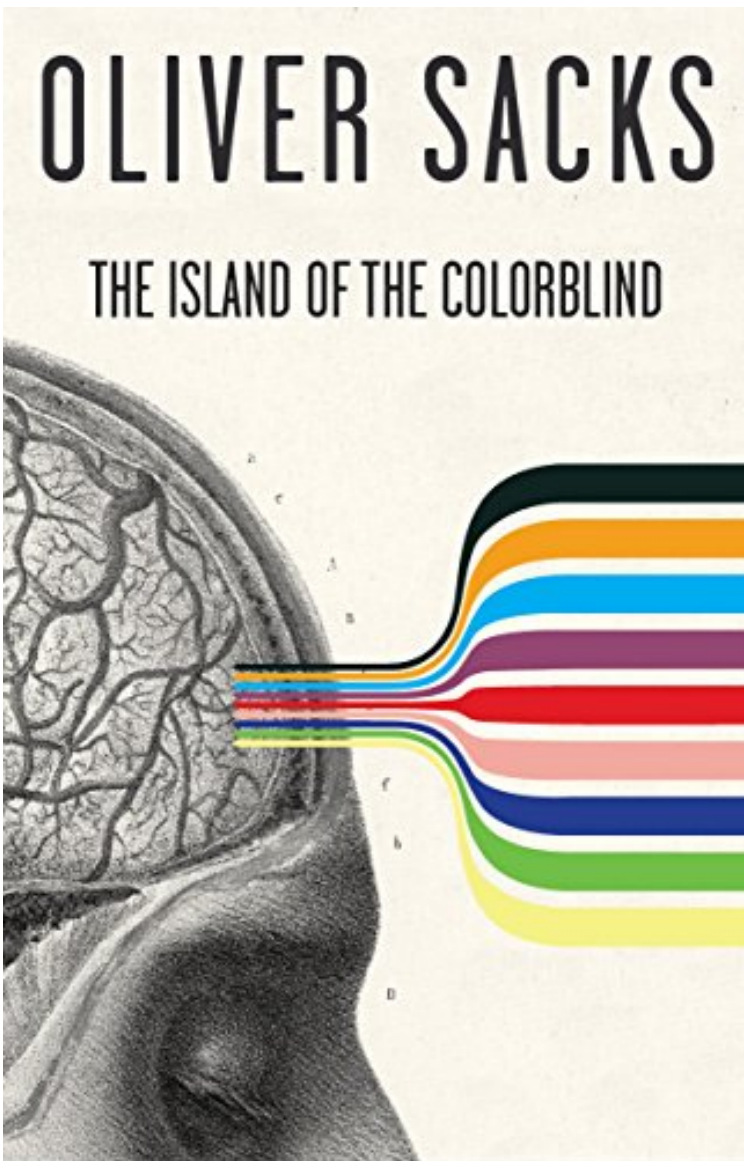


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The Island of the Colorblind



Par Oliver Sacks
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOliver 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's 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.

From the Hardcover edition.

Islands have always fascinated me; perhaps they fascinate everyone. The first summer holiday I remember -- I was just three years old -- was a visit to the Isle of Wight. There are only fragments in memory -- the cliffs of many-colored sands, the wonder of the sea, which I was seeing for the first time: its calmness, its gentle swell, its warmth, entranced me; its roughness, when the wind rose, terrified me. My father told me that he had won a race swimming round the Isle of Wight before I was born, and this made me think of him as a giant, a hero. Stories of islands, and seas, and ships and mariners entered my consciousness very early -- my mother would tell me about Captain Cook, about Magellan and Tasman and Dampier and Bougainville, and all the islands and peoples they had discovered, and she would point them out to me on the globe. Islands were special places, remote and mysterious, intensely attractive, yet frightening too. I remember being terrified by a children's encyclopedia with a picture of the great blind statues of Easter Island looking out to sea, as I read that the Islanders had lost the power to sail away from the island and were totally cut off from the rest of humanity, doomed to die in utter isolation. I read about castaways, desert islands, prison islands, leper islands. I adored *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle's splendid yarn about an isolated South American plateau full of dinosaurs and Jurassic lifeforms -- in effect, an island marooned in time (I knew the book virtually by heart, and dreamed of growing up to be another Professor Challenger.) I was very impressionable and readily made other people's imaginings my own. H.G. Wells was particularly potent--all desert islands, for me, became his Aepyornis Island or, in a nightmare mode, the island of Dr. Moreau. Later, when I came to read Herman Melville and Robert Louis Stevenson, the real and the imaginary fused in my mind. Did the Marquesas actually exist? Were Omoo and Typee actual adventures? I felt this uncertainty most especially about the Galapagos, for long before I read Darwin, I knew of them as the "evilly enchanted" isles of Melville's *Encantadas*. Later still, factual and scientific accounts began to dominate my reading -- Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, Wallace's *Malay Archipelago*, and my favorite, Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* (I loved especially his description of the six thousand year old dragon tree on Tenerife) -- and now the sense of the romantic, the mythical, the mysterious, became subordinated to the passion of scientific curiosity. For islands were, so to speak, experiments of nature, places blessed or cursed by geographic singularity to harbor unique forms of life -- the aye-ayes and pottos, the lorises and lemurs of Madagascar; the great tortoises of the Galapagos; the giant flightless birds of New Zealand -- all singular species or genera which had taken a separate evolutionary path in their isolated habitats. And I was strangely pleased by a phrase in one of Darwin's diaries, written after he had seen a kangaroo in Australia and found this so extraordinary and alien that he wondered if it did not represent a second creation. As a child I had visual migraines, where I would have not only the classical scintillations and alterations of the visual fields, but alterations in the sense of color too, which might weaken or entirely disappear for a few minutes. This experience frightened me, but tantalized me too, and made me wonder what it would be like to live in a completely colorless world, not just for a few minutes, but permanently. It was not until many years later that I got an answer, at least a partial answer in the form of a patient, Jonathan I., a painter who had suddenly become totally colorblind following a car accident (and perhaps a stroke). He had lost color vision not through any damage to his eyes, it seemed, but through damage to parts of the brain which "construct" the sensation of color. Indeed, he seemed to have lost the ability not only to see color, but to imagine or remember it, even to dream of it. Nevertheless, like an amnesiac, he in some way remained conscious of having lost color, after a lifetime of chromatic vision, and complained of his world feeling impoverished, grotesque, abnormal--his art, his food, even his wife looked "leaden" to him. Still, he could not assuage my curiosity on the allied, yet totally different, matter of what it might be like never to have seen color, never to have had the least sense of its primal quality, its place in the world. Ordinary colorblindness, arising from a defect in the retinal cells, is almost always partial, and some forms are very common: red-green colorblindness occurs to some degree in one in twenty men (it is much rarer in women). But total congenital colorblindness, or achromatopsia, is surpassingly rare, affecting perhaps one person in thirty or forty thousand. What, I wondered, would the visual world be like for those born totally colorblind? Would they, perhaps, lacking any sense of something missing, have a world no less

dense and vibrant than our own? Might they even have developed heightened perceptions of visual tone and texture and movement and depth, and live in a world in some ways more intense than our own, a world of heightened reality--one that we can only glimpse echoes of in the work of the great black-and-white photographers? Might they indeed see us as peculiar, distracted by trivial or irrelevant aspects of the visual world, and insufficiently sensitive to its real visual essence? I could only guess, as I had never met anyone born completely colorblind.

Revue de presse "Sacks' most personal book yet-- a book that pulls a reader into it. If there is a single message to be found in [it], it is that life without joy, life without compassion, would be a sorry thing indeed. Buy many copies of this book and give them to your friends." -The Calgary Herald

"A delight.... The Island of the Colorblind fits comfortably on the shelf reserved for the best sort of travel writing, where everything under the sun is a candidate for inclusion.... In a tropical setting, amid the coral reefs and cycads ... the Victorian naturalist in Sacks blossoms, and his touch is lighter than ever." -NOW

"A grand entertainment, a trove of learning. It is [Sacks'] combination of the artist's eye and the healer's touch that makes [his] work -- and the man himself -- so memorable. Unfailingly tolerant, open and curious, he humanizes everything he touches.... This makes him for many-- our prophet of understanding." -Martin Levin, The Globe and Mail