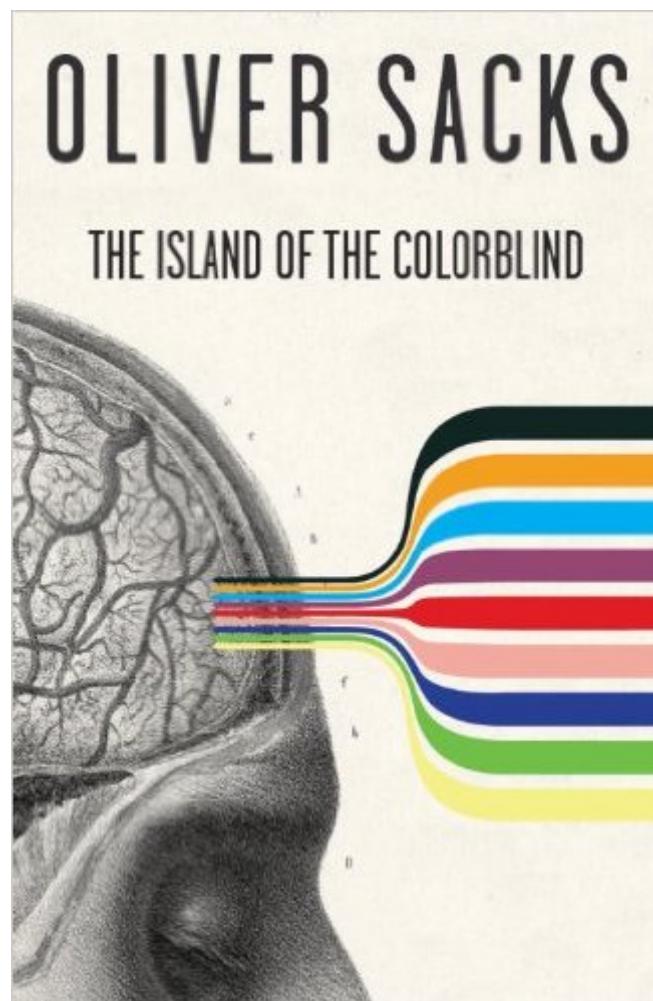


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The Island Of The Colorblind



Synopsis

"An explorer of that most wondrous of islands, the human brain," writes D.M. Thomas in The New York Times Book Review, "Oliver Sacks also loves the oceanic kind of islands." Both kinds figure movingly in this book--part travelogue, part autobiography, part medical mystery story--in which Sacks's journeys to a tiny Pacific atoll and the island of Guam become explorations of the meaning of islands, the genesis of disease, the wonders of botany, the nature of deep geological time, and the complexities of being human.

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Customer Reviews

I adore the quirkiness of Oliver Sacks. Such a multifaceted individual...neurologist, botanist, world-traveller, musically talented, and a bona-fide eccentric of the best kind. I have read nearly all of his books and this is one of the best. My biggest fault with Sacks is that he can drone on about minutiae in the middle of a scintillating story and lose the interest of his readers. I love a good detailed medical story, and I don't have ADD or anything, but I skipped through many pages of "An Anthropologist on Mars", in spite of the great stories in that book. In *this* book he keeps the tale lively and doesn't lapse into stupefying detail. It's full of juicy tidbits from a variety of areas: the history and anthropology of the peoples of the Pacific islands, personal anecdotes of the people he meets, a delightful travelogue, descriptions of beautiful ferns and cycad forests, adventure, mystery...Main story #1: The genetically color-blind people of a small Pacific island. How did they

get to be that way? What is it like to live on a small primitive island in a village of color-blind people? Main story #2: What caused the majority of the population of Guam in the early part of this century to fall ill with a mysterious Parkinsonian-like disease that in some cases wiped out entire families? Oh, and here's the rub...this disease has now almost disappeared. Could it be the cycads? Or not?

I had not read Sacks before and was laid up in the Peninsula hospital in Burlingame. This book was lingering on the shelf at home and I had my wife bring it to me. Soon the beige walls and IV tubes disappeared and I was fighting the humidity of the tropical south pacific. This book reads like a travelogue, a report on achromatopsia (congenital colorblindness), the lytico-bodig (an alzheimers/parkinsons like condition), and the fern-like botanical oddity of cycad trees, among other things. The description of the ruins of Nan Madol was awesome. Where one reviewer found this literary style to be 'rambling,' I found it to be deliciously lazy and ambling. Sacks employs the device of digression with a pace that sort of stones you. Maybe this motif was influenced by the kava Sacks took on Pohnpei. In any event, the book opens by delving into the congenital malady of acute colorblindness known as achromatopsia. Sacks learns of a little micronesian island with a large population of sufferers and follows his nose there with a couple of buddies, one of who is himself achromatopic. Soon we are on a small plane island hoping our way to the tiny atoll called Pingelap. You can virtually feel the tropical breeze reaching up your shorts. The description of achromatopsia is excellent. One almost imagines oneself as colorblind, seeing the world in a new perspective. Indeed, the light sensitive achromatopes here are often employed as night fishermen due to the advantage of their sensitive night vision, to catch flying fish in the phosphorescent waters of the warm Pacific. Sacks' attitude toward pathology is most admirable. He truly sees the afflicted as no more or less than whole people with differences, not partial or dysfunctional people that are not normal. All of the afflicted in this book are examined respectfully and equitably as functional, whole, living organisms instead of sick and inferior. Geniune pathos appears where warranted but never condescendingly. Next we're off to the volcanic island of Pohnpei and the megalithic ruins that remind us these islands "were once the seat of monumental civilizations." More achromatopes are encountered here, along with the acculturational clash between these Pacific island cultures, a collection of population bottlenecks colonized by Southeastern Asians, and Europeans. We visit the rainforest and encounter delicate, endemic, flourescent ferns, and forests of sakau, the local psychopharmacological substance of choice. Then it's off to Guam to study the neurological disorder called the lytico-bodig of mysterious etiology. The island practice of consuming the toxic seeds of

local cycad trees is suspected as a cause of this condition, but it is unclear if it's caused by the eating of paste made from cycad tree seeds or is genetic in origin, as it seems to run in families. Sacks reaches into his experience with encephalitis induced coma patients and L-DOPA treatment in exploring the lytico-bodig. We also meet up with the ecological tsunami of the brown, tree-climbing snake which has consumed all the birds on Guam. The last island is Guam's small neighbor Rota, where islanders take Sacks into the jungle in search of cycads, where we also find the leafless *Psilotum nudum*, whose ancestor was "the first plants to develop a vascular system, to free themselves from the need to live in water." Also visited are giant land crabs with claws powerful enough to open coconuts. Maybe it's because I was trapped in a hospital, but I thoroughly enjoyed this travelogue, investigative science, and wistful reminiscence of the biological and cultural underpinnings that have brought us to this place in the present.

Having thoroughly enjoyed 'The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat' I opted to make this my second Dr. Sacks outing. Once again the good doctor provides compelling, humane, interesting stories about odd physiological conditions and the cultures that foster and contend with them. In multiple episodes that have him traveling to small volcanic islands in Micronesia, the entertaining neurologist studies a group of people who have been born without the ability to see color. Accompanying him is a Nordic specialist in this genetic trait, and one who also happens to share the same condition. As the troupe moves about the islands, they meet and talk with the achromatopes; the natives and Knut evince a feeling of camaraderie. Dr. Sacks plumbs their depths to hear them describe their world in terms of textures and monochrome shades, completely barren of color. Along the way, he experiences a taste of their 'night' lives, the skills they have developed to compensate for their lack of color sight. The next topic in the island hopping takes them to Guam where Sacks sees the patients of an associate who suffer from lytico-bodig, a degenerative condition which causes paralysis [not unlike Dr. Sacks' own neurological patients] and eventual dissolution. Having struck only a certain age bracket on the islands, the mysterious disease has confounded science for almost four decades and has almost killed off its victims. Finally, he treks to Rota to walk among the ancient Cycad plants that have captured his imagination since childhood. This novel appealed to the adventurer's spirit while I was reading it, listening to Dr. Sacks describes the beauty of the island culture and the supremely languid pace of life. Dr. Sacks' writing is not only aesthetically entertaining, but his case studies continue to pique the interest of the intellect. However, one is never so bowled over by the beauty of the surroundings as to forget the real human cases being presented. It is indeed an odd combination, this beauty and tragedy, but one that works very well in

this novel producing an enjoyable read.

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