
that promotes their spread. Late-20th-century humankind, she argues, lives in a habitat unlike that of any of our ancestors. Air travel allows viruses from Africa (such as HIV) to “jump” to other continents in a matter of hours. In Third World cities, malnutrition combines with wretched sanitation to turn urban citizens into human petri dishes. And the destruction of ecosystems affects not only tropical rain forests but even Connecticut, where deforestation, by driving tick-bearing feral animals into the suburbs, has greatly increased the incidence of Lyme disease.

At midcentury, during the heyday of medical infallibility, one lone dissenter wrote, “Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world.” The dissenting voice was Albert Camus’s, in his novel *The Plague* (1948). Almost 50 years later, many people now wonder how close the world is to the “coming plague”—say, an airborne version of HIV. No one, including Garrett, can say, but she presents a frightening scenario of world health professionals ill prepared to identify and control diseases that nimbly spread, evolve, and become resistant to drugs. Garrett reminds her readers how the early reluctance of governments to grapple quickly with AIDS contributed to its rapid spread. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has recently created a model “emerging infections program”; still, Garrett wonders whether what any one country does can enable it to “stave off or survive the next plague.” During the 1960s, people such as Marshall McLuhan predicted that the world would soon be one big village. For viruses, at least, the prediction has come true.

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS:

Seven Paradoxical Tales. By *Oliver Sacks*. Knopf. 315 pp. \$24

Ask not what disease the person has, but rather what person the disease has. By following this maxim (learned from his parents), neurologist Sacks has brought a degree of humanity to patients otherwise regarded as freaks and dismissed by his colleagues as hopeless. In *Awak-*

enings (1983) and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), Sacks, not content with describing neurological illnesses, vividly evokes the personal experience of living within their effects. Sacks has described himself as a neuro-anthropologist but actually more resembles a physician making house calls at the far border of human experience.

Sacks calls his case studies or tales “paradoxical” because the patients he describes have succeeded not in spite but almost because of extraordinary dysfunctions. He describes an artist who, having lost his color vision in a car accident, now paints striking works in black and white through a heightened sense of their contrast. A surgeon with Tourette’s syndrome—characterized by oddly pitched vocal outbursts and arms flinging abruptly—manages, while operating, to control all manifestations of the disease. An autistic zoologist finds that autism permits her insight into animal behavior, but around human actions she is perplexed enough to feel like “an anthropologist on Mars.” Despite the neurological malfunctions that caused their conditions, Sacks writes, these people have adapted into “alternate states of being, other forms of life, no less human for being different.”

The “anthropologist on Mars,” though, more aptly applies to Sacks himself. Ever since Arthur Rimbaud attempted to “systematically disorder the senses,” literature has endeavored to resee the common world in new and strange ways. To this end, Franz Kafka often wrote in the guise of an animal—a mouse or gorilla or dog; Francis Ponge (and numerous other writers) invented fictitious countries where familiar practices and psychology were turned inside-out. Sacks outdoes such fictional contrivances, however, when he recreates the inner world of an idiot savant who sees ordinary objects as numbers or that of an alcoholic, suffering from a complete inability to remember, who lives in a hellish, endless present. In Oliver Sacks, science seems to have fulfilled literature’s old dream—to show that life is not only stranger than we imagine but even stranger than we *can* imagine.