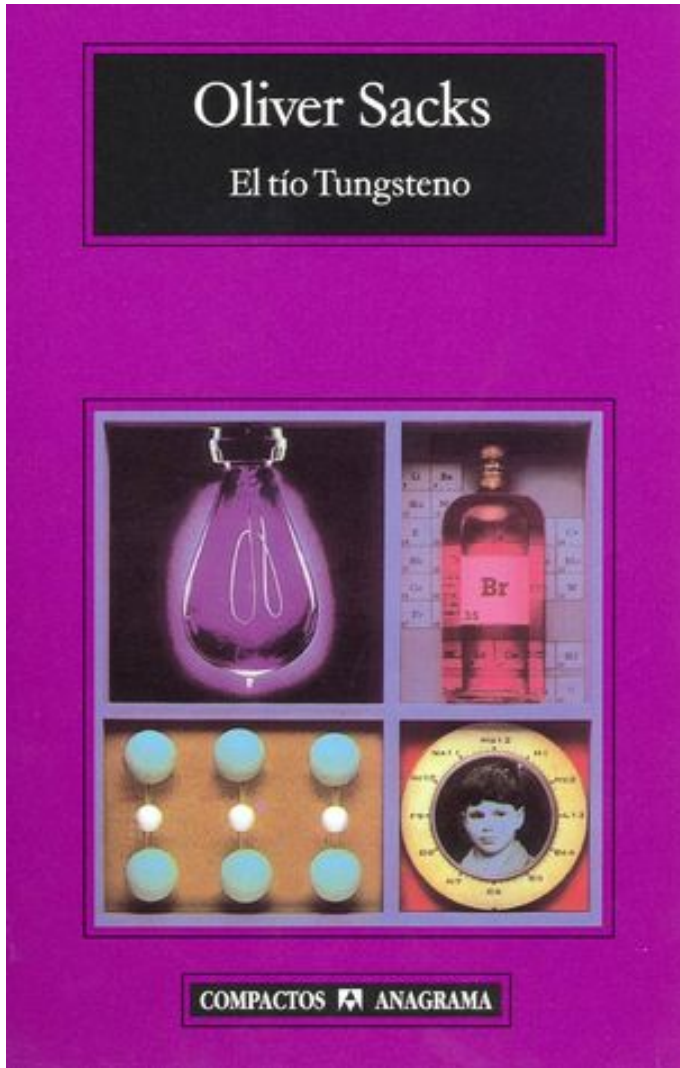


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# Oliver Sacks

## El Tío Tungsteno



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## Description

Oliver Sacks's luminous memoir *Uncle Tungsten* 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 colours, 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 endeavour. --Wendy Smith

## Insightful reviews

Chris: This is Sacks' inspiring memoir of his early teenage years, when his growing scientific mind recapitulated the history of chemistry through reading and his own hands-on experiments. It can be read either as a record of one person's education, or as a high-level history of chemistry. The magic of this book is how Sacks combined the two into an engaging narrative.

He begins by telling of his earliest observations, when not yet ten years old, of simple material categories. This grew into differentiating the elements by their properties. When he saw the periodic table for the first time in a museum, along with samples of each element, it all came together in a blinding mind-storm. His romance with chemistry continued for another year or two, eventually leading him to flirt with basic nuclear processes at the dawn of the atomic age shortly after WW2. Then it all changed for him when adolescence barged in, bring with it other imperatives.

How fortunate Sacks was to have mentors (outside of the school system, of course) who recognized his non-conforming abilities and encouraged him. We see the universal, and despicable, bullying given to boys who are different and talented—a theme shatteringly taken-up in his 2015 memoir covering adulthood [On the Move: A Life](#). We also see the amazing ability of the (even young and formative) human mind to understand the universe, one that is available to anyone curious.

Steve Smits: I enjoy Oliver Sack's works. For one who is such an accomplished scientific figure in the medical world, his prose writing is so good. "Uncle Tungsten", published first in 2001, is his memoir of his life and times in pre and immediately post war England. Sack's family were

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Jews who had immigrated to England around the turn of the 20th century. His parents were physicians and his uncles (he came from quite a large family) were scientists and entrepreneurs. Uncle "Tungsten" owned and ran a factory that produced light bulbs and he was deeply knowledgeable about heavy metals that could be used as filaments in these early bulbs. In addition to Uncle Tungsten, Sacks's family members were brainy and colorful characters who are quite fun to read about.

Through Uncle (Dave) "Tungsten", Sacks's intellectual curiosity in chemistry was aroused. (Mathematics was also an obsession.) At an early age, he acquired all manner of chemicals and set up his own laboratory where he conducted experiments to understand better the chemical properties of various elements and compounds. One amazing aspect of the story is how easy it was for Sacks to acquire chemicals that are quite dangerous and how tolerant his parents were of the goings-on in his lab in an attached shed. One cannot imagine such liberality or forbearance today.

In many ways, Sacks's memoir gives the history of chemistry advances in the 19th and 20th century. He describes the breakthrough work of many of the icons of early chemistry -- Boyle, Lavoisier, Davy, Faraday, Mendeleev and others. His burning impulse to understand how the physical world was constructed and interacted is plain to see and marked him as an unusual young person of great intellectual potential.

What's perhaps even more compelling in Sacks's story is his depiction of life before and during the war. Sacks, born in 1933, was shipped off to boarding schools away from London during the Blitz and his memories (many were not happy ones) give a fascinating view of life during this time. His family was closely connected to the Jewish community in London and his stories about this culture are interesting and evocative; he says that this tight knit society ceased to be after the war.

His path through the world of chemistry progresses through increasing levels of complexity. Some of his descriptions of chemical laws and processes are above my understanding; they made me aware of how much about chemistry I have forgotten, or, more likely, never knew. When he reached atomic realms of the periodic table of elements and structure of atomic entities, I was quite lost. Notwithstanding, it's worth slogging through the esoteric parts of the book, if for nothing more than to gain an appreciation of this young man's remarkable intellectual focus and his passion for knowledge.

Fred Jacobson: I went on a mini-Sacks "bender" this year, reading Uncle Tugsten, Musicophilia, and then dipping into one of his earlier books (An Anthropologist on Mars). What I have always loved about Sacks is his ability to present the scientific, social, personal and emotional aspects of his subject as a balanced entity. You can see, through his writings, how he develops a rapport with his patients.

Uncle Tungsten is a memoir of Sacks, growing up in Britain under the Blitz, a child of a remarkable family. Perhaps because of the subject, it reminded of my other beloved chemical memoir, Primo Levi's *Then Periodic Table*. As a chemist, I found Uncle Tungsten to be a wonderful description of the joys that many of us found as children in learning about, and playing with, chemicals- in those pre-litigation times when you could still by "Chemistry Sets".

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Timothy: a truly vibrant and poignant account of Oliver Sacks early life fascination and love for chemistry. He makes us all consider unhappy for the lack of that childlike interest and attachment to science. he stumbled on have fun with exploring the actual world. what percentage folks has the ability to do experiments on chemical compounds in the course of our youth days? How many people dream of chemistry? How many folks take pleasure in vacationing the adventure of science; asking questions and given solutions to fulfill our keen curiosity? those are what we need to wonder at Sacks childhood. It used to be choked with chemistry and a natural love and fervent for science. However, it was once saddening to grasp that he was once later persuaded to renounce chemistry for medicine. After all, he was once born in a kin of doctors. In his words, he said, "what have been a holy topic for me packed with poetry, used to be being rendered prosaic, profane." Such used to be his remorse and the type of ecstasy he felt for science.

Darcy: This e-book used to be nice since you can fairly experience the boyhood excitement, and also you choose up loads of little chemistry minutiae (which I, as a chemist, specifically appreciate). i do not believe it really is too technical, however, and that i wish its chemistry content material doesn't deter non-chemists of any sort from examining it. whereas reading, i used to be often reminded that the area has replaced considerably long ago ~60 years. Oliver Sacks grew up in a time the place you'll primarily run all the way down to the shop and purchase a few beautiful harmful stuff- even on the age of 10! I cherished studying approximately his discoveries even more than I beloved examining approximately them in chemistry textbooks.

Maria: 20150928 ? A vivid, lyrical mixture of private memoir and chemical love story. Uncle Tungsten sat on my bookshelf for years; I knew i might get round to it someday. i lately discovered myself midway via Sacks' final (and, sadly, final) memoir at the Move; it used to be so sturdy that i did not wish it to end! So I placed it down and punctiliously loved my self-imposed excuse to eventually learn the special tale of his formative years first. i am blissful I did, since it made my comprehension of the arc of his lifestyles a lot richer as I back to and comprehensive at the Move. I can see why a few reviewers turn into annoyed with this book; Sacks had a deep love of chemistry, and his adolescence is informed during the lens of the actual components and their position at the periodic table. should you do not percentage not less than a passing curiosity in chemistry, you will get distracted and bored. i will not say in solid judgment of right and wrong that you'd be disillusioned, however, because the subtitle of the e-book is "Memories of a Chemical Boyhood," and the interconnection of his existence with the subject is especially good specified within the publication description, at the publication jacket, and in different people's reviews. it is a bit like interpreting endless Jest and never waiting for it to be challenging, or interpreting Twilight and expressing outrage at its vapidness. i've got a hearty-eyed curiosity within the background of science, and that i used to be thrilled that a lot of the booklet splinters off into mini-biographies of a few of the heroes of chemistry: Humphry Davy, Michael Faraday, the Curies, Lavoisier, Boyle, Dalton, Berzelius. those tales regularly circle again round and dovetail with own facets of Sacks' outstanding childhood, really good relatives, and fascinating family members life. Happily, the tangents by no means suppose indulgent or extraneous. My greatest problem with this booklet was once suppressing the good-natured jealousy I felt for the freedom, encouragement, and emotional in addition to monetary aid Oliver's family members supplied as he pursued his highbrow passions to their fullest extent. We readers, up to the numerous sufferers whose lives he touched and at once greater via his

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brilliance and compassion, are all fortunate that he used to be given this kind of wealthy beginning upon which to construct his life. It is a guy who used his ambitious powers for good.

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