



An Anthropologist on Mars

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Oliver Sacks, who is a practicing neurologist and academic, is also the author of five collections of case studies so empathetically presented and coherently written that they have appeared in such outlets as THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS and THE NEW YORKER. To be sure, these case studies—in reality, essays—contain a good bit of scientific analysis, but Sacks’s footnotes are as likely to make literary references as they are to refer to scientific treatises.

“An Anthropologist on Mars” is the seventh, and last, essay in Sacks’s collection. Each of the seven is devoted to a single individual, each of whom is suffering from a different neurological malady. Perhaps none of them has made as complete a transition into the everyday world as Temple Grandin, a successful academic and businesswoman who is also autistic, but Sacks demonstrates how each has used his or her disorder to advantage. As Sacks’s subtitle indicates, these are paradoxical tales. The conundrum presented by such extreme cases as Temple Grandin becomes, in Sacks’s adept rendering, a parable of the whole human condition. In order to realize fully the common humanity he shares with the victims of neurological chance who are his subjects, Sacks has himself sometimes attempted through physical means to enter their worlds. Sacks’s efforts to bridge the gap between the normal and the abnormal and between himself and his subjects is not new. Few, however, have been able to marshal the compassion and deep understanding Sacks conveys in writing about the extraordinariness—even the advantages—inherent in the lives of those distinguished by disorders of the mind.

Sources for Further Study

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