

# Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood

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From his earliest days, Oliver Sacks, the distinguished neurologist who is also one of the most remarkable storytellers of our time, was irresistibly drawn to understanding the natural world. Born into a large family of doctors, metallurgists, chemists, physicists, and teachers, his curiosity was encouraged and abetted by aunts, uncles, parents, and older brothers. But soon after his sixth birthday, the Second World War broke out and he was evacuated from London, as were hundreds of thousands of children, to escape the bombing. Exiled to a school that rivaled Dickens's grimmest, fed on a steady diet of turnips and beetroots, tormented by a sadistic headmaster, and allowed home only once in four years, he felt desolate and abandoned.

When he returned to London in 1943 at the age of ten, he was a changed, withdrawn boy, one who desperately needed order to make sense of his life. He was sustained by his secret passions: for numbers, for metals, and for finding patterns in the world around him. Under the tutelage of his "chemical" uncle, Uncle Tungsten, Sacks began to experiment with "the stinks and bangs" that almost define a first entry into chemistry: tossing sodium off a bridge to see it take fire in the water below; producing billowing clouds of noxious-smelling chemicals in his home lab. As his interests spread to investigations of batteries and bulbs, vacuum tubes and photography, he discovered his first great scientific heroes, men and women whose genius lay in understanding the hidden order of things and disclosing the forces that sustain and support the tangible world. There was Humphry Davy, the boyish chemist who delighted in sending flaming globules of metal shooting across his lab; Marie Curie, whose heroic efforts in isolating radium would ultimately lead to the unlocking of the secrets of the atom; and Dmitri Mendeleev, inventor of the periodic table, whose pursuit of the classification of elements unfolds like a detective story.

Uncle Tungsten vividly evokes a time when virtual reality had not yet displaced a hands-on knowledge of the world. It draws us into a journey of discovery that reveals, through the enchantment and wonder of a childhood passion, the birth of an extraordinary and original mind.

Oliver Sacks's luminous memoir charts the growth of a mind. Born in 1933 into a family of formidably intelligent London Jews, he discovered the wonders of the physical sciences early from his parents and their flock of brilliant siblings, most notably "Uncle Tungsten" (real name, Dave), who "manufactured lightbulbs with filaments of fine tungsten wire." Metals were the substances that first attracted young Oliver, and his descriptions of their colors, textures, and properties are as sensuous and romantic as an art lover's rhapsodies over an Old Master. Seamlessly interwoven with his personal recollections is a masterful survey of scientific history, with emphasis on the great chemists like Robert Boyle, Antoine Lavoisier, and Humphry Davy (Sacks's personal hero). Yet this is not a dry intellectual autobiography; his parents in particular, both doctors, are vividly sketched. His sociable father loved house calls and "was drawn to medicine because its practice was central in human society," while his shy mother "had an intense feeling for structure ... for her [medicine] was part of natural history and biology." For young Oliver, unhappy at the brutal boarding school he was sent to during the war, and afraid that he would become mentally ill like his older brother, chemistry was a refuge in an uncertain world. He would outgrow his passion for metals and become a neurologist, but as readers of *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* know, he would never leave behind his conviction that science is a profoundly

human endeavor. --Wendy Smith "Dr. Sacks mourns, with a Wordsworthian sense of loss, the passing of those 'lyrical, mystical perceptions of childhood', those 'sudden landscapes of glory and illumination'. And yet the mixture of rekindled passion, humility and humour with which the older man pays homage to the boy, shows just how little he has faded into the light of common day."

-The Economist

"Good prose is often described as glowing: luminous, numinous, glimmering, shimmering, incandescent, radiant. Sacks's writing is all that, and sometimes, no matter how closely you read it, you can't quite figure out what makes it so precisely, unsparingly light...By the time he was 15...Sacks's attention began drifting away from chemistry...He can't quite say why he abandoned his first love and Mendeleev's Garden. His 'intellectual limitations? Adolescence? School?...The inevitable course, the natural history, of enthusiasm, that burns hotly, brightly...and then, exhausting itself, gutters out?' No matter. With Uncle Tungsten, Sacks has reignited the fire, so the rest of us can read by its glow."

-The New York Times Book Review

"Artful, impassioned memoir of a youth spent lost in the blinding light of chemistry from neurologist-essayist Sacks. . . . In a kind and gracious voice, Sacks guides readers on his journey of passionate discovery into the romance of chemistry. . . . The realm of science is alchemy in Sacks's hands as he spins pure gold from base metals."

-Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"In Uncle Tungsten, Oliver Sacks weaves together the wonders of chemistry and his boyhood experiences with grace, ease, and just the right comedic touch. The result is a rich, unique, and compelling glimpse into the development of an enormously fertile and creative mind."

-Brian Greene

"A gift from a wonderful man and a masterful scholar and writer. This sharing of life can only merit the chemist's symbol for Tungsten: W --a winner!" -Stephen Jay Gould

"Oliver Sacks is an extraordinary soul-scientist and artist, healer and explorer-and he has given us an extraordinary memoir. Uncle Tungsten is profoundly illuminating and continually surprising."

-James Gleick

#### Other Books

The Unexpected Professor. Best known for his provocative take on cultural issues in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* and *What Good Are the Arts?*, John Carey describes in this warm and funny memoir the events that formed him - an escape from the London blitz to an idyllic rural village, army service in Egypt, an open scholarship to Oxford and an academic career that saw him elected, age 40, to Oxford's oldest English Literature professorship. He frankly portrays the snobberies and rituals of 1950s Oxford, but also his

inspiring meetings with writers and poets - Auden, Graves, Larkin, Heaney - and his forty-year stint as a lead book-reviewer for the Sunday Times. This is a book about the joys of reading - in effect, an informal introduction to the great works of English literature. But it is also about war and family, and how an unexpected background can give you the insight and the courage to say the unexpected thing.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ . I came across a different kind of educational idiocy in Oliver Sacks's Uncle Tungsten, Memories of a Chemical Boyhood. When Sacks was eleven his mother used to give him dead babies to dissect, to prepare him for the medical career she ..."