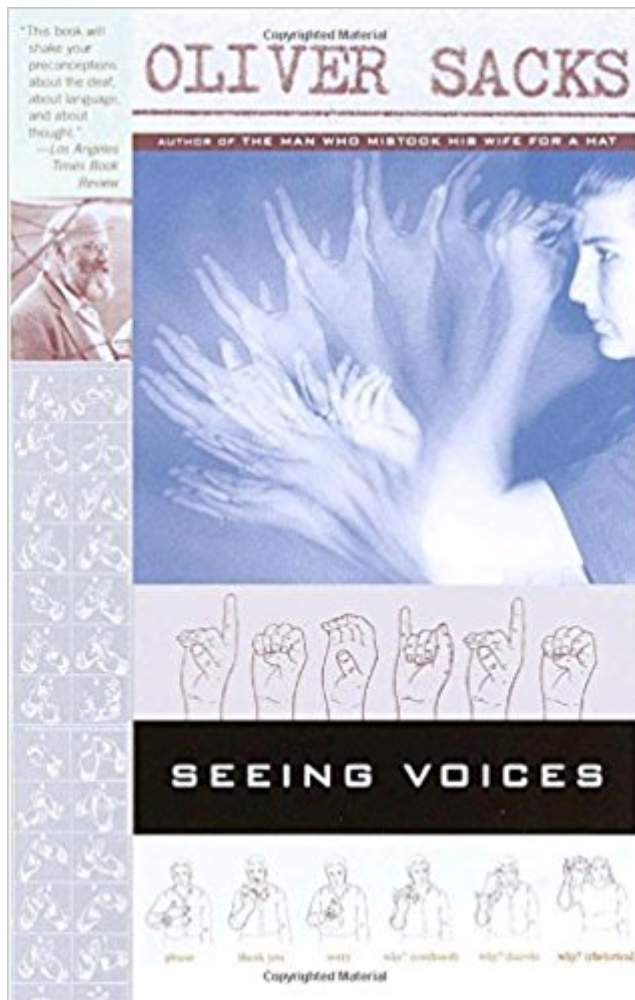


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# Seeing Voices



## Synopsis

Like *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, this is a fascinating voyage into a strange and wonderful land, a provocative meditation on communication, biology, adaptation, and culture. In *Seeing Voices*, Oliver Sacks turns his attention to the subject of deafness, and the result is a deeply felt portrait of a minority struggling for recognition and respect--a minority with its own rich, sometimes astonishing, culture and unique visual language, an extraordinary mode of communication that tells us much about the basis of language in hearing people as well. *Seeing Voices* is, as Studs Terkel has written, "an exquisite, as well as revelatory, work."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In what PW judged "an extraordinarily moving and thought-provoking report," neurologist Sacks scrutinizes the history of treatment of the deaf, investigates the expressive capabilities of sign language and gauges the linguistic and social pressures faced by deaf people. Illustrated. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sacks, a neurologist and author of the popular *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* ( LJ 2/15/86), developed a serious interest in sign language and deafness after reviewing Harlan Lane's *When the Mind Hears* ( LJ 10/15/84 ) for the New York Review of Books . In this work, Sacks explores all facets of the deaf world--he meets with deaf people and their families and visits schools

for the deaf, spending a good deal of time at Gallaudet University. As he writes, "I had now to see them in a new, 'ethnic light,' as people with a distinctive language, sensibility, and culture of their own." The work is divided into three broad sections, throughout which there are numerous, somewhat distracting footnote "excursions." Although there is a wealth of insight and information here, the book tends to drag for the average reader and may disappoint fans of Sacks's previous best seller. Recommended for scholars and graduate collections.- Debra Berlanstein, Towson State Univ., BaltimoreCopyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

My American Sign Language teacher recommended the class read Seeing Voices by Oliver Sacks, so I decided to read it during our break between terms. I quickly found myself immersed in a world within the world in which we live. Sacks, a hearing man, explores the Deaf world and Deaf Culture in a way that brings clarity to something that feels impossible to understand. Sacks provides a glimpse into the history of deaf people and their interactions with the world. His observations are compassionate but never pitying. At times I found myself wincing at the cruelty people are capable of inflicting on one another as I read his descriptions of the attitudes toward deaf people throughout history. In his discussion on communication among the Deaf and between Deaf and hearing people, I felt a sense of the urgency all living beings feel to communicate. His examination of deaf people's attempts to communicate and how often hearing people force their communication on other people as if it's the only way to communicate left me heartsick but more aware of my own tendencies. I felt incredibly aware of how often I take hearing for granted and how often it serves me without me giving it a second thought. Sacks also pushed me to think about how "normal" doesn't mean the same thing to everyone, something I know but sometimes forget. Seeing Voices is about more than Deaf Culture and deaf people, it's a book about how society functions and normalizes and fears and creates and destroys and changes. Seeing Voices screams for us to open our world and see beyond the limitations we place on ourselves and others based on misconception and lack of communication...

Looking at language without speech is mind blowing. Without language we do not share in human culture. We do not "think" without language. I truly believe that everyone should find the experiences of the deaf important and interesting on an emotional and intellectual level. This book was a great start for me. While this book is dated, Oliver Sacks shares very valuable experiences by deaf people. He reviews some of the personal struggles of the deaf, their historic treatment by hearing

people, some history of sign language, and the development of Deaf culture. It is helpful that Oliver Sacks starts initially from his own ignorance. He walks us through well researched insights, and he brilliantly lights our understanding of human thinking that comes from language development.

As a hearing person, I must admit that I never gave much thought at all to the Deaf, let alone Deaf culture. Sacks' *Seeing Voices* is a real eye opener in this regard. Sacks admits that he came at the problem of deafness from a medical/neurological perspective, and was quickly and radically changed by what he learned about the Deaf. Sacks passion is evident as he takes the reader through the history of Deaf culture, the struggles and successes of the Deaf. I now have a new appreciation of the Deaf, and their place in society, and their unique difficulties. This has opened a new channel in my mind, one which I intend to explore more fully in the future.

The book is somewhat infuriating if you understand deaf people and know what sign language is. Sacks has no idea, and he keeps explaining things that are, frankly, obvious to anybody who knows a bit of how sign language (or Sign, as he keeps calling it) works. The writing is fairly long-winded, in particular in the middle part. The third part is clearly the best and liveliest. It's a good account of the uprising at Gallaudet University in 1988 that forced the election of their first deaf president. Apart from that, there's some good history, but there's also a good amount of repetition and overlap (the three parts were written as independent pieces at first). Definitely read if you think sign language is just English with gestures. Skip if you've ever read anything about sign language or have even taken a class.

fascinating book about the history, challenges and successes for deaf culture, including the history of sign language and major educational institutions. oliver sacks does a fantastic job of bringing empathy and awe to this topic.

*Seeing Voices* provides two in depth perspectives: a psychological and personal account of relationship and defining the concept of 'deafness'. Sacks provides research about deaf people and their psyche, endurance and strength in the world during the 1980's. His personal recount of being an outsider with friends during Deaf President Now at Gallaudet provides an authentic experience shared to the public.

We recently took a four month course in ASL. It is one thing to learn a new way to communicate, it

is another to have it become a part of you. This book, *Hearing Voices*, provided us with the first steps in understanding deafness with life stories, scientific studies, and observations. Since we are not deaf, this book also provided us with the first steps in communicating with the deaf using ASL...understanding and appreciation for a culture that SEES our world in a richly different way.

Can't beat Sackd for a good read. He will be missed.

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