



## BOOKS

## Between fact and fairy tale

Dr. Oliver Sacks' final collection of essays showcases his talent for turning clinical writing into something much more

BY TRISTAN BRONCA

Over his 40-year career, Dr. Oliver Sacks, the British-American neurologist and writer, brought a unique lens to his work. Some hagiographers would likely trace the beginnings of his trademark approach back to some advice he received from his friend, the poet W.H. Auden. After Dr. Sacks' second book, *Awakenings*, was met with only modest sales, Auden told him: "You're going to have to go beyond the clinical. Be metaphorical, be mythical, be whatever you need."

Dr. Sacks wrote dozens of books, but he is perhaps best known for his neurological case studies demonstrating the many wonders of the mind. Early readers described one of his books, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, whose titular essay is about a man who literally did just that, as "landing oddly between science and fairy tale."

But I'd make a case that his work always contained this peculiar quality. *Awakenings*, a work roundly praised and was later adapted for film, was a story about catatonic patients who were briefly brought back to life by an experimental drug. What would you call that if not a miracle?

Dr. Sacks passed away in 2015 but his final collection of essays, *Everything in Its Place: First Loves and Last Tales* (out April 23) contains these same layers of myth and metaphor for which its beloved author is known. It has three sections: "First Loves," Dr. Sacks' reflections on his blossoming love of museums, swimming, cuttlefish and chemistry; "Clinical Tales," including not only neurological case studies but other essays on, for example, the merits of Victorian mental asylums (really);

and finally "Life Continues," in which he writes about his later life, gardens, and a beautiful brief encounter with an orangutan at the Toronto Zoo.

Some of these essays will be familiar to readers of his work, having appeared previously in other publications, but this is the first time they have been collected. "Clinical Tales" makes up the meat of the book and in it are some fascinating stories. In "Neurological Dreams," Dr. Sacks writes of patients whose dreams presaged the onset of their disease, before they experienced any symptoms. He wrote of his own personal experience following a leg injury. After being unable to use both crutches, he dreamed of picking them up and walking down a hall, and awoke to find he was finally able to do so. It was a dream that solved the very motor-neural problem his brain had faced. Dr. Sacks' stories appear to support beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, who thought dreams were portents of things to come, but he suspected something else: Dreams reflect the states of the body and mind, sometimes indirectly, and sometimes before there is any other evidence. These and other stories in the collection are fascinating and yet, as Dr. Sacks noted, there is virtually nothing on dreams in the neurological literature.

Dr. Sacks had quite a few detractors who felt he took advantage of vulnerable patients by writing about them, but even some of his admirers say he hadn't made any enduring contribution to his field. "At most, a trivial contribution to brain science," according to a 2012 profile in *New York Magazine*. Which is probably true, but not really the point. Something else made his approach special; something that has since been adopted by science writers trying to "go beyond the clinical"—to break the association the word has with adjectives such as "cold" and "detached."

In the *Globe and Mail*, psychiatrist and writer Dr. Norman Doidge, wrote that "We long for thinkers like Dr. Sacks, who remind us that science is about wonder and who, by so doing, hint that perhaps the idea that we are merely matter in motion is just part of the story, but not the whole story." **MP**