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REVIEWS

THE RIVER OF CONSCIOUSNESS/
WHAT WE THINK ABOUT WHEN WE THINK ABOUT FOOTBALL

Thoughtful to the core

A new collection shows the full extent of Oliver Sacks' inquiring mind

This week we're looking at two collections of non-fiction which demonstrate that intellectual depth can sit alongside an entertaining read. First up we have **The River of Consciousness** by Oliver Sacks. Sacks, who passed away two years ago, was one of the world's most celebrated scientists, and he worked as a neurologist for almost 50 years at the same time as producing groundbreaking and bestselling works such as *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. This collection of essays is the second such book to be published since Sacks' death, but he was apparently working on more when he died, so it likely won't be the last. The majority of these essays first appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and they reflect the diverse nature of the author's inquiring mind.

On the front cover, the *New York Times* refers to Sacks as "the poet laureate of medicine", and while medical science is the focus for much of the writing, Sacks deviates into arts and culture, philosophy and metaphysics, and into concepts of perception itself. There are essays here on Sacks' scientific heroes such as Darwin and Freud, as well as Sacks' more common subject matters of neurology, psychiatry and psychiatric disorders. In the title essay, in which Sacks looks at the very core ideas of consciousness, perception and time, he manages to quote Borges and Hume on the first page, before going on to describe neurological conditions that can throw our concepts of each of these things into question.

Like many of the essays here, this one comes peppered with long footnotes, very much in Sacks' style, and these are odd, inventive and indicative of the author's restless love of facts and details, as if his endlessly busy mind can't be contained within the margins of a page.

The final essay, entitled *Sotoma: Forgetting and Neglect in Science*, looks at the nature of scientific discovery and development, arguing convincingly that the reality has been very different from the conventional image we have of scientific progress. Either way, it seems unlikely that Oliver Sacks and his amazing life's work will be forgotten or neglected.

And so to sport with Simon Critchley's



Illustration: Dom McInerney

What We Think About When We Think About Football. The English author is a professor of philosophy in New York and has written books on everything from suicide to David Bowie, but in this slim volume he turns his attention to football. With essay titles like *Theatre of Identity and Non-identity* and *What is it Like to be a Ball?* it would be easy to poke fun at this book, but actually it's very thought-provoking and fun, and written with an intense love of the game at its core.

Throughout the 16 essays, Critchley puts the beautiful game under the microscope, and applies ideas from philosophy and literature to our relationship with the game, whether it's fans' undying love for their club, revulsion at the over-commercialisation of the game, or simply revelling in a series of beautiful passes.

The author is equally at home quoting Jean-Paul Sartre as he is Bill Shankly, just as likely to discuss the ideas of Heidegger or Marx as he is the talents of Zidane or Cruyff. A collection of writing that casts a genuinely new light on a familiar subject.

Words: Doug Johnstone @doug.johnstone

The River of Consciousness
Oliver Sacks
Picador, £18.99

What We Think About When We Think About Football
Simon Critchley
Profile, £8.99

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