

*The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*

By Oliver Sacks

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Genre: Nonfiction

233 pages

## **A Journey into the Strange World of Neurological Aberrations**

By Alyssa W.

The perception of science involves the image of a society of geniuses, attempting to rid the world of its problems; however, this is not the case. Rather, the scientific world is filled with creativity, questions, the hope for discovery, and the fear of failure.

The processes of discovering abnormalities in eccentric disorders of the brain are explored in Oliver Sacks' compilation of neurological case studies entitled *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*. Seemingly effortlessly, Sacks makes the book flow naturally with dialogue, inner thoughts, and most importantly, neurological facts.

Oliver Sacks, a physician and professor, collects a series of abnormal conditions of the brain, both cognitive and psychological, and titles this text after the most famous study about a man who mistook his wife for a hat. Like many of his nonfiction texts, for instance, *Awakenings*, *A Leg to Stand On*, and *Seeing Voices*, Sacks discusses various scientific discoveries pertaining to the field of neuroscience.

As the book opens, Sacks discusses the reasoning and inspiration for writing his book, stating that his research and work with patients is his inspiration. It is clear that Sacks has a passionate stance in the medical world, expressing that “[his] work, [his] life, is all with the

sick—but the sick and their sickness drives [him] to thoughts which, perhaps, [he] might otherwise not have.” The dedication and drive he has to discover and gain knowledge is inspiring and motivating as he is challenged with the emotional task of medical diagnosis when the disorders are rare, and in some cases, unnamed nonexistent disorder. Such was the case in the first, and most important case study.

Dr. P, a musician and teacher, was an odd man due to his faulty system of facial recognition. For most, there is a distinct difference between recognizing a friend’s face, and that of a stranger. But in the case of Dr. P, there was little difference to no difference. His abnormal recognition center often resulted in embarrassing errors, miscalling names of students, and perceiving faces where they did not exist. With such a disorder, he even falsely believed his wife was a hat, and his hat was his wife! With this, Sacks immerses the reader into his thoughts and procedures surrounding the case as he racks his knowledge and experience to diagnose Dr. P. As for the final diagnosis, well, that requires you to read the book to find out for yourself.

Readers are taken through many scenarios in which Sacks investigates the abnormalities of the brain and the effects on the lives of patients. The text does not focus on a single man or woman, but, rather on a myriad of people including Dr. P, Mrs. OC, and Bhagawhandi P, in cases that range from tumors, lesions, or even hallucinations that make everyday life a difficult task to complete. Imagine the days when you are forgetful, have a raging headache, or simply cannot see clearly. Now imagine that scenario for every single day of your life, and you are experiencing the same symptoms as Sack’s patients. However, the biggest problems are not the symptoms, but rather how to diagnose and prevent them in the future.

Despite the serious nature of the conditions, Sacks is able to add a dash of humor and a pinch of sarcasm to lighten up the otherwise somber mood through dialogue and extreme description of each action. The reader feels right at home and in the present based on the meticulous attention to detail. Vivid description shows the creative methodology of scientists and provides insight into the false assumptions of the science world.

As a collection of neurological case studies, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* is educational, yet still humorous and appeals to the emotions. Sympathy, curiosity, and compassion are stimulated as the mild gravity of each case study is revealed. Although the stories are all true, and some of them devastating to the people suffering, the various bits of commentary and vivid accounts of each situation, along with strong recounts of previous actions show the unique style of the author.

Despite being well written, light-hearted and humorous, the entire text is filled with scientific terms and concepts with little continuous plot. Thus, it can be tedious to read through introductions and information about each neurological disorder. Each case, dense with factual details, requires attention if the reader has a desire to retain information. Otherwise, it can be a quick read to skim through the studies.

Oliver Sacks' intended audience were those interested in biology, specifically the fields of behavioral and cognitive neuroscience. Written as an adult, educational text and then transposed into other textbook versions, Sacks educates those interested on the dynamic field of

neuroscience and discovery. The book enables all readers to enter a different world than our own to experience and empathize with the people suffering and overcoming adversity.

Oliver Sacks attributes his success and love for science to his patients who “drive [him] to question, and constantly [his] questions drive him to patients—thus in the stories or studies which follow there is a continual movement from one to the other.” The book acts as an inspiration to young adults, as well as adults who enjoy writing combined with scientific research. Despite the tales of inconceivable conditions, the words float off the page, as the reader becomes immersed into the world of those impaired by neurological aberrations. As the reader flips through the pages, the true tales are disclosed and we all enter a strange world we would never be able to relate to.