work as a consultant neurologist at Bronx State Hospital; however, a New York City budget crisis threatens his and 1,250 other jobs there at the present time.

A claim he makes, which must be taken with a grain of salt, is that as a fellow in neuropathology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine he was a hazardous lab rat, who lost a specimen in the centrifuge and was known to screw his microscope into the slide he was studying. He told one interviewer, "Basically, at the end of my fellowship year, they said, 'Get out! You're a menace! Go and see patients, you'll do less harm.'"

Completely true or not, the point is clear that he felt apart from the science of neurology, as it was often "mechanically" practiced—the doctor looking at charts of reflex times, graphs of brainwave activity, everything but the patient. Naturally, the

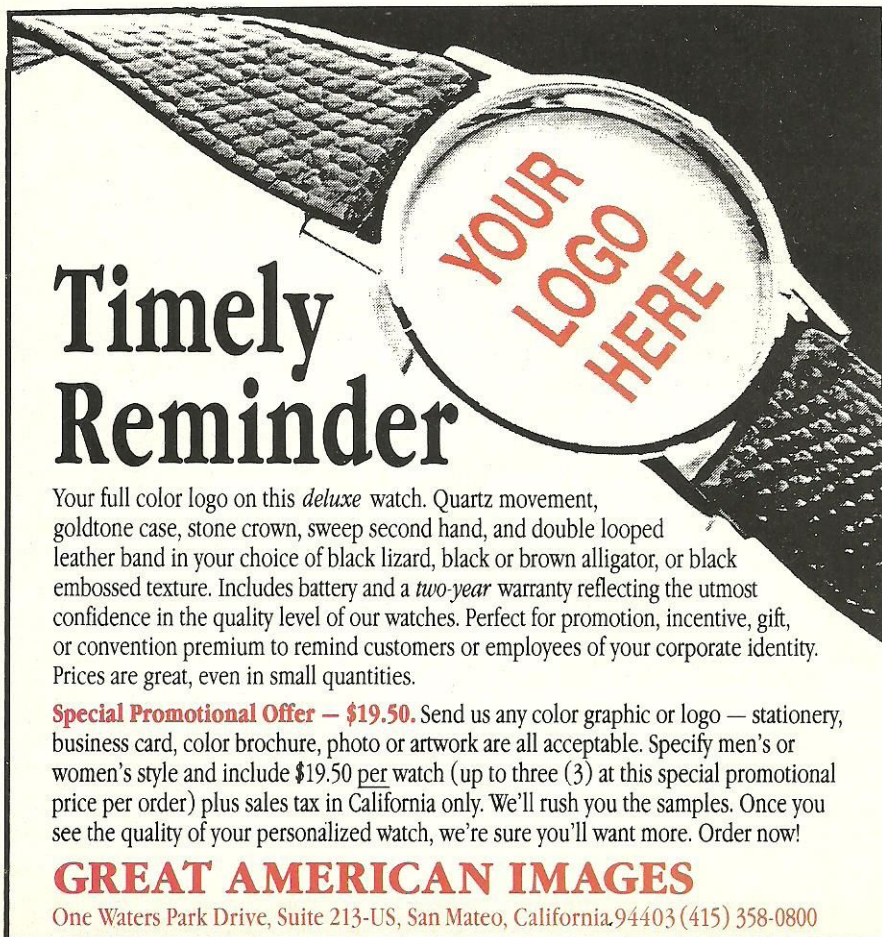
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patient must be seen within a scientific context, but Sacks had also been influenced by the writings of the natural explorers who had left poetic descriptions of the places they had been; his sense of people and the hells they sometimes live in had been shaped by Trollope, Chekhov, Borges, Turgenev, Dickens, and, of course, his young years as an institution's inmate. Patients must also be treated within a personal context. As he recently wrote, "It is not sufficient just to make a diagnosis of migraine and give a pill. One has to inquire into the entire human drama that surrounds the attacks, to explore what they might mean in a particular person. One has to take not just a 'medical' history, but to try to construct a complete human narrative."

By his own admission, a good deal of the clinical skill he possesses is because he "appreciates patients, listens to them, and is fascinated by what they say." His ability to see, treat, and describe people and their complaints within both a determinedly scientific and "dramatic" setting began to show itself in his *Migraine*, which he published originally in 1970 (a revised edition was issued in 1985). With a family history of migraines, Sacks was naturally ready to follow up on the numerous patients who had been presented to him with the various symptoms making up this sometimes debilitating disorder. His work also touches on how pain is often connected through a neurologic web to personal creativity or productivity.

In *Migraine*, readers can see Sacks' literary voice beginning to emerge. Included, but lacking the full imagery of his later works, are his "clinical tales." Too often their presentation has a textbook feel. On display, nevertheless, is his ability to capture the popular imagination with his literary explorations and present a full context for symptoms often considered in isolation. An anecdotal survey suggests that some readers, having come to a greater intellectual awareness of their ailment, feel less tension and pain from their attacks. *The Times* of London called *Migraine* "Bal-

anced, authoritative . . . brilliant" and *The New York Times Book Review* suggested it "should be read as much for its brilliant insights into the nature of our mental functioning as for its discussion of migraine."

By the time these encomiums had begun to flow his way, Sacks had found himself and a small number of patients ping-ponging between heaven and hell. It was an experience that focused his scientific mission and tuned his literary voice. The experience began in 1967 with his discovery of 80 chronic ward patients who had once suffered from the "sleepy sickness" viral pandemic, which randomly inflicted itself throughout Europe and North America from about 1916 to 1927. Now these patients were again casualties of an equally mysterious postencephalitic syndrome. Some 20 to 40 years after "recovering," they again became lost to the world, losing physical control until what seemed to them a normal pace was imperceptible action to those who cared for them. They were again "asleep," assumed to be beyond help.

After two years of insomniac nights for Sacks, he came to believe that these patients might be helped by L-DOPA—the "miracle drug" for Parkinson's disease sufferers. He describes himself as having been in a terror over whether or not to prescribe it. The possibility was there that it wouldn't work, but nothing else had worked either. A bigger worry was what kind of world these victims of chance would awake to. Friends and family would be gone; they would be years older than they remembered; and they would face not only the resultant psychological trauma, but also the physical damage inflicted on their body by age, disease, and lack of physical activity.

Some of the patients were aroused by the L-DOPA as if by a prince's kiss. Others regained their lives to a lesser degree, but in each case, the drug magnified, combined, and scrambled the patients' ailments. The results, Sacks found, were traceable to some extent to the life the person led before the ancillary disease struck and by the support structure

they found after receiving L-DOPA. (Sadly, in no case were the "awakenings" to a full life permanent.)

This emphasis on the role the individual plays in his or her own treatment "and the implications which [this] holds out for medicine and science" won him reactions from indifference to hostility when he tried to publish his clinical observations in medical journals. The years from 1970 to 1972 seem to have been a low point, when he was charged with fabrication, exaggeration, hostility to science, and technical incompetence.

He had his patient notes, the patients on film and cassettes, and the patients' own words in the journals he had asked them to keep for as long as they could. He also had the recollections of the others working in the hospital. Still, skeptics blocked publication of his findings until the editor of the British magazine *The Listener* invited him to submit an essay on his observations in 1972.

The essay and a more favorable response allowed him to, as he wrote in the 1990s-edition preface to *Awakenings*, "Explore what it was like to be human, to *stay* human, in the face of unimaginable adversities and threats. Thus, while continually monitoring their organic nature—their complex, ever-changing pathophysiologies and biologies—my central study and concern became *identity*—their struggle to maintain identity—to observe this, to assist this, and, finally, to describe this."

Although some younger doctors and medical students seized on the book as an "underground text," publication won him few plaudits from the more established medical community. However, the literary community was moved. W.H. Auden, whose father had been a doctor at the time of the "sleepy sickness" affliction, reviewed the book as "a masterpiece" in *The New York Review of Books* (and led indirectly to Sacks' publication of numerous essays there). Harold Pinter carried the work around in his head for eight years until it emerged as the one-act play *A Kind of Alaska*. Also in the wake of the book was British television's production of



a documentary on Sacks and his patients four years after their "awakening," incorporating archival footage and snippets of Sacks' original Super-8 film.

People who know his clinical work describe him as an excellent diagnostician and able communicator with his patients. Outside that institutional setting, words often seem unable to fully convey Sacks' ideas. Some conversational pauses make him out to be a prisoner, unable to break free of too many ideas. His hands draw figures in the air, and his body shifts to both embellish and hone his communication. He will rise to get a book from a shelf, one time supporting an argument with a chapter title, another time pulling down a volume thoroughly highlighted with different colored pens. Other times he twists to get something from his desk—a stack of correspondence, for example, testimony to his statement that no matter how often he responds, he always finds himself at least 200 letters behind. It is distracting, an example of the eccentricity so many who know him comment upon, and so unlike the composed man of letters found in his writings.

Sacks acknowledges that there is no pattern to his publications. He has been considering a work on Tourette's syndrome—a neurological disorder of uncontrollable physical and sometimes vocal tics—for more than 15 years, and there always seem to be three to four essay or book ideas at hand. He admits to always being surprised when people respond to what they see as the politics in his work; he is equally uncomfortable when claimed by the holistic and new-age health movements, and when accused of doctor-bashing. Both labels increased after his 1984 publication of *A Leg to Stand On*.

An accident on a Norwegian holiday led to an essay ("The Leg") in the *London Review of Books*, an appearance on a Dick Cavett show, and, when an editor who had been tipped off to watch caught the show, a book about the experience of a doctor as patient—*A Leg to Stand On*. (The editor would receive the

first handwritten final manuscript of his career.) A combination of scientific investigation and memoir, Sacks' most personal work is a historical explication of phantom illnesses—patient testimonies to symptoms no doctor can discover—and part humanistic treatise on how patients can suffer from well-meaning doctors convinced by "what should be" to ignore what the patient tells them "is."

While *Leg* was difficult to categorize, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, which Sacks published the next year, reinvented a whole genre—the clinical tales of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Sacks has described each of his patients as "an entire encyclopedia of neurology," but these cases—presumably a fraction of the thousands he has seen—are of the type that inspire the study of neurology. Dr. P., the "man" of the title, does not always recognize what he sees as the object it is: Getting ready to leave, he grabs his wife's head—mistaking it for his hat and planning to put it atop his own. John and Michael, "the twins," savants unable to perform most simple functions, are able to rattle off the day of the week for any day in the past or future. While the strange nature of each life attracts and repels, one comes away from the book with greater insights into one's own perception and humanity.

People who worked on the book claim various reasons for its success, not the least of which was that it was one of those all too rare occurrences in publishing when a mass audience discovers a deserving, unhyped author. Obviously, no such book is "packaged," yet it should be noted that besides the extraordinary title, many individual chapter titles have a commercial ring. Additionally, there are almost no footnotes and many fewer digressions in the text than in other of Sacks' works. Whether it was the nature of the material or a conscious desire to get the word out to more people is unclear. What is sure is that the book's success (26 weeks each on *The New York Times* hardcover and paperback best-seller lists) ensures that much more atten-

tion will be focused on whatever Sacks now chooses to write about.

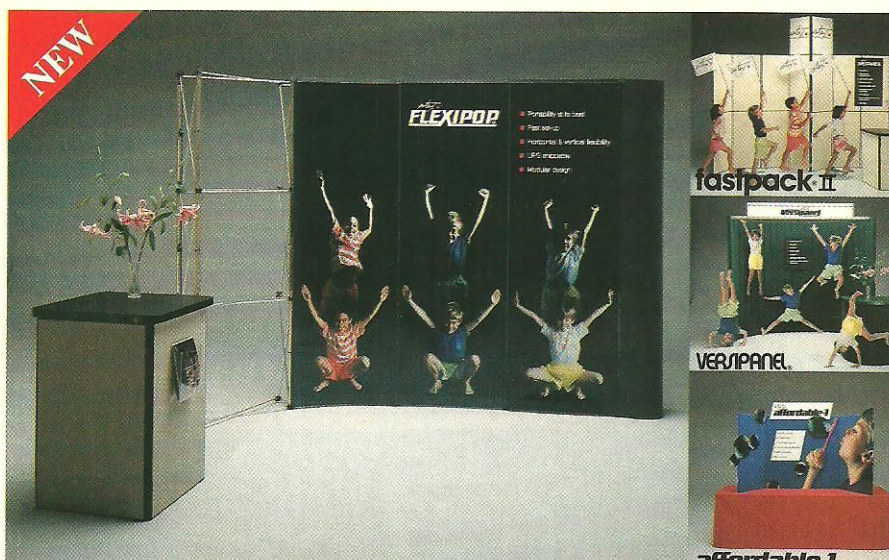
The power given Sacks by his best seller was first applied to a study of a forgotten people. *Seeing Voices*, published in 1989 and slightly revised prior to its 1990 publication in paperback, is a work about perception and communication. It began as a review of a book on the history of the deaf. The resulting *New York Review of Books* essay into their history and culture was followed two years later by a piece on the Gallaudet University student uprising and the subsequent appointment of the school's first deaf president. The students' protest also resulted in a worldwide sense of pride and community among the deaf.

The work reads like a burst of creative inquiry, which actually took over three years and continues to this day. Sensitive and extensively researched, *Seeing Voices* won much praise for focusing on an often ignored culture and for its insights into all communication. But no subject is free of political wrangling, and while most in the deaf community applauded Sacks' opinions, a few were vehement with their objections to what they felt was, in places, his misguided advocacy.

The issues in Sacks' work are perception and communication, but in his life the overriding crisis is lack of time. He lectures around the world—he has traveled to Italy three times recently, after not having been there for 40 years—and continues to teach and see patients at various New York hospitals. At the same time, he writes prodigiously—millions of words a year just in patient notes, in addition to the essays, books, and ever-present journals that are the focus of those "free moments" in airplanes or hotel rooms and the truly rare weekend at a favorite lakeside country inn.

But more presses on him. He has been interviewed about his own work and for articles in connection with Penny Marshall, Robin Williams, and Robert De Niro. He is published in 14 languages in 20 countries, and even when there is overlap, his books sell in both hardcover and paperback editions.





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His last three books have recently come out on audiocassette editions, "read" by the author. There was the book tour for the *Seeing Voices* paperback, and the movie version of *Awakenings* had already begun to claim critical praise and prizes before it even opened. The demands on his time today will clearly be supplanted by even more demands tomorrow.

As a search for knowledge, he deems his writing "the best thing in the world to me," and flippantly talks of shaving off his beard and hiding for three to six months to write. The result? It might be the Tourette's book; perhaps a work about the link between the pathology of illness and the creativity of the one ailing; or possibly something about which his contemplations have barely begun.

"Neurology and the Soul," his most recent essay in the *The New York Review of Books*, grew from lectures he gave in Italy, through additions and reconsiderations, into a greatly abridged vision of his scientific career and ideas. He wrote, "There has always, seemingly, been a split between science and life, between the apparent poverty of scientific formulation and the manifest richness of phenomenal experience."

As doctor, researcher, and author, Sacks strives to offer a bridge across that divide. No matter how many times he reworks his writing or reconsiders his speech, he will be unable to offer his complete vision. Nevertheless, having worried the idea for himself, Sacks' next aim seems to be to help those he comes in contact with—in person or through his writings—to mine for themselves that "manifest richness."

As would befit a man who is often thanked for the "spirituality" of his books, Sacks is self-effacing, compassionate, gentle, and generous, but intense. He may not be Hollywood's idea of Santa Claus, but off camera, and through his practice and his writings, he has touched millions of people in charming and magical ways equal to that other bearded man. □

*G.K. Oswald is a free-lance book editor based in New York City.*

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