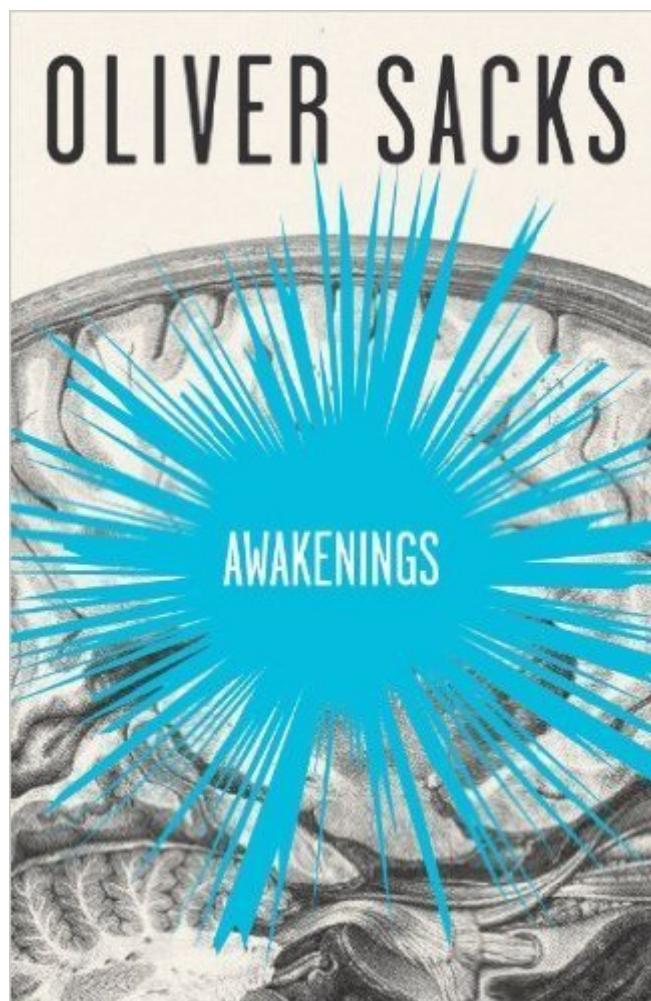


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Awakenings



Synopsis

Awakenings--which inspired the major motion picture--is the remarkable story of a group of patients who contracted sleeping-sickness during the great epidemic just after World War I. Frozen for decades in a trance-like state, these men and women were given up as hopeless until 1969, when Dr. Oliver Sacks gave them the then-new drug L-DOPA, which had an astonishing, explosive, "awakening" effect. Dr. Sacks recounts the moving case histories of his patients, their lives, and the extraordinary transformations which went with their reintroduction to a changed world.

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Customer Reviews

Oliver Sacks has elevated the case history in Awakenings to a literary art form of the highest kind. A neurologist in charge of a ward of people left high and dry by the 1918 flu epidemic which left them in a profound catatonic state, an extreme form of Parkinson's, he experiments on his patients with a new wonder drug L-Dopa which proves a mixed blessing for them. Some are awakened to brilliant life for a brief time, but most of them are doomed either to revert to their original condition or to die (several know they are going to die and announce the fact). Dr. Sacks (who looks quite demonic on the cover photo) uses his medical powers to change lives with a high-handedness that is almost Faustian. The effects are so extraordinary and strange that some of these stories read like the finest fantasy. All the stories are wonderfully strange, proving that human consciousness is many-faceted and that what we label "disease" may be merely a new avenue of perception. Some of these people perform acts not only bizarre but improbable, showing an unusual level of vitality and no ordinary

degree of power. There are people here able to fill whole buckets with their saliva, people who rise from beds they have not left for 30 years with no muscle atrophy, people whose extraperception provide them with a life invisible to others, people who fall into pits unseen by anyone else in a perfectly ordinary hospital hall, unless securely in contact with others, people who can only move "normally" to music, people occupying a strange anachronistic limbo, stuck in the time when they first fell ill, and people who move as slowly as plants grow, whose time sense is distorted so that they seem motionless as statues for hours of a time arrested in mid-movement, though in their own perception, they are completing an activity (brushing their hair) at an ordinary pace. This is Sack's greatest work, a riveting portrait of human possibilities at their most extreme.

If I had never read "The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat" before this book (both by the same author), I would have rated this as a five-star classic. Though as well written as the other work, this book presents his studies in a less humane, and more scientific way. Read the other work and one will sense the noticeable difference in the way that Dr. Sacks approached his patients. When reading the "Awakenings", I felt as a detached bystander looking through the windows of his clinic and observing the patients. When reading "The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat", I was so engaged by Dr. Sacks vivid descriptions of the patients, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, that it was as if I was face-to-face with the patients, and that I was connected in some intrinsic way to each and every one of them. Please please read the other work as well as this one.

Despite flaws, one of the most human books I've readIn 1969, Oliver Sacks gave L-DOPA (a recently released "miracle drug") to scores of his post-encephalitic Parkinson's patients. Most of them woke up - after essentially being in a state of sleep/death for over 30 years. They were the remnants of the great post-WWI epidemic and most spent virtually all their adult lives institutionalised. They were suffering from a specific "flavour" of Parkinsonism - and contrary to popular belief, this disease is not about shaking or tremors but more about the warping of an internal sense of scale (of space and time) which makes movement, thought and being human almost impossible. L-DOPA gave the patients a new lease on life, but at a terrible price.The book chiefly outlines the case histories of individual patients in the course of the treatment. Although occasionally Sacks is repetitive from one patient to another (one of the book's flaws), his attention to detail, his degree of empathy and the vividness with which he describes the patients and their lives are breathtaking. The book gives an amazing impression of what it's like to go from being at a standstill (your mind being taken up by a map of a map of a map of a map...of nothing) to the frenzy

of mania (one patient spoke at 500 words a minute). Awakenings has inspired a Hollywood movie, dozens of plays, documentaries, theatrical productions and more. This is because the story is about so much more than a particular disease. It's about what it means to be human. And it's about the tremendous strength of the patients in the face of a disease that has to be read about to be believed - literally a living hell. Although Sacks seems almost mystical-dualist at times (the other main flaw in my opinion), his purpose is to bring the story to the world and to encourage a more wholistic, empathetic medicine that does not aim to reduce the human to symptoms and side effects, especially when it's completely counterproductive for certain disorders. Very recommended despite some minor flaws.

One of the things I find most striking about Oliver Sacks is his humanity. I find myself instilled with his sense of compassion and understanding by reading his cases. Awakenings succeeds at being accessible to both the layperson and professional, and captivating both. There is a glossary to familiarize yourself with neurological terminology, but again the book isn't overtly prolix; rather a gripping account of neurological maladies. Through Mr. Sack's these patients have received a certain immortality; a sense that their suffering has not been in vain, but tremendously valuable, not only to the advancement of neurology but as testament to the inherent strength and resolve in us all.

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