

# AWAKENINGS AT 50



## WEDNESDAY, 26<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2024

10.00 – 10.30 | Coffee

10.30-10.50 | Opening remarks

11.00 – 12.00 | **Brian Hurwitz** (Emeritus, KCL), ‘De-Awakening: A Cultural and Scientific Genealogy of *Awakenings*’

12.00 – 13.00 | **Gavin Francis** (Writer and GP, NHS Scotland), ‘“Like Antaeus Removed from the Earth”: Oliver Sacks and Medicine as Inspiration’

13.00 – 14.25 | Lunch

14.30 – 15.30 | **Ulrika Maude** (University of Bristol), ‘Oliver Sacks’s Literary *Awakenings*’

15.30 – 16.45 | Coffee and open discussion (speakers and attendees)

## THURSDAY, 27<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2024

10.00 – 10.20 | Coffee

10.30 – 11.30 | **Hannah Proctor** (University of Strathclyde), ‘“Detectives of the Extraordinary”: Oliver Sacks, Alexander Luria and “Romantic Science”’

11.40 – 12.40 | **Andrew Gaedtke** (University of Illinois), ‘The Sacks Effect: “Disorders of Being” After *Awakenings*’

12.45-14.00 | Lunch

14.00 - 15:00 | **Matt Rubery** (QMUL), ‘Oliver Sacks’s Neurodivergent Readers’

15.15 – 16.30 | Coffee and concluding discussion (speakers and attendees)

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## **De-Awakening: A Cultural and Scientific Genealogy of *Awakenings*** **Brian Hurwitz**

It may seem obvious why Oliver Sacks chose *Awakenings* as the title of his 1973 monograph. Not only were symbolic and mythic arousals central to the clinical cases the work developed, notions of awakening were at the heart of its metaphorical structuring and how Sacks came to understand his patients as people. In subsequent editions, he sought to explain and re-explain why he settled on the term, which I situate in the cultural and scientific contexts of the period and in Sacks's own awareness of L-DOPA as 'a miracle-drug' with a lengthening list of negative effects. Despite his growing appreciation of its profoundly unwanted human consequences which amounted to nothing less than a de-awakening – one patient early on re-christened it 'Hell-DOPA' – Sacks never changed his mind about the power of the compound to revivify, transfigure and redeem the lives of people suffering from postencephalitic Parkinsonism. I will explore this dialectic in relation to the chemo-allegorical capacities of the book's main protagonist to re-connect people to lost pasts.

## **'Like Antaeus Removed from the Earth': Oliver Sacks and Medicine as Inspiration** Gavin Francis

Oliver Sacks often framed his clinical work in literary terms, and his literary work in clinical terms. His books sought to reconcile artistic and scientific perspectives on the stories he heard in clinical practice. 'Luria's endeavor,' he wrote, 'to combine the classical and the romantic, science and storytelling – became my own'. His remark that, 'Removed from my patients, I am like Antaeus removed from the earth' is emblematic of the symbiosis he saw between literary and clinical practice, as if the writing of his books were a Herculean struggle in which his will to write could only be sustained by encounters with patients. This paper will examine Sacks's *Awakenings* as part of the tradition of the doctor-writer through biographical and autobiographical sources, Sacks's first steps into writing

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for a general rather than scientific audience, and compare Sacks's approach with other celebrated doctor-writers (William Carlos Williams, Anton Chekhov, Thomas Browne). It will also reflect on the importance of literary sensibility to the effective practice of medicine. As a working doctor-writer I'll conclude by exploring the influence of Sacks's books on my own journey as a reader, clinician and writer, and the resonances and dissonances between his work and my own.

## **Oliver Sacks's *Literary Awakenings***

Ulrika Maude

In this paper, I will examine the genre of the case study as intrinsically *literary*, while at the same time operating in opposition to literature as such. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that poetry is 'a more philosophical and more serious thing than history' because it concerns 'universals', while history concerns 'particulars'. And yet poetry is not quite philosophy for Aristotle, since it also gets caught up in representing things that have happened or are alleged to have happened, or that are imagined as happening in the individual or singular instance. For Aristotle, in other words, the literary combines history and philosophy, but does so undecidably, offering us the paradox of the exemplar in the particular. I will propose that this logic also haunts the case study, whether medical or legal, in which the particular instance needs to transcend its singularity in order to advance a proposition that also has the potential for general or even universal application. I will attempt to think through the logic of the case study in the context of Oliver Sacks's *Awakenings* in order to ask whether his writing can productively be read as a form of literary discourse, as well as – or instead of – scientific enquiry.

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## **“Detectives of the Extraordinary”: Oliver Sacks, Alexander Luria and 'Romantic Science'** Hannah Proctor

My paper will discuss the correspondence Soviet neuro-psychologist Alexander Luria exchanged with his younger British-American colleague Oliver Sacks between 1973 and 1977, the year Luria died. Luria first contacted Sacks in 1973, just after Sacks's *Awakenings* was first published, to express his annoyance with Sacks's characterization of his work in a review essay. Sacks responded with a profuse apology and the two scientists then struck up a friendly correspondence, discussing Sacks's *A Leg to Stand On* in great detail while it was still a work in progress. Luria often requested that Sacks send him American detective fiction in the post and they agreed that their own work had something in common with that of a detective. Sacks always expressed his indebtedness to Luria's empathetic and literary approach to writing case histories, claiming that both of them wrote about their 'extraordinary' patients in a way that 'ordinary' people could understand. This paper will explore their theoretical conversations but also probe distinctions between the two scientists' understandings of human consciousness which were developed in very different social and political contexts.

## **The Sacks Effect: 'Disorders of Being' After *Awakenings*** Andrew Gaedtke

In *Awakenings*, Oliver Sacks promoted what he called “romantic science”—a category which names both an approach to the care for patients suffering from neurological disorders as well a discursive style for representing those case histories. As a corrective to the predominantly “technical or mechanical emphasis” which he observed in the sciences of the mind, Sacks drew attention to the altered phenomenologies, the “variety of worlds” and “landscapes of being” that resulted from his patients' disorders. This paper will trace Sacks's legacy by demonstrating

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the ways that this “romantic science” has been carried forward in several discursive contexts: scientific writing, memoir, and fictions of altered states. I will show how echoes of Sacks’s approach can be observed in several threads: a neo-phenomenological turn in the contemporary neuronovel, the rise of a popular “neuroculture,” as well as a more critical evaluation of the biological turn in psychiatry and other discourses of the mind.

## **Oliver Sacks’s Neurodivergent Readers**

Matt Rubery

This presentation examines Oliver Sacks’s attention to neurodivergent readers. It is hardly surprising that Sacks noticed other people’s reading habits since he himself was known to be a voracious reader whose curiosity extended far beyond his professional interests in medicine. My account traces the path from Sacks’s own devotion to reading (“I need to read; much of my life is reading”) to his discernment of atypical reading practices among people whose lives were affected by a variety of neurological conditions, from the compulsive forms of behaviour documented in *Awakenings* to clinical patients seeing text hallucinations splayed across the walls and stroke survivors who read with their tongues.