Unit 3 Essays

1 On Libraries

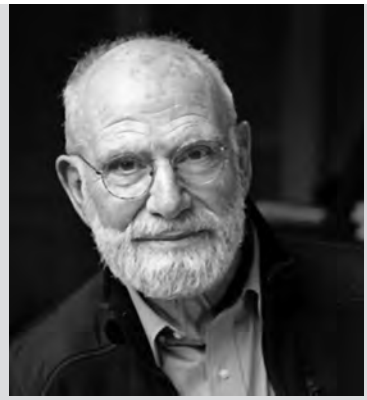
Oliver Sacks

Before reading

Answer the following questions.

a. Why do people visit the libraries?

b. Have you ever borrowed books from the library? If yes, what kinds of books do you like to read?



Oliver Sacks was born in 1933 in London and was educated at the Queen's College, Oxford. He completed his medical training at San Francisco's Mount Zion Hospital and at UCLA before moving to New York, where he soon encountered the patients whom he would write about in his book *Awakenings.* Sacks was a neurologist and an author whose case studies of patients with unusual disorders became best-sellers. His focus on patients with particularly rare or dramatic problems made his work popular with writers in other forms, and his case studies were adapted into several different movies and operas. Dr. Sacks spent almost fifty years working as a neurologist and wrote a number of books--including *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, *Musicophilia*, and *Hallucinations*--about the strange neurological predicaments and conditions of his patients. *The New York Times* referred to him as "the poet laureate of medicine," and he received many awards, including honors from 'The Guggenheim Foundation,' The National Science Foundation, The American Academy of Arts and Letters, and The Royal College of Physicians. His memoir, *On the Move*, was published shortly before his death in August 2015.

"On Libraries" is written in praise of intellectual freedom, community work, and the ecstasy of serendipitous discovery. Among the titans of mind and spirit shaped and saved by libraries was the great neurologist, author, and voracious reader.

When I was a child, my favorite room at home was the library, a large oak-paneled room with all four walls covered by bookcases—and a solid table for writing and studying in the middle. It was here that my father had his special library, as a Hebrew scholar; here too were all of Ibsen's plays—my parents had originally met in a medical

students' Ibsen society; here, on a single shelf, were the young poets of my father's generation, many killed in the Great War; and here, on the lower shelves so I could easily reach them, were the adventure and history books belonging to my three older brothers. It was here that I found *The Jungle Book*; I identified deeply with Mowgli, and used his adventures as a taking-off point for my own fantasies.

My mother had her favorite books in a separate bookcase in the lounge—Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray, Bernard Shaw's plays in pale green bindings, as well as an entire set of Kipling bound in soft morocco. There was a beautiful three-volume set of Shakespeare's works, a gilt-edged Milton, and other books, mostly poetry, that my mother had got as school prizes.

Medical books were kept in a special locked cabinet in my parents' surgery (but the key was in the door, so it was easy to unlock).

The oak-paneled library was the quietest and most beautiful room in the house, to my eyes, and it vied with my little lab as my favorite place to be. I would curl up in a chair and become so absorbed in what I was reading that all sense of time would be lost. Whenever I was late for lunch or dinner I could be found, completely absorbed by a book, in the library. I learned to read early, at three or four, and books, and our library, are among my first memories.

But the Ur-library, for me, was the Willesden Public Library, our own local public library. Here I spent many of the happiest hours of my growing-up years—our house was a five-minute walk from the library—and it was there I received my real education.

On the whole, I disliked school, sitting in class, receiving instruction; information seemed to go in one ear and out by the other. I could not be passive—I had to be active, learn for myself, learn what I wanted, and in the way which suited me best. I was not a good pupil, but I was a good learner, and in Willesden Library—and all the libraries that came later—I roamed the shelves and stacks, had the freedom to select whatever I wanted, to follow paths which fascinated me, to become myself. At the library I felt free—free to look at the thousands, tens of thousands, of books; free to roam and to enjoy the special atmosphere and the quiet companionship of other readers, all, like myself, on quests of their own.

As I got older, my reading was increasingly biased towards the sciences, especially astronomy and chemistry. St. Paul's School, where I went when I was twelve, had an excellent general library, the Walker Library, which was particularly heavy in history and politics—but it could not provide all of the science and especially chemistry books I now hungered for. But with a special testimonial from one of the school masters, I was able to get a ticket to the library of the Science Museum, and there I devoured the many volumes of Mellor's *Comprehensive Treatise on Inorganic and Theoretical Chemistry* and the even-longer *Gmelin's Handbook of Inorganic Chemistry*.

When I went to university, I had access to Oxford's two great university libraries, the Radcliffe Science Library and the Bodleian, a wonderful general library that could

trace itself back to 1602. It was in the Bodleian that I stumbled upon the now-obscure and forgotten works of Theodore Hook, a man greatly admired in the early nineteenth century for his wit and his genius for theatrical and musical improvisation (he was said to have composed more than five hundred operas on the spot). I became so fascinated by Hook that I decided to write a sort of biography or "case-history" of him. No other library—apart from the British Museum Library—could have provided the materials I needed, and the tranquil atmosphere of the Bodleian was a perfect one in which to write.

But the library I most loved at Oxford was our own library at the Queen's College. The magnificent library building itself had been designed by Christopher Wren, and beneath this, in an underground maze of heating pipes and shelves, were the vast subterranean holdings of the library. To hold ancient books, incunabula, in my own hands was a new experience for me—I particularly adored Gesner's *HistoriaeAnimalium* (1551), richly illustrated with Dürer's drawing of a rhinoceros and Agassiz's four-volume work on fossil fishes. It was there, too, that I saw all of Darwin's works in their original editions, and it was in the stacks that I found and fell in love with all the works of Sir Thomas Browne—his *Religio Medici*, his *Hydrotaphia*, and *The Garden of Cyrus (The Quincunciall Lozenge)*. How absurd some of these were, but how magnificent the language! And if Browne's classical magniloquence became too much at times, one could switch to the lapidary cut-and-thrust of Swift—all of whose works, of course, were there in their original editions. While I had grown up on the nineteenth-century works that my parents favored, it was the catacombs of the Queen's library that introduced me to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature—John-son, Hume, Pope, and Dryden. All of these books were freely available, not in some special, locked-away rare books enclave, but just sitting on the shelves, as they had done (I imagined) since their original publication. It was in the vaults of the Queen's College that I really gained a sense of history, and of my own language.

I first came to New York City in 1965, and at that time I had a horrid, pokey little apartment in which there were almost no surfaces to read or write on. I was just able, holding an elbow awkwardly aloft, to write some of *Migraine* on the top of the refrigerator. I longed for spaciousness. Fortunately, the library at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where I worked, had this in abundance. I would sit at a large table to read or write for a while, and then wander around the shelves and stacks. I never knew what my eyes might alight upon, but I would sometimes discover unexpected treasures, lucky finds, and bring these back to my seat.

Though the library was quiet, whispered conversations might start in the stacks—two of you, perhaps, were searching for the same old book, the same bound volumes of *Brain* from 1890—and conversations could lead to friendships. All of us in the library were reading our own books, absorbed in our own worlds, and yet there was a sense of community, even intimacy. The physicality of books—along with their places

and their neighbors on the bookshelves—was part of this camaraderie: handling books, sharing them, passing them between us, even seeing the names of previous readers and the dates they took books out.

But a shift was occurring by the 1990s. I would continue to visit the library frequently, sitting at a table with a mountain of books in front of me, but students increasingly ignored the bookshelves, accessing what they needed with their computers. Few of them went to the shelves anymore. The books, so far as they were concerned, were unnecessary. And since the majority of users were no longer using the books themselves, the college decided, ultimately, to dispose of them.

I had no idea that this was happening—not only in the AECOM library but in college and public libraries all over the country. I was horrified when I visited the library a couple of months ago and found the shelves, once overflowing, sparsely occupied. Over the last few years, most of the books, it seems, have been thrown out, with remarkably little objection from anyone. I felt that a murder, a crime had been committed—the destruction of centuries of knowledge. Seeing my distress, a librarian reassured me that everything "of worth" had been digitized. But I do not use a computer, and I am deeply saddened by the loss of books, even bound periodicals, for there is something irreplaceable about a physical book: its look, its smell, its heft. I thought of how the library once cherished "old" books, had a special room for old and rare books; and how in 1967, rummaging through the stacks, I had found an 1873 book, Edward Liveing's *Megrim*, which inspired me to write my own first book.

Oliver Sacks, a writer and neurologist, was the author of over a dozen books, including Hallucinations, Musicophilia, Awakenings, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, *and* On the Move. *He died on August 30, 2015.*

Glossary

fantasies (n.): imagination, not real

morocco (n.): a fine soft material used for making covers for books

curl up (v.): to form or make sth form into a curl or curls

absorbed (adv.): with one's attention fully held

astronomy (n.): the scientific study of the Sun, moon, stars, planets, etc.

hungered for (v.): to have a strong desire for sb/sth

devoured (v.): to eat sth completely and quickly, especially because of hunger

stumbled upon (v.): to find sth/sb unexpectedly or by chance

improvisation (n.): music, a part in a play

incunabula (n.): an early printed book, especially one printed before 1501

magniloquence (n.): use of high-flown language

lapidary (adj.): elegant and precise

catacombs (n.): a series of underground tunnels

enclave (n.): a small territory belonging to one state or group of people surrounded by that of another

pokey (adj.): small and cramped

aloft (adv.): overhead

stacks (n.): piles or heaps of something

camaraderie (n.): friendship and trust

rummaging (v.): to turn things over and esp. make them untidy while searching for sth

helt (v.): to lift or carry

Understanding the text

Answer the following questions.

a. Where could the author be found when he was late for lunch or dinner?

b. What are his first memories?

c. Why did he dislike school?

d. What did he feel about at the library?

e. Why was he so biased about sciences especially astronomy and chemistry?

f. Why did he become so fascinated by Hook?

g. Describe library at the Queen's College.

h. Why did the students ignore the bookshelves in the 1990s?

i. Why was he horrified when he visited the library a couple of months ago?

Reference to the context

a. The author says, "I was not a good pupil, but I was a good listener." Justify it with the textual evidences.

b. A proverb says, "Nothing is pleasanter than exploring a library." Does this proverb apply in the essay? Explain.

c. Are there any other services that you would like to see added to the library?

Reference beyond the text

a. Write an essay on **Libraries and its uses for students**.

b. Do you have any public library in your locality? If so, do the people in your community use it? Give a couple of examples.