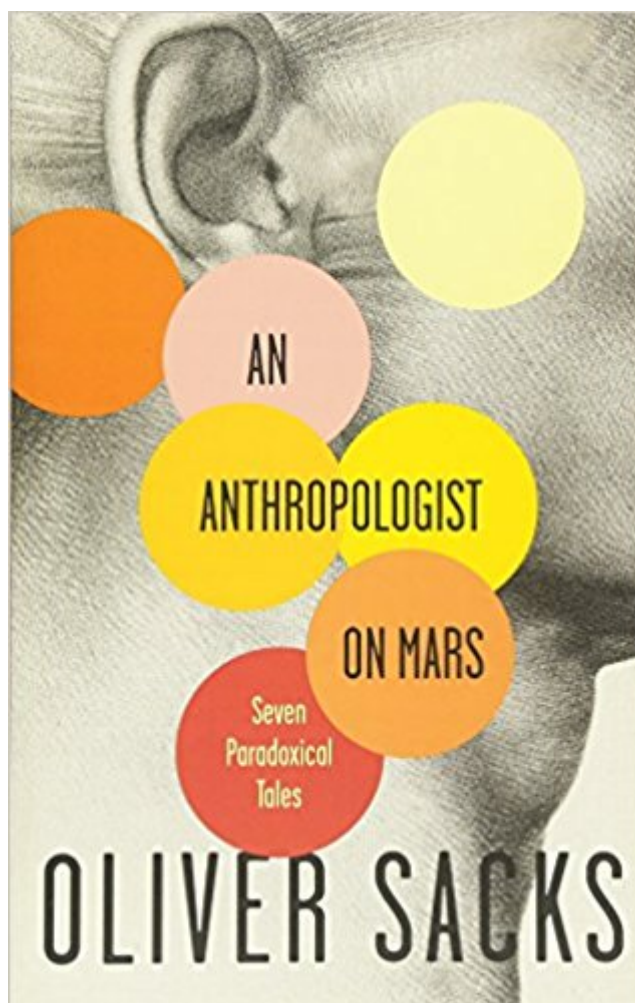


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# An Anthropologist On Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales



## Synopsis

To these seven narratives of neurological disorder Dr. Sacks brings the same humanity, poetic observation, and infectious sense of wonder that are apparent in his bestsellers *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. These men, women, and one extraordinary child emerge as brilliantly adaptive personalities, whose conditions have not so much debilitated them as ushered them into another reality.

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## Customer Reviews

The works of neurologist Oliver Sacks have a special place in the swarm of mind-brain studies. He has done as much as anyone to make nonspecialists aware of how much diversity gets lumped under the heading of "the human mind." The stories in *An Anthropologist on Mars* are medical case reports not unlike the classic tales of Berton Roueché in *The Medical Detectives*. Sacks's stories are of "differently brained" people, and they have the intrinsic human interest that spurred his book *Awakenings* to be re-created as a Robin Williams movie. The title story in *Anthropologist* is that of autistic Temple Grandin, whose own book *Thinking in Pictures* gives her version of how she feels--as unlike other humans as a cow or a Martian. The other minds Sacks describes are equally remarkable: a surgeon with Tourette's syndrome, a painter who loses color vision, a blind man given the ambiguous gift of sight, artists with memories that overwhelm "real life," the autistic artist Stephen Wiltshire, and a man with memory damage for whom it is always 1968. Oliver Sacks is the Carl Sagan or Stephen Jay Gould of his field; his books are true classics of medical writing, of the

breadth of human mentality, and of the inner lives of the disabled. --Mary Ellen Curtin

Neurologist Sacks presents seven case studies of people whose "abnormalities" of brain function offer new insights into conceptions of human personality and consciousness. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

If you liked "the man who mistook his wife for a hat", you will like this book. It has a similar structure with Oliver presenting a case and describing his ideas about what he thinks is going on. Personally, I do not think I would have enjoyed it as much without my kindle to look up words every couple pages. If you are not familiar with Oliver Sacks, you should know that he uses A LOT (I mean a LOT) of footnotes. And it can be disruptive to the flow of reading. Kindle note: The footnotes that come up on the bottom sometimes do not contain the entire thing, so you have to click "go to footnotes" and read it there (it usually goes on to the next page) then go back to the number of the footnote and click it to go back to your spot. Its slightly annoying, but I give the book five stars because Oliver Sacks is a fantastic writer.

Most see a disability as an impairment of normal function; however, some see a disability as a source of creativity and innovation. Being blind means that one does not exist in the perceptual world of sight; on the contrary, that individual may have a greater presence in the perceptual world of touch, taste, smell, and hearing. Therefore, a conclusion may be drawn that a perceptual world is different for each individual, but that perceptual world contributes to the experience of the individual regardless of its constituents. In a few case studies of paradoxical neurological disorders Oliver Sacks illustrates the perceptual words of those who differ from the norm. Oliver Sacks was a British born neurologist that spent the majority of his professional life in the United States. In addition to being a well-known physician, Sacks was also a naturalist and author who wrote many best-selling books; including, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, and *An Anthropologist on Mars*. A common motif that is explored throughout *An Anthropologist on Mars* is sight. The multiple sections of *An Anthropologist on Mars* detail longitudinal case studies, with a majority of them pertains to discrepancies in visual perception; however, all of them pertain to individuals that use their afflictions as a source of creativity. Sight happens to be a very relatable topic of interest to Sacks, since he was documented as having been diagnosed prosopagnosia, or the impairment of facial recognition. As a physician, Oliver Sacks fosters a relationship with the individuals of his case studies that transcends the traditional doctor and patient relationship. In the section *The Last Hippie*,

Sacks visits his patient Greg in an assisted living facility for several years and even indulges Greg and his love of rock music by arranging to take him to a Grateful Dead concert. In *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Sacks outlines each of his case studies with a different section of the novel that are all mutually exclusive from one another. These sections illustrate: a color-blind painter, a blind man who believes he is living in the sixties, a surgeon with Tourette's syndrome, a man who lost his sight in early childhood to regain it in his mid-fifties, an artist who creates his artwork solely from memory, a young artist savant, and an professor with autism with extraordinary empathy for animals. Sacks goes to great lengths to get to know his patients on a personal level and learn as much as they can about how they go through life, oftentimes shadowing them at both work and home to get a sense of both their private and personal lives. In the case of the surgeon with Tourette's syndrome, Oliver Sacks lived his Bennett, the subject of his study, and scrubbed in on several of his scheduled surgeries. The reason Sacks is able to share so much insight on the perceptual worlds of the subjects of his case studies is that he fosters close personal relationships with them. I believe that through several unique case studies, Oliver Sacks is making a statement about perceptual disabilities illustrating the concept that those afflicted by perceptual disorders are not characterized by their disorders, rather that the disorder is characterized by the individual. In the section *An Anthropologist on Mars*, a professor at Colorado State University who is autistic, is interviewed by Sacks and it is clear that she is aware of her strengths and weaknesses. Temple's attitudes seem similar to this: she is very aware (if only intellectually, inferentially) of what she is missing in life, but equally (and directly) aware of her strengths, too- her concentration, her intensity of thought (Sacks 277). Despite Temple's difficulty pertaining to social perception, she is able to live a rich and productive life; ironically, empathizing with other animals. This autistic professor has a doctorate in animal science, but lacks the ability to distinguish tears of joy from tears of sadness; however, she is not defined by her ability to judge social cues but rather by her valued contributions to the scientific community. The scientific community, specifically the medical community, can also benefit from another subject of Sack's case studies. Tourette's is a compromising disorders that affects the ability for individuals to pursue certain professions due to nervous ticks; in opposition to traditional thought, surgeon is not one of those professions. His whole identity at such times is that of a surgeon at work, and his entire psychic and neural organization becomes aligned with this, becomes active, focuses, at ease, un-Tourettic (Sacks 98). Sacks depicts the personal life of Bennet as characterized by extreme ticking; on the contrary, in his profession Bennet is able to perform surgery with the utmost care and precision. Despite Bennet's nervous ticking, he is

able to meet the expectations of his profession where under traditional standards he would be discriminated against. Discrimination is a concept usually given a negative connotation; however, in regards to the visible light spectrum discrimination is essential. In the event of an accidental car crash, Johnathan lost the ability to discriminate color. "Although Mr. I does not deny his loss, and at some level still mourns it, he has come to feel that his vision has become highly refined, privileged, that he sees a world of pure form, uncluttered of color" (Sacks 38). An artist in his mid-fifties that made formerly made a living off of his colored painting was forced to reinvent his style so late in life due to a tragic accident. Despite losing the fundamental aspect of color, Johnathan was able to prosper in a new black and white phase of his life, evidence that deficiencies in perception is not what defines us. The contributions to our perceptual world is different for each individual, but that perceptual world contributes to the experience of the individual regardless of its constituents. Oliver Sacks does a phenomenal job of illustrating the boundaries of the perceptual worlds of the subjects of his case studies. Sacks provides in depth psychological and biological analysis regarding several unique case studies of which demonstrate that those afflicted by perceptual disorders are not characterized by their disorders, rather that the disorder is characterized by the individual.

This book is intended for anyone who is interested in seeing the world through different eyes. You will not learn the cause of any neurological disorders; however, you will experience the world in seven very unique views. The challenges these individuals face during their lifetimes are unimaginable, but their adaptations to survive are even more incredible. Beware of spoilers. Oliver Sacks begins the book by writing about a recent surgery on his right shoulder. Although he is right-handed he wrote the preface with his left hand, as his surgery did not permit use of his right arm for several weeks. The grand theme I noticed this book was adaptation. Rather than seeing patients with disabilities, Oliver Sacks sees opportunities for each individual to improve his or her adaptation skills. *An Anthropologist on Mars* is written in seven sections - each one containing a different story. In these sections, Oliver Sacks describes his journey to understand each patient's life. His approach is very personal, as opposed to most neurologists. He visits his patients in their natural settings, such as in an art studio or at a concert, rather than in a clinical setting. Case #1: "The Case of the Colorblind Painter" tells the story a man who has appreciated color for 56 years, until he was involved in a car accident. From that moment, his vision was in black and white. This change in vision was unbearable to him, so he only watched black and white TV and ate foods which were naturally color gradients of black or white. Years later he saw a sunrise and was

inspired to paint again. Nuclear Sunrise marked the end of Mr. I's severe depression. Case #2: My personal favorite case, "The Last Hippie", described a young Grateful Dead fan. He knew the lyrics of every song and attended a few of their concerts. He became religious shortly after high school and lived in isolation with his fellow Krishnas. He noticed some deterioration in his eyesight, but was pressured to ignore it. A few years later, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor the size of an orange, and could not remember anything after 1970. Sacks became close with him and attempted to understand his mind. After a few talks with Greg, Sacks realized he had no knowledge of current events, such as the President's name. The only thing they connected on was rock music. Sacks took him to a Grateful Dead concert in Madison Square Garden, and observed that he screamed for Pigpen, a deceased band member. Greg was able to sing along with all songs released before 1970, but termed their later music as "futuristic". Sacks played Grateful Dead CD's on the drive to the hospital where Greg resided, to keep the memory alive; however, the next day, Greg could not recount the concert. He mentioned that he went to two Grateful Dead concerts, but when asked if he had seen them in Madison Square Garden, he replied, "No, I've never been to the Garden." Case #3: "A Surgeon's Life" describes the life of Dr. Carl Bennett, a surgeon and pilot with Tourette's. Oliver Sacks observed Dr. Bennett in his home and in the operating room. In the home, Dr. Bennett talked about his obsession with symmetry while constantly straightening his glasses. His tics, involving throwing heavy objects at kitchen appliances, were extreme; however, they completely disappeared in operating rooms and planes. Many people doubted he would become a successful surgeon because of his tics, but Dr. Bennett was never self-conscious about his tics. His confidence certainly played a role in his achievements. Case #4: "To See and Not See" is the sad story of a man who was blind since birth, but had his vision partially restored after surgery. Many people would assume regaining sight is a positive occurrence, and the experiencing the world from then on is intuitive; however, Virgil tells Sacks differently. Although he could detect various colors and shapes, he did not grasp depth and perception. After falling ill for several years, Virgil lost his vision permanently. He called his blindness a "gift". Case #5: "The Landscape of His Dreams" tells the tale of another painter in love with his hometown, Pontito in Tuscany. He was famous for his 3-D photographic memory. He only painted the streets, people, and adventures of Pontito. After suffering many horrors at the age of 31, Franco Magnani decided to permanently live in San Francisco, and never visit Pontito. With this decision came serious illness, which is still not identified. Magnani began having strange dreams about Pontito. He painted hundreds of works containing his dreams, with exquisite detail. Franco did eventually return to Pontito to find a worn down town, but he continued to paint as he remembered it from his childhood. Case #6: "Prodigies"

outlines the life of Stephen, a young British boy who is an autistic artist. He has been described as the "best in Britain". Oliver Sacks befriends Stephen and gets arithmetic lessons. He describes him as a condescending teacher, although Stephen tries very hard to teach Sacks without criticism. Here Sacks characteristics of autism: 50 percent are mute and 95 percent are very limited in life. Stephen has "escaped from these statistics" and become a prodigy. Case #7: "An Anthropologist on Mars", the title of this book, is about a woman named Temple Grandin. She is a professor and humanitarian; she cared about animals more than anything. Grandin is very involved with her work and community, and does not let her autism slow her life. She tells Sacks she sometimes feels like "an anthropologist on Mars" because she has a very different perspective. A few cases captivated me more than others, but all cases were very personal, making them very interesting to read. I enjoyed Oliver Sacks' writing style. It appeals to readers who don't have a scientific background and are just interested in different perspectives on life. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has never quite understood the difficulty in living with colorblindness, amnesia, Tourette's, or autism. Oliver Sacks does a fantastic job of providing insight into each individual's life, insight you would not get from reading traditional books on neurological disorders.

As with many of Sacks' books, this is a collection of Sacks observations and clinical examinations of patients with neurological "disorders". Ranging from Tourette's to severe autism, Sacks' patients run the gamut of neuro-psychological states. As is typical with Sacks, not only does he attempt to document the condition of the individuals he also attempts to document their humanity and personality. That being said, I did find this particular volume to be somewhat more clinical in tone, and occasionally somewhat speculative. However, the book is phenomenally well-documented, with abundant footnotes, endnotes, and bibliography. Hopefully readers of this book will come away with a greater sense of empathy for, and understanding of, individuals living with the documented conditions.

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