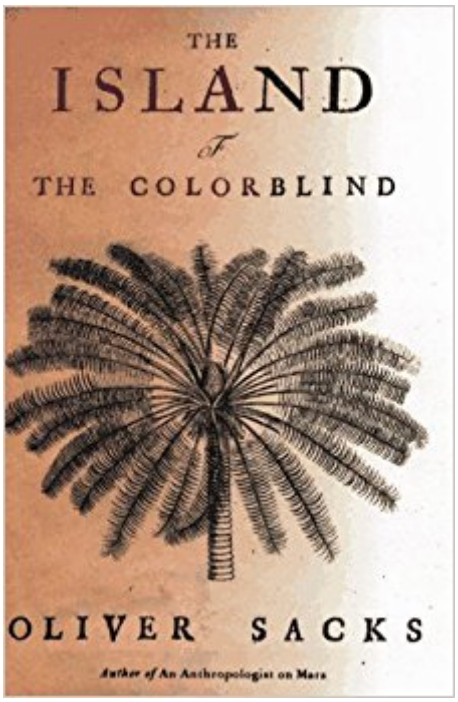
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The Island Of The Colorblind



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Synopsis

Oliver Sacks has always been fascinated by islands--their remoteness, their mystery, above all the unique forms of life they harbor. For him, islands conjure up equally the romance of Melville and Stevenson, the adventure of Magellan and Cook, and the scientific wonder of Darwin and Wallace.Drawn to the tiny Pacific atoll of Pingelap by intriguing reports of an isolated community of islanders born totally color-blind, Sacks finds himself setting up a clinic in a one-room island dispensary, where he listens to these achromatopic islanders describe their colorless world in rich terms of pattern and tone, luminance and shadow. And on Guam, where he goes to investigate the puzzling neurodegenerative paralysis endemic there for a century, he becomes, for a brief time, an island neurologist, making house calls with his colleague John Steele, amid crowing cockerels, cycad jungles, and the remains of a colonial culture.The islands reawaken Sacks' lifelong passion for botany--in particular, for the primitive cycad trees, whose existence dates back to the Paleozoic--and the cycads are the starting point for an intensely personal reflection on the meaning of islands, the dissemination of species, the genesis of disease, and the nature of deep geologic time. Out of an unexpected journey, Sacks has woven an unforgettable narrative which immerses us in the romance of island life, and shares his own compelling vision of the complexities of being human.

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Customer Reviews

In his books An Anthropologist on Mars and The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, Oliver Sacks

details the lives of patients isolated by neurological disorders, shedding light on our common humanity and the ways in which we perceive the world around us. Now he looks at the effects of physical isolation in The Island of the Colorblind. On this journey, he carried with him the intellectual curiousity, kind understanding, and unique vision he has so consistently demonstrated. Drawn to the Micronesian island of Pingelap by reports of a community of people born totally colorblind, Dr. Sacks set up a clinic in a one-room dispensary. There he listened to patients describe their colorless world in terms rich with pattern and tone, luminance and shadow. Then, in Guam, he investigated a puzzling neurodegenerative paralysis, making housecalls amid crowing cockerels, cycad jungles, and the remains of a colonial culture. The experience affords Sacks an opportunity to elaborate on such personal passions as botany and history and to explore the meaning of islands, the dissemination of species, the birth of disease, and the nature of deep geologic time.

Neurologist Sacks, famed for his investigations of unusual medical conditions (The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, etc.), went to Micronesia in 1993 to study firsthand two rare disorders: achromatopsia, or total congenital color blindness, which afflicts more than 5% of the population on the islands of Pingelap and Pohnpei; and lytico-bodig, a fatal, progressive neurodegenerative disease common in Guam, causing paralysis, dementia and catatonia. His total immersion in island life makes this luminous, beautifully written report a wondrous voyage of discovery. Most of those born color-blind never learn to read because they can’t see the teacher’s writing on the board; they can’t work outdoors in bright light, and are unable to see fine detail; yet many achromatopes, Sacks found, develop acute compensatory memory skills and curiosity and thus live in a world of heightened reality. On Guam he visited families tragically scarred by lytico-bodig, a disease blamed by some scientists on the natives’ ingestion of cycad trees’ toxic seeds; other researchers suspect that the cause can be traced to a virus, diet as a whole or genetics. With aplomb, Sacks wears many hats?cultural anthropologist, naturalist, explorer, ethnographer, neuroscientist?as he delves into the islands’ volcanic origins, their archeological wonders (e.g., Pohnpei’s megalithic ruins, remnants of a monumental civilization), their unique flora and fauna (nocturnal tree-climbing snakes, iridescent ferns, dwarf forests), their bloody colonial history under Spanish and German rule, their still active indigenous myths. As a travel writer, Sacks ranks with Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin. As an investigator of the mind’s mysteries, he is in a class by himself. Illustrated with drawings, maps. 150,000 first printing; Literary Guild selection; Random House audio. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Oliver Sacks was a sensitive writer and a polymath. The Island of the Colorblind is filled with history and science concerning the superficially unrelated topics of neurology and botany. The first part of this book focuses largely on inherited blindness among a tiny Pacific population, and the second part examines a strange illness afflicting the older residents of Guam that in some patients looks like ALS and in others looks like parkinsonism. Some researchers have speculated that the disease may be the result of poisoning brought on by the consumption of cycad seeds, and it so happens that Oliver Sacks harbored a lifelong fascination with cycads and other "living fossil" plants.On one island that Sacks visited, there are many bars serving, not alcohol, but a bordeerline-hallucinogenic fluid, and, in the interest of science and discovery, he drank a great deal in one session. (You have to love Oliver Sacks.)The huge overflow of information in the book makes for a huge section of endnotes. I finally decided, after frustratingly leafing back and forth, to simply blast ahead with the body of the book and then read the endnotes as just another chapter. It worked; the endnotes really do stand on their own.

If you are a fan of Oliver Sacks, you will thoroughly enjoy this book. I was first introduced to Dr. Sacks through the film Awakenings, featuring Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro. It was this movie with encouraged me to further investigate and purchase the book by the same title. If you have not read Awakenings, I would highly recommend it, and if you have, I would definitely recommend this as the next book for your collection. The first half of the book deals with two islands that have an extremely high number of colorblind people residing there. Your eyes will be opened to what you assumed you knew about colorblind people, and what the truth actually is.The second half of the book deals with Guam, where scores of people are suffering from a debilitating illness with symptoms that mimic the vast and varied symptoms of the post-encephalitis patients we saw in Awakenings. You will discover the mystery surrounding this disease, and the overwhelming task of trying to find a cause of this illness.One of my favorite things about Dr. Oliver Sacks is that when he writes about these illnesses and patients, he is not treated them as just another case. After you read about each individual person, as we did in Awakenings, you feel as though you actually knew the person an experience a portion of the hurt the family feels. Dr. Sacks writes each case with love, and you can feel that he actually loves and cares for these people. Experience an amazing journey on some of the vast illnesses that affect the human brain and thus the rest of the body.

If you are an Oliver Sacks fan-girl or -boy, you will probably enjoy this. But it is an odd book. There actually *is* no "island of the colorblind, though there are a couple of places where there are more

totally colorblind people than usual. And the second half of the book is about Sacks passion for cycads, trees somewhat like palm trees. Yeah, Dr. Sacks has a number of odd passions. His writing is, what shall I say....discursive? Undisciplined? Free-flowing? He has so many ideas, so many experiences, and he has a passion to share them all. If that sounds like a ride you want to take, this book is for you. Me, I liked it.

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 was interested to know more about achromatopsia which is a very rare genetic eye disease. I found the book and read it. But, at the end of the book I found myself to be so knowledgeable about so many other issues related to the islands in Pacific Ocean and their indigenes people that I never knew existed. At the end, it is a fascinating book and that it is written and crafted by a great writer

Every book by Dr. Sacks is a revelation and an utter delight to read. This is no exception.

As always, Oliver Sacks is very interesting. This book combined his usual empathetic neurological expeditions with travel, history of Micronesia and botany. I found it to be one of his best that I have read and I have read most of his books.

Oliver Sacks finds the most interesting stories - one is the effects of eating cycad palm flour - creating Parkinson's like symptoms over time and the other is about an island where everyone is colorblind because they are related to the king who is colorblind (after the small island's population is devastated by a natural disaster)

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