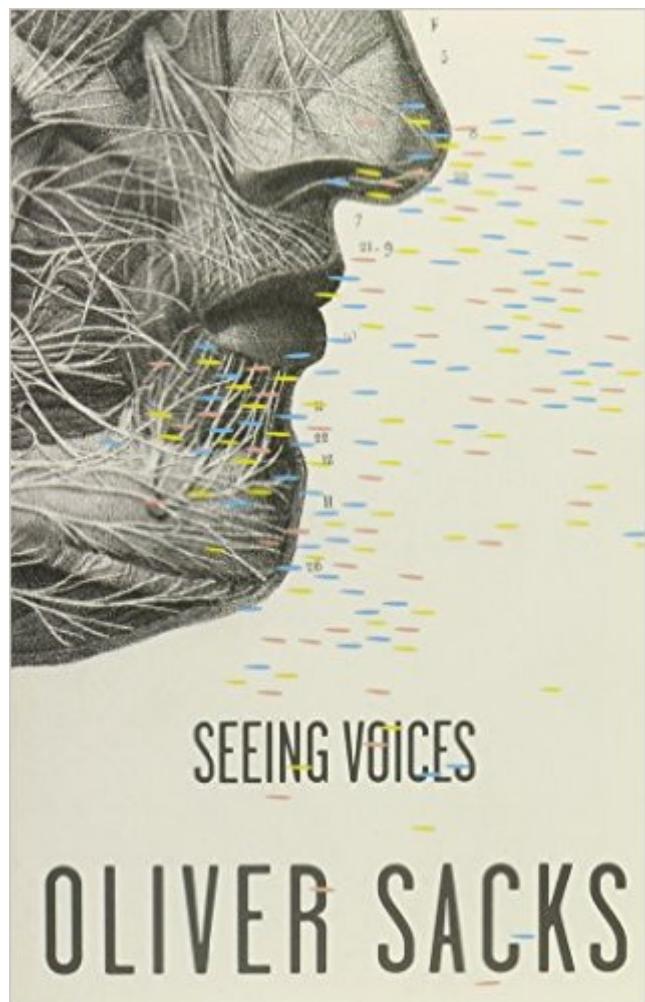


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Seeing Voices



Synopsis

Like The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, this is a fascinating voyage into a strange and wonderful land, a provocative meditation on communication, biology, adaptation, and culture. In Seeing Voices, Oliver Sacks turns his attention to the subject of deafness, and the result is a deeply felt portrait of a minority struggling for recognition and respect--a minority with its own rich, sometimes astonishing, culture and unique visual language, an extraordinary mode of communication that tells us much about the basis of language in hearing people as well. Seeing Voices is, as Studs Terkel has written, "an exquisite, as well as revelatory, work."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this extraordinary study, Dr. Sacks gives the general reader a penetrating insight into the world of the deaf. In his acclaimed "The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat", as a practicing neurologist, he brought his readers into the bizarre world of terrible brain related illnesses, presenting twenty-four cases of individuals afflicted with such diseases as agnosia or prosopagnosia, where "normal" reality is turned inside out, and how some of these diseases are treated and how the patients cope with their condition. In "Seeing Voices", he permits us entry into the silent, at times strange, though culturally rich world of the congenitally and pre-lingually deaf. As someone who has had no previous experience or knowledge in this area, for me this text opened a whole new area of culture and history that is continually growing and developing. Sacks' explores the nature of language, touching upon Noam Chomsky's paradigm-shifting studies, "Syntactic Structures", "Cartesian Linguistics"

and Language of Mind", where he proposes his theory that language is innate, lying dormant until it is made active through human interaction and culture. Sacks connects these theories to the pre-lingual deaf and its implications and manifestations. We are also given a history lesson on the language of SIGN, how it has developed, why it was jettisoned, out of ignorant prejudice, in the late nineteenth century, and its miraculous come back in the twentieth century. Through Sacks' concise and straightforward prose, he connects us to the foreign world of another language not depended on speech, its intricacies and its wonder, and how those of us who have the ability to hear and to verbalize, all too often take language for granted. He also makes clear the sophistication of Sign as a form of legitimate communication, its grammatical foundations and its many nuances, and how, in some ways, it is a superior form of active exchange between people. In chapter three, Sacks tells us about the cultural breakthrough at Gallaudet University in March 1988, where after massive student protest, the school literally closed down, the first ever deaf president of the university was appointed. Sacks witnessed this social changing event first hand, which in the end affected him more than he realized, "I had to see this all for myself before I could be moved from my previous "medical" view of deafness (as a condition, a deficit, that had to be "treated") to a "cultural" view of the deaf as forming a community with a complete language and culture of its own."

(P.129-30)Indeed this entire text has changed my view that deafness is not simply a condition or human deficit, but another way of being in the world. In fact the deaf, with their shared language are forming a world community and culture crossing all barriers. And as Dr. Sacks points out, in this way, "...the deaf have something to teach us." (P. 167)

Seeing Voices gives a clear answer to the question, "Which comes first? Language or thought." The answer, "Language." As Sacks retells stories of the profoundly deaf deprived of "language" into early adulthood, the pattern emerges: Without language there is no abstraction, no ability to achieve love or communication, and all life becomes an inarticulate groaning to have basic needs met immediately. There is no sense of time - life becomes an eternal present. The discovery of language leads to intense sadness as one realizes the lonely prison they have been in. In a long life of reading, this is the first book I immediately re-read on completing it the first time.

I concur with my colleague Kex86, this is an excellent mediation on what it means to think. Sacks acknowledges the substantial Deaf (with a capital 'D') political movement that feels deafness is not a disability, but a completely different way to experience the world. The unsurpassed richness of Sign -- and the thought patterns supported by it -- will cause many a "deafness-impaired" hearing

person to give consideration to this view. As always, Oliver is erudite, compassionate, witty and insightful. A delightful and thought-provoking book -- in ANY language.

Oliver Sacks, the author of Awakenings, presents an overview of deafness and deaf culture. The book is written in three parts. Part 1 covers a history of deafness with the first deaf schools in France. The history examines the controversy between the oral method and sign language. Part 2 extensively looks at sign as a distinct language with its own syntax and grammar. Part 3 is an excellent synopsis of the 1988 uprising at Gallaudet University over the selection of a new president. This book offers a fascinating overview of deaf culture by a talented writer.

I have to admit, I was "forced" to read Sacks' book for my Cognition class in university this past year. However, once I started getting into the book, it actually became a joy to read as Sacks poured his enthusiasm and wonder about the world of the deaf onto every page. I was soon finished and looking forward to the paper I was required to write on the book. However, as noted in many other comments, the long footnotes were incredibly distracting, many of them turning over for three pages, after which it was necessary to go back and re-read everything you'd just finished looking at in the main article. His repetition at the beginning and end of the book also got annoying. On the whole, though, I quite enjoyed Oliver Sacks' book and am interested in reading more of his works now.

I love Oliver Sacks's writing because of his excitement, even his passion that he brings to his subjects. In every book of his that I have read, he has infected me with his sense of amazement at the puzzles of the human brain. Even after studying neurology I learned a lot about deafness and language from this book. However, I found the writing to be redundant and the editing to be poor. When he started to repeat the same ideas over and over again I started wondering whether this book had not originally been just a long article for the New York Review of Books. Moreover, many of the most interesting ideas were relegated to the footnotes and this made for very choppy reading. In short, I will always remain a big fan of Oliver Sacks, but I think his writing has improved a lot since he wrote this and I sure won't miss the footnotes if he leaves them out of his next book.

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