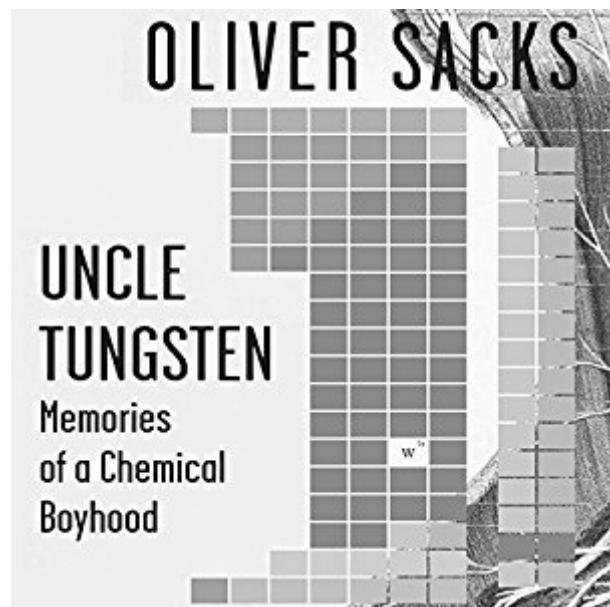


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Uncle Tungsten: Memories Of A Chemical Boyhood



Synopsis

Long before Oliver Sacks became a distinguished neurologist and best-selling writer, he was a small English boy fascinated by metals - also by chemical reactions (the louder and smellier the better), photography, squids and cuttlefish, H.G. Wells, and the periodic table. In this endlessly charming and eloquent memoir, the author of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings* chronicles his love affair with science and the magnificently odd and sometimes harrowing childhood in which that love affair unfolded. In *Uncle Tungsten* we meet Sacks' extraordinary family, from his surgeon mother (who introduces the 14-year-old Oliver to the art of human dissection) and his father, a family doctor who imbues in his son an early enthusiasm for housecalls, to his "Uncle Tungsten", whose factory produces tungsten-filament lightbulbs. We follow the young Oliver as he is exiled at the age of six to a grim, sadistic boarding school to escape the London Blitz, and later watch as he sets about passionately reliving the exploits of his "chemical heroes" in his own home laboratory. *Uncle Tungsten* is a crystalline view of a brilliant young mind springing to life, a story of growing up which is by turns elegiac, comic, and wistful, full of the electrifying joy of discovery.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"It often happens that the mind of a person who is learning a new science, has to pass through all the phases which the science itself has exhibited in its historical evolution." (Stanislao Cannizzaro, Italian chemist, 1826 - 1910). These words had a powerful resonance for Oliver Sacks. When the gifted neurologist wrote his autobiography, he also wrote a history of chemistry as recapitulated

through his own childhood experiences. He grew up in a very scientific family--his mother and father were physicians, and his uncle Dave (the 'Uncle Tungsten' of the title) was both a chemist and a business entrepreneur, who "would spend hundreds of hours watching all the processes in his factories: the sintering and drawing of the tungsten, the making of the coiled coils and molybdenum supports for the filaments, the filling of the bulbs with argon..." Uncle Tungsten allowed his nephew to perform chemical experiments in his laboratory, which contained samples of almost every element. Oliver's "physics uncle," Uncle Abe had a small telescopic observatory on top of his house, where he demonstrated the wonders of spectroscopy to his nephew: "The whole visible universe--planets, stars, distant galaxies--presented itself for spectroscopic analysis, and I got a vertiginous, almost ecstatic satisfaction from seeing familiar terrestrial elements out in space, seeing what I had known only intellectually before, that the elements were not just terrestrial but cosmic, were indeed the building blocks of the universe." No wonder young Oliver grew up with a love for the elements and their chemistry! Rarely do I read an autobiography and envy the author his childhood--most recent examples of this genre, e.g.

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