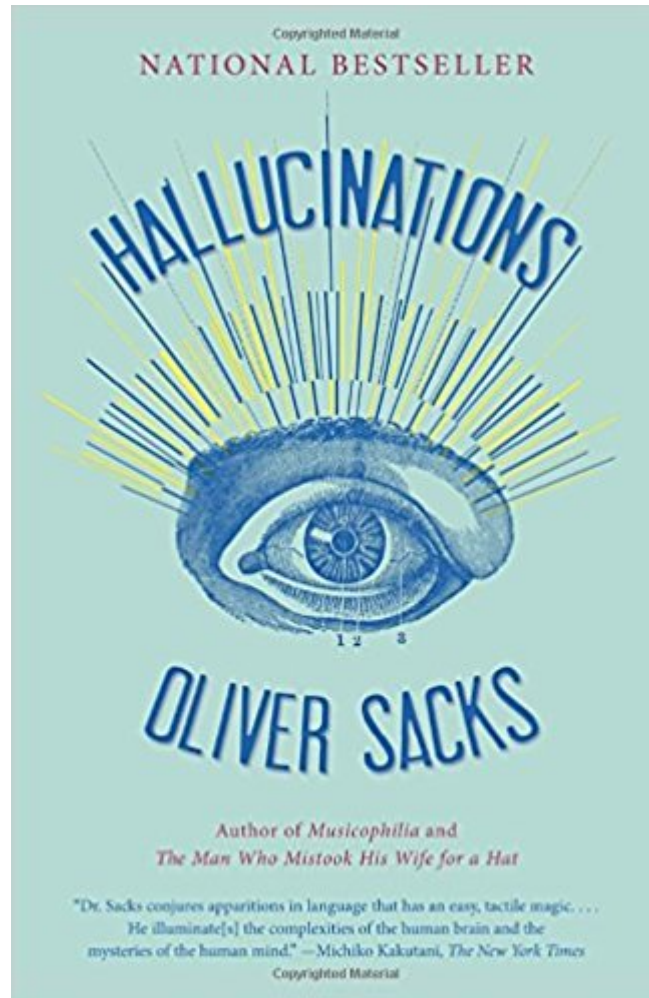




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Hallucinations



Synopsis

To many people, hallucinations imply madness, but in fact they are a common part of the human experience. These sensory distortions range from the shimmering zigzags of a visual migraine to powerful visions brought on by fever, injuries, drugs, sensory deprivation, exhaustion, or even grief. Hallucinations doubtless lie behind many mythological traditions, literary inventions, and religious epiphanies. Drawing on his own experiences, a wealth of clinical cases from among his patients, and famous historical examples ranging from Dostoevsky to Lewis Carroll, the legendary neurologist Oliver Sacks investigates the mystery of these sensory deceptions: what they say about the working of our brains, how they have influenced our folklore and culture, and why the potential for hallucination is present in us all.

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Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, November 2012: A familiar song on mental repeat, a shadowy movement in an empty house--many of us experience minor visual and auditory hallucinations and think nothing of it. Neurologist and professor Oliver Sacks concerns himself with those for whom such breaks with reality are acute and life altering. Dr. Sacks's latest book--one of the most compelling in his fascinating oeuvre--centers on Charles Bonnet syndrome, a condition characterized by intricate visual hallucinations. Weaving together case studies with anecdotes from his own past and accessible medical explanations, Dr. Sacks introduces us to Sharon, whose vision is invaded by Kermit the Frog; Gertie, whose phantasmal gentleman caller visits each evening,

bearing gifts; and a host of other patients whose experiences elicit both sympathy and self-reflection. (The good doctor also shares his own experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, to comic and insightful effect.) Hallucinations is Oliver Sacks at his best: as learned, introspective, and approachable as we could possibly imagine. --Mia Lipman

The Neurological and the Divine: An Interview with Oliver Sacks

The following is an excerpt from a Q&A with Dr. Sacks published on Omnivoracious, the Books blog. Click [here](#) to read the full interview.

Mia Lipman: In Hallucinations, you mention that your childhood migraines are one of the reasons you became a neurologist. How did they help shape your path?

Dr. Sacks: My experiences go back to my first memories of when I was three or four, suddenly seeing a brilliant zigzag which seemed to be vibrating, then enlarged and covered everything to one side. This has happened innumerable times since, but that first time was very terrifying.

—Â|| know I was in the garden, and part of the garden wall seemed to disappear, and I asked my mother about it. She too had classical migraines, so she explained what it was about and said that it was benign and it would only last a few minutes, and I'd be none the worse. So though I'm not in love with the attacks, it's nice to know that one can live with this quite well. So that early experience made you curious about why this was happening to you? Indeed, and there were other experiences. Sometimes it was just color, perhaps in one half of the visual field, or things would be frozen and I couldn't see any movement. So I think this gave me a very early feeling that it's only the privilege of a normal brain which allows us to see the way we do—

—Â •and that what seems to be a simple vision in fact must have dozens of different components, and any one of these can go down. So it was a learning experience for me as well.

Speaking of learning experiences, you talk in the book about a period in your 30s when you did a lot of hallucinogenic drugs.

—Â • Ah, I thought that would come up. [Laughing.] Of course, it's the best part! I especially liked your description of the results as "a mix of the neurological and the divine." What did this self-experimentation teach you about your field, as well as personally? I can't conceal that my motives were sort of mixed, but these were learning experiences as well as recreational ones, and occasionally terrifying ones. The gain, I think, [is that] it's a way of revealing various capacities and incapacities in the brain, including, perhaps, mystical ones.

—Â|| quote William James, who, after taking nitrous oxide, said that it showed him there were many forms of consciousness other than rational consciousness, and that these seem to be uncovered one by one. And that's quite an experience. I do not recommend it to anybody, and I hope my writing about these things is not seen as a recommendation. I think I'm very lucky to have survived them, which several of my friends and contemporaries didn't.

> Continue reading "The Neurological and the Divine: An Interview with Oliver Sacks"

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Many of the observations in Sacks's book are couched so modestly and gently that they seem not reductive but transcendent, the dependence of belief on biology representing one more example of the remarkable grace to be found in the operations of the human mind. —Jenny Davidson

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Mmm... Somehow this book left me with a bittersweet sensation after finishing it. I found this book filled with some good information and case histories about hallucinations, but unfortunately, Dr. Sacks doesn't get deep into the neural basis of the problem. While I was reading it, I found that most of the times Dr. Sacks would make some superficial speculations about the problem, and then he would switch to another case history, over and over again. At some parts, though, reading results very difficult since the book turns out to be repetitive. Anyway, if you're interested in hallucinations and you're ok with reading case histories, over and over again, you still can land on this book. Though I think there must be better ones. I wish I could give it 3 1/2 stars.

Dr Sacks' book is specifically delineating the circumstances in which hallucinations are experienced outside of psychosis and dreaming. I found the neurological specifications of the phenomena to be fascinating. Dr. Sacks has a wonderful facility in the phrasing of esoteric neurological symptoms and malfunction in such a way that is accessible to the non-medical reader. I had two issues with this book. The first has been noted in a review already posted. I find the long description of the hallucinations to be heavy reading after a while. I agree it is a bit like listening to another person's dreams, which tend to lack the immediacy to the listener. I especially found it tedious to review the author's experiences with drugs that induce hallucinations. This is a subject very heavily covered in extant literature. Second, he allows only cursory credence to the concept that any spiritual experiences may be caused by anything other than organic function. He notes that James had allowed that practitioners of spiritualism may believe their experiences to be true. While I understand that this is the premise of the book, still it lacks some depth of possibility. Given these caveats, I think this is a worthwhile reading experience. Certainly this book expands the world of hallucinations outside of psychotic cause. Certainly this is important for those people who experience these phenomena to know possible medical issue both for their own peace of mind and for the motivation to seek help. Therefore I would recommend this book.

Many people think hallucinations only happen to people with schizophrenia and other psychological

disorders. In truth, hallucinations occur in 'healthy' minds, as well. With this book, Oliver Sacks provides data on diseases that can cause hallucinations, such as Parkinson's and migraines. He also talks about a variety of other causes, such as sleep deprivation and medications. Through it all, he shares anecdotes from history, his patients, and his own life. I found the subject fascinating. Sacks, a neurologist, has spent much of his life researching the mind and, in these pages, he shares some of what he has learned along the way. The language used is easy to understand. Medical terms are clarified and explained. The average person should have no problem reading this. While I did find the examples interesting, after a while it all became a bit repetitive. Information was often repeated in various chapters. And the book didn't have much of a conclusion. Despite that, I'd recommend the book to everyone. What you'll learn is well worth the time you'll spend reading.

It's an index of many ways humans can hallucinate. It's not an expiation of how humans hallucinate. It's assessable. It can be opened to any page to find something amazing. Oliver Sacks' commitment to understanding what it is to be human using the tools of rationality astounds me.

Hallucinations is the newest book by Oliver Sacks, the award winning author of scientific nonfiction books such as *Awakenings* and *The Man who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. It describes different forms of hallucinations and their causes. One of this book's greatest strengths is that Sacks writes for the average person, not just scientists. Instead of filling the book with technical phrases and dry science, he uses common language and many detailed examples to explain the topics he covers in an easy to understand way. He does not overcomplicate topics with too much detail. He only presents the necessary information to understand what he is talking about and then usually provides a real life example of the symptoms. He calls this style "clinical anecdotes." Most of his examples come from his patients, but he also uses personal examples of his experiences with a variety of hallucinogenic drugs and the visual hallucinations associated with his right eye blindness and migraines. The book is very well written and is a definite recommendation to any one with an interest in the topic of hallucinations. Every chapter in the book covers a different type of hallucination. Both natural and induced forms of hallucination are covered. The book begins with Charles Bonnet Syndrome, a relatively common condition where mentally healthy individuals with vision loss experience complex visual hallucinations, especially of people.. Next he discusses sensory deprivation, where our brains seem to overcompensate and produce simple hallucinations. Sacks then moves on to olfactory and auditory hallucinations which can be caused by the loss of

the senses of smell and hearing, respectively. These hallucinations can also be experienced when confronted with a place or object strongly associated with the smell or sound, such as Sacks' example of returning to his childhood home and smelling wine in the cabinet it where it had been kept many years earlier. The next topic is hallucinations related to Parkinson's. Patients treated with the drug L-dopa frequently experience vivid dreams and visual hallucinations. Next, in what is by far the most interesting chapter in the book, Sacks gives accounts of hallucinogenic drugs including hashish, mescaline, LSD, and cannabis. Sacks gives first person examples of many of these types of drugs from his time in California in the 60's. One example is a story about hallucinating an entire visit by some friends after taking the synthetic drug Artane. The visit included a full, everyday conversation and the opening and closing of doors. He next deals with the simple hallucinations present in migraine patients, which are usually just patterns and lights. The next chapter deals with epilepsy. During epileptic attacks, patients can experience complex visual and auditory hallucinations. Some even hypothesize that this could explain the visions received by Joan of Arc. He then describes cases of simple hallucinations when a person is near sleep. For example, you might believe you hear a phone ringing just before falling asleep. He also goes on to describe vivid dreams and nightmares. The book finishes with descriptions of hallucinations of self, including out of body experiences and phantom limbs. According to Sacks, one of the most important things to understand about hallucinations is that they do not mean that a person is insane. Many cases of hallucinations are simply caused by the brain trying to overcompensate for a lost or diminished sense. Hallucinations are much more common than originally thought because they often go unreported by people who fear being labeled as crazy. For example, it is theorized that close to twenty percent of people with vision loss experience Charles Bonnet Syndrome but few people, including doctors and nurses, have heard of it. Odds are most people will experience some form of hallucination in their life. By understanding this, hallucinations, and those that suffer from them, can shed some of the stigmatization they currently receive and replace it with support and information that could really help them. Sacks wrote a very informative and easy to understand book. If you have enjoyed his previous books or just want to learn more about an interesting topic I highly recommend picking this book up. I am giving the book four stars instead of five because, in my opinion, some sections could get a little stretched out and boring, though that probably had more to do with the topics in those sections being less interesting to me than those surrounding them. For example, the auditory and olfactory hallucinations chapters are nowhere near as interesting as the chapters on Charles Bonnet Syndrome, Epilepsy, dreams and nightmares, or especially the excellent chapter on hallucinogenic drugs.

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