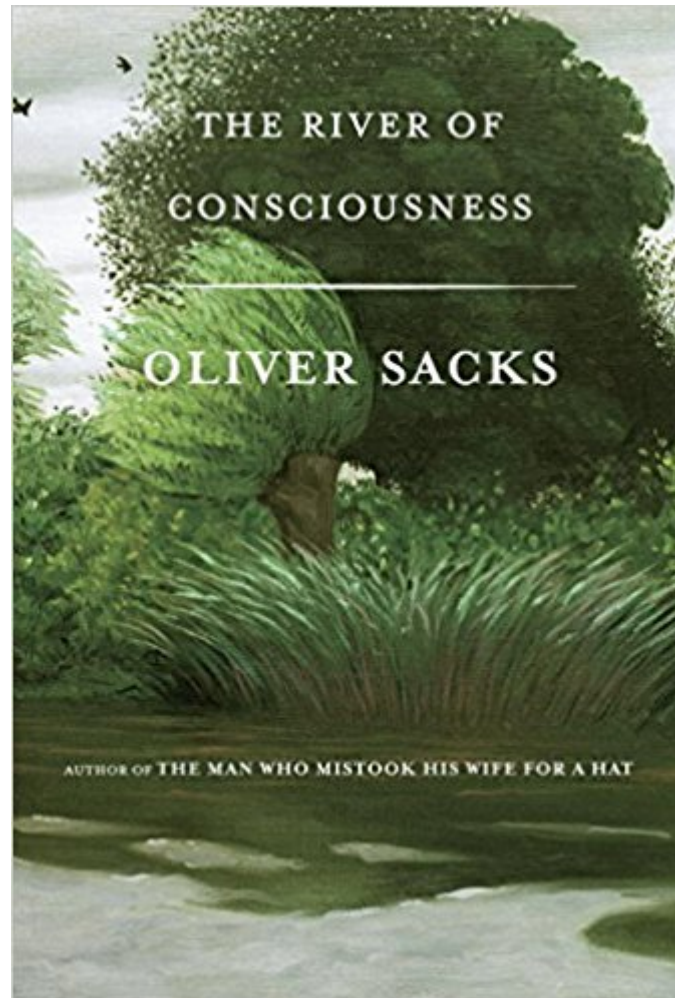




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The River Of Consciousness



Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *Gratitude*, *On the Move*, and *Musicophilia*, a collection of essays that displays Oliver Sacks's passionate engagement with the most compelling and seminal ideas of human endeavor: evolution, creativity, memory, time, consciousness, and experience. Oliver Sacks, a scientist and a storyteller, is beloved by readers for the extraordinary neurological case histories (*Awakenings*, *An Anthropologist on Mars*) in which he introduced and explored many now familiar disorders--autism, Tourette's syndrome, face blindness, savant syndrome. He was also a memoirist who wrote with honesty and humor about the remarkable and strange encounters and experiences that shaped him (*Uncle Tungsten*, *On the Move*, *Gratitude*). Sacks, an Oxford-educated polymath, had a deep familiarity not only with literature and medicine but with botany, animal anatomy, chemistry, the history of science, philosophy, and psychology. *The River of Consciousness* is one of two books Sacks was working on up to his death, and it reveals his ability to make unexpected connections, his sheer joy in knowledge, and his unceasing, timeless project to understand what makes us human.

Book Information

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Knopf (October 24, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0385352565

ISBN-13: 978-0385352567

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 15 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #150,134 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #39 in [Books > Science & Math > Experiments, Instruments & Measurement > Time](#) #84 in [Books > Science & Math > Essays & Commentary](#) #145 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Basic Sciences > Neuroscience](#)

Customer Reviews

“Fans of the late neurologist have another chance to enjoy this erudite, compassionate storyteller, essayist, and memoirist in what may be his final work. This collection of 10 essays, some of which appeared previously in the *New York Review of Books*, was assembled by three colleagues from an outline provided by Sacks two weeks before his death in 2015.” —*A*

collection of dissimilar pieces that reveal the scope of the author's

interests—sometimes challenging, always rewarding. • Kirkus Reviews

OLIVER SACKS was born in 1933 in London and was educated at Queen's College, Oxford. He completed his medical training at San Francisco's Mount Zion Hospital and at UCLA before moving to New York. Familiar to the readers of *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, Dr. Sacks spent more than fifty years working as a neurologist and wrote many books, including *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, *Musicophilia*, and *Hallucinations*, about the strange neurological predicaments and conditions of his patients. The *New York Times* referred to him as "the poet laureate of medicine," and over the years he received many awards, including honors from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Royal College of Physicians. His memoir *On the Move* was published shortly before his death in August 2015.

Oliver Sacks is dead but, fortunately for us, his ideas are not. *River* is the first of two books of posthumously collected essays. These are occasional pieces, but only in the sense that they were crafted for general audiences. The shortest ("Mishearings") is six pages long and none run beyond the high twenties. Every one has something pertinent to say and they are all, all, delightful to read, so good a stylist and so sharp an intellect was Sacks. Another note about Sacks: he wasn't a Pollyanna—he read his observations on his own coming out in London and San Francisco in the 60s, or his chilling account of the aftereffects of a radical treatment to deal with his own, greatly advanced by then liver cancer ("A General Feeling of Disorder")—but he was, even in his own worse moments, sunny and humane. He was an optimist of sorts—a realistic optimist, whose optimism was tempered by his scientific training and skeptic bent. He was generous in acknowledging forebears who influenced him. Thus, he acknowledges Darwin and Freud in paired essays. He puts Darwin's late work on flowers in context. More than the dithering of an ailing, worn out man, it constituted a sustained and radical attack on the enemies of evolution. Darwin produced six books and seventy odd papers on plant life in his later years—Sacks pictures him "lob[bing] great missiles of evidence" at scoffers at his theory of natural selection. As to Freud, Sacks champions his great, but strangely neglected, earlier work as a neurologist, which, he argues, laid the groundwork for the great man's later abandoning of physiology for psychology,

under the assumption that at some much later stage, science would discover a connection between the two. There is also a marvelous essay (Sacks 1997) "Scotoma: Forgetting and Neglect in Science" on forgetting or ignoring scientific discoveries when either no general theory has been discovered into which the discoveries can fit or the phenomenon under study seems irrelevant or insignificant. He cites the obvious cases of the abandoning in the second century AD of Aristarchus' elegantly simple heliocentric world and its replacing by the needlessly complicated Ptolemaic system five centuries later (a replacement that survived unchallenged for fourteen centuries), the decades long ignoring of Gregor Mendel's work on genetics but he also draws on his own work: why was there no scientific literature on the intricate hallucinatory patterns that were present in one out of twenty migraine cases, why so little written about and so few cases observed of patients with Tourette's syndrome, etc., etc.? The key note of these and the other essays in this miraculous volume is the question "why?" If anything happened to Sacks' body or psyche, he asked not just "what" but "why?" "what draw so little attention for so long? When he read William James (along with Freud, Sacks' greatest inspiration), he hypothesized about the nature of perception: how is time perceived by humans, as continuous stream or separated but strung together moments like a cinema film? There is also a wonderful article on the mental activities of worms and plants. This collection will make you think but also wonder. What a joy Sacks was!

Two weeks before his death from cancer, Oliver Sacks outlined the contents of *The River of Consciousness* for the team that would oversee its publication. If you knew you were dying, what would you want to leave behind? It was this question as much as my appreciation of his other works that drew me to this book. In their obituary of Sacks, the *New York Times* said that he wrote about "the Brain's Quirks", and *The River of Consciousness* fits that description well. It is a collection of ten articles, some of which first appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, on subjects like the mental perception of time and speed, the mental lives of plants and worms, the fallibility of memory, and a mental feeling of disorder. The last article, "Scotoma: Forgetting and Neglect in Science", explores instances of significant scientific discoveries that were underappreciated or entirely ignored in their time. The first article, "Darwin and the Meaning of Flowers", is somewhat different in subject but is quintessential Sacks: "I rejoice in the knowledge of my biological uniqueness and my biological antiquity

and my biological kinship with all other forms of life. I trace back this sense of biological meaning to Darwin's epiphany on the meaning of flowers, and to my own intimations of this in a London garden, nearly a lifetime ago. That quote sums up well the style of the articles, which mixes science, case history, and Sacks' unique autobiographical memories of a life wondering why and pursuing knowledge, and is often philosophical in tone. I have read several of Sacks' books and consider them to be aimed at a fairly intelligent and well-educated general audience. Many of these articles seem more academic in tone. If you read a hard-copy edition of the book you might want to keep your phone handy to Google terms Sacks did not bother to define, like "paraphasia" or "proprioception" or to look up a picture of a Necker cube, since I doubt a reader would appreciate Sacks' discussion of the phenomenon fully if they were not already familiar with it. I found myself struggling to understand assertions like "Charcot was convinced that although no anatomical lesions could be demonstrated in patients with hysterical paralyses, there must nonetheless be a 'physiological lesion' located in the same part of the brain where, in an established neurological paralysis, an anatomical lesion would be found." Unless you have a truly impressive breadth of knowledge and vocabulary, prepare to be occasionally challenged. The River of Consciousness, in sum, is a fitting representation of Oliver Sacks: a brilliant mind rejoicing in life and eager to share his joy with the rest of us.

For those familiar with Sacks' 14 previously published works, reading this collection of essays will be like a trip down memory lane...because he references several of them repeatedly. I've never read an entire collection of the author's essays, which made the many references to his other works less enjoyable. His style of writing is interesting, engrossing and easy to follow. Subjects: Darwin's often overlooked botanical work; Speed, varying perceptions of time due to age, medical conditions and fear; Sentience: The Mental Life of Plants and Worms; Freud as a Neurologist, Memory, Mishearings, Homeostasis; Consciousness and Migraines; are fascinating and, in the end, I'm glad to have read the collection. I had not known that Darwin was much interested in plants, nor that Freud was a neurologist and I could relate to several of the essays, especially The Fallibility of Memory (in which he discusses unintentional plagiarism, (p109), "For substantially all ideas are second-hand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources,"), the one about

sentience of plants and worms (this supports Peter Wohlleben's contentions in *The Hidden Life of Trees*), and *The Creative Self*, which I appreciated for the fact of folks who blossom creatively later in life. Best of the book: unusual essay subjects that lead me to think differently about things. Worst: extreme spoilers about George Orwell's 1984 (the ending of the book), the Sherlock Holmes series and too many references to his previous works.

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