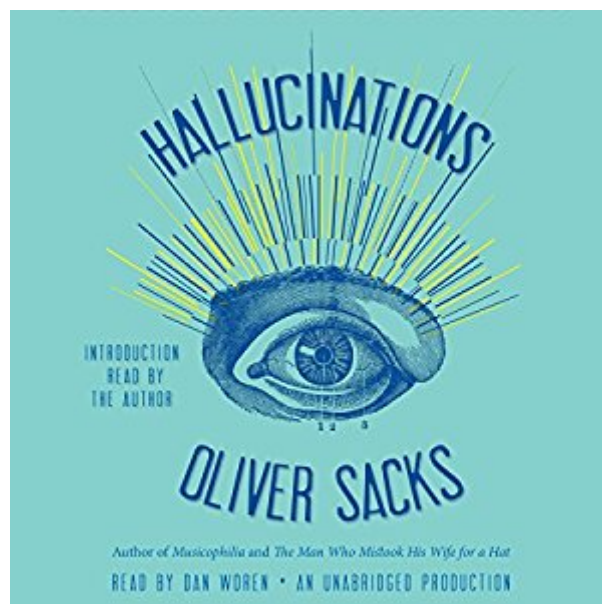


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Hallucinations



Synopsis

Have you ever seen something that wasn't really there? Heard someone call your name in an empty house? Sensed someone following you and turned around to find nothing? Hallucinations don't belong wholly to the insane. Much more commonly, they are linked to sensory deprivation, intoxication, illness, or injury. People with migraines may see shimmering arcs of light or tiny, Lilliputian figures of animals and people. People with failing eyesight, paradoxically, may become immersed in a hallucinatory visual world. Hallucinations can be brought on by a simple fever or even the act of waking or falling asleep, when people have visions ranging from luminous blobs of color to beautifully detailed faces or terrifying ogres. Those who are bereaved may receive comforting "visits" from the departed. In some conditions, hallucinations can lead to religious epiphanies or even the feeling of leaving one's own body. Humans have always sought such life-changing visions, and for thousands of years have used hallucinogenic compounds to achieve them. As a young doctor in California in the 1960s, Oliver Sacks had both a personal and a professional interest in psychedelics. These, along with his early migraine experiences, launched a lifelong investigation into the varieties of hallucinatory experience. Here, with his usual elegance, curiosity, and compassion, Dr. Sacks weaves together stories of his patients and of his own mind-altering experiences to illuminate what hallucinations tell us about the organization and structure of our brains, how they have influenced every culture's folklore and art, and why the potential for hallucination is present in us all, a vital part of the human condition.

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Customer Reviews

You're sitting in a darkened room, or perhaps lying in bed. Suddenly, you hear your name being spoken. Perhaps it's a familiar voice. You start, you may even get up- but more likely you just

realize there's no one there. You must have imagined it. Has this ever happened to you? It would be odd if it hadn't. Most people have had this experience, and experiences like it. If and when it happened to you, your first thought was probably "I must have imagined it." You might also have thought about telling someone else about it- but then thought better of it. Normal people don't have hallucinations, right? That's something that happens to crazy people. But hallucinations are a near-universal phenomenon, and they're not limited only to those people suffering from mental disorders. In fact, the hallucinations of schizophrenics, which are usually auditory in nature, make up a very small subset of the range of hallucinations that people experience. There are a great many conditions, both internal and external, that can result in hallucinations in all modalities- sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. There are kinesthetic hallucinations that affect a person's perception of the position of their body, or pain, or the passage of time. For every perception, there are hallucinations. Many, if not most, people don't report hallucination for fear of being labeled crazy. There's a very common, yet underreported condition called Charles Bonnet Syndrome, or CBS for short, that commonly afflicts older people who suffer from some visual impairment. The impairment can be peripheral in nature, like macular degeneration, or central, as in a stroke affecting visual cortex or thalamus; the important thing is that all or part of the visual field is damaged, or missing.

"Hallucinations" is a fascinating and eminently readable neurological parade covering all varieties of hallucinations. Dr. Sacks calls it a "natural history or anthology of hallucinations," a perfectly apt description. It turns out that hallucinations are not that uncommon. In fact, I'd guess that most readers drawn to these pages will find themselves exclaiming at one point or another, "Yeah, that's happened to me, too!" But don't get me wrong; this book is not filled with the commonplace. On the contrary, anyone who loves reading Oliver Sacks knows that his books are filled with extraordinary and totally off-the-wall case histories. This book does not disappoint...at times it is jaw-dropping surreal. The work is divided into an introduction and fifteen chapters. Each chapter covers a different broad category of hallucination and each category is based on a specific neurological disorder or cognitive deficit. Sacks believes that the only way to understand hallucinations is to read about the first-hand experiences of those that suffer from them. Thus, the book is made up almost entirely of first-hand accounts. Whenever possible, Dr. Sacks follows each individual case description with information about the impact these hallucinations have had on that person's life. Perhaps one third of these first hand examples come from Sacks' professional clinical case studies. Another approximate fifteen percent or more comes from Dr. Sacks' own unique personal experience (i.e., his experiences having hallucinations due to his migraine disorder or from experimenting with a

large variety of hallucinogenic drugs and other substances when he was a young man). The balance comes from general historical or medical primary source materials.

Oliver Sacks has crossed a mystical line with *Hallucinations* and given us a journey into the human brain in all its misfiring, surreal glory. Sacks has a knack for writing about the *different*, the *unusual* as part of the normal human experience; his *Hallucinations* can be amazing, frightening and even ugly, but they are not in any way inhuman. Hallucinations are a part of who we are and who we're supposed to be. They've always been there...I'm aphasic. I had a brain injury at age 18. Before that, I saw every Word, every sentence, every paragraph I spoke or I heard spoken or sung, pass before my eyes in Times Roman font. Because my brother is schizophrenic, I told no one. What would people think of me and my Words? But seeing the Words gave me comfort from the time I was three. When aphasia ripped my "hallucinations" out of my brain, I thought would die of loneliness. (I very nearly did.) It took me six years to relearn how to read again; but the Words didn't come home to my eyes. I was forced to see the world as it *is*, and I didn't like it very much. Twenty years out from injury, while listening to Ian Hunter's haunting slow burn of "All of the Good Ones Are Taken," I saw a fleeting phrase superimposed upon the windshield. And then, I saw another. And another. My "hallucinations" were Home; and I was finally again whole. And here's where you say, "But she LOOKS so normal..." Grin. The beauty of *Hallucinations* is that Sacks writes eloquently and draws one into the world of the hallucinatory experience. He wants us to understand the reasons behind the existence of these visions, these phantoms of the brain. There are some people who understand their hallucinations and function well while having them; others are frightened and cannot discern hallucination from reality.

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