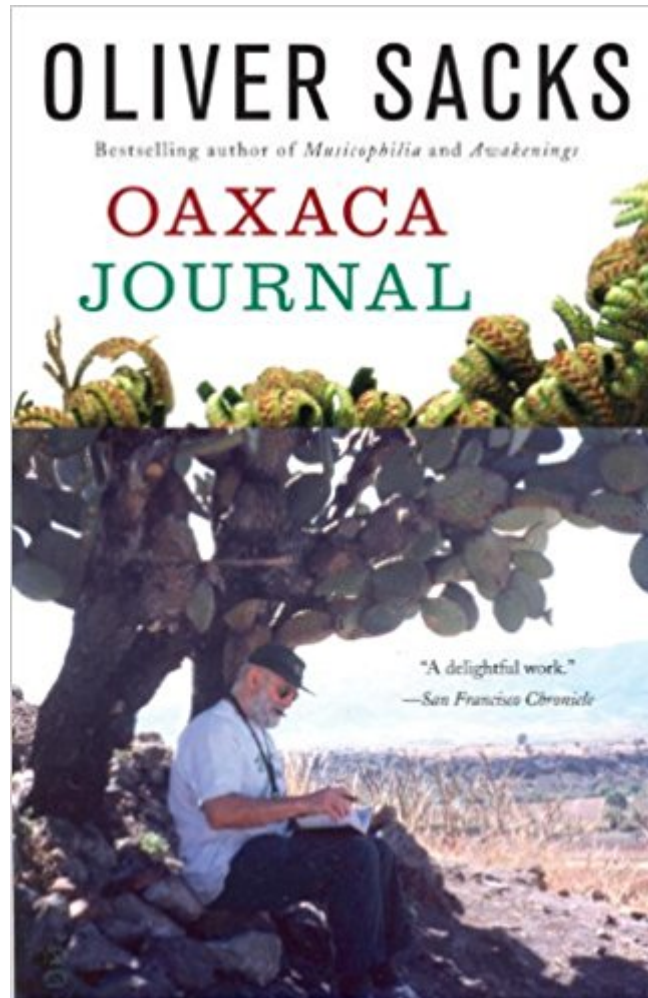




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Oaxaca Journal



Synopsis

Since childhood, Oliver Sacks has been fascinated by ferns: an ancient class of plants able to survive and adapt in many climates. Along with a delightful group of fellow fern aficionados—mathematicians, poets, artists, and assorted botanists and birders—he embarks on an exploration of Southern Mexico, a region that is also rich in human history and culture. He muses on the origins of chocolate and mescal, pre-Columbian culture and hallucinogens, the vibrant sights and sounds of the marketplace, and the peculiar passions of botanists. What other species would comb ancient Zapotec ruins on their hands and knees, searching for a new type of fern? Combining Sacks's enthusiasm for natural history and the richness of humanity with his sharp and observant eye for detail, *Oaxaca Journal* is a rare treat.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The eminent neurologist is also a fern lover, and this book is his record of a ten-day "fern foray" in southern Mexico. It is light and fast-moving, unburdened by library research but filled with erudition. Some of his fellow-foragers are professional pteridologists; others are amateurs, and there is a certain romance in the sight of smitten fern hunters crawling through the Mexican dust exclaiming in Latin. Among the botanical and anthropological observations, one catches glimpses of Sacks's inner life: his preoccupation with dualities, his nearly Victorian sense of modesty, his fascination with the world around him. He could be speaking of himself when he comments on a colleague peering through a hand lens at a small mountain flower: "Is it the artist or the scientist in him which is aroused by the *Lobelia*? Both, clearly, and they are utterly fused." Copyright © 2005 The New

Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sacks is--besides a neurologist and a splendid stylist with a shelf of marvelous books to his credit, most recently *Uncle Tungsten* [BKL S 1 01]--a fern. That is to say, not that he is an Englishman living in New York, but that he is an amateur pteridologist, one whose hobby is appreciating the ancient class of plants called ferns (and "the so-called fern allies"--clubmosses, horsetails, spike mosses, and whisk ferns--"my own preference," he says). In 1999, that avocation led him to spend 10 days in Oaxaca, Mexico, with other members of the American Fern Society, to whose greater pteridological erudition he modestly defers. He kept a diary, the basis for this book. Fortunately for most readers, he doesn't just describe the rare fern species he gets to see. He notes the exotic birds that two of his companions find as thrilling as the ferns; he admits, however, that he never saw any avians smaller than hawks and vultures, for he hasn't developed a birder's eyes. He lovingly relays what the group's excellent guide imparted of Oaxaca's history, its indigenes, the Zapotecs, and their ancient culture; he rhapsodizes over ruins and the technological and intellectual powers they bespeak; and he admires the people, the many exotic foods, the vistas, and the age-old industries of the towns he visits--all of this while his fellow travelers mostly keep on ferning. He says he wants to go back. Take us along, Dr. Sacks--please! Ray Olson

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Oliver Sacks has a huge amount of curiosity and insight. The book is not over-written, he shares his experiences about traveling with the fern society to Oaxaca very directly and although this might not sound promising, it really is.

This book was really a gift for my wife, who is a biologist and really enjoyed reading about this field trip experience. It was a perfect book to read together. The excitement of finding plant species was familiar to her, the descriptions of local foods, customs, and cottage industries was fascinating, and the discussions of subjects of interest to the author added a special touch. Why four stars instead of five? We found the book to be very good, but we like to save five stars for the truly outstanding.

This another of Dr. Sacks contributions to good reading along with contributing to the world's store of how the mind works. Since it is a journal we get a glimpse also of how his mind works, and a delightful narrative of a trip into Oaxaca. For botanists it is also informative about ferns as a result of

the companions who are also interested in what that part of the world has to offer.

Dr. Sacks accompanied a group of botanical friends on a trip to see, catalogue, draw, and take delight in the unparalleled variety of ferns in Oaxaca, Mexico. His resulting journal is a meditation on Zapotec culture, amateur naturalists, edible insects, psychedelics, and above all ferns: seemingly so fragile yet having survived, with little change, for over 300 million years. According to the author, his "sense of a prehistoric world, of immense spans of time, was first stimulated by ferns and fossil ferns." For someone like myself who loves both ferns and the writings of Dr. Sacks, this journal is a treasure. It was composed under the blue sky of Oaxaca and filled with an emotion that Dr. Sacks admits is usually foreign to him: joy. The author is fond of reading natural history journals and he has created a multi-faceted gem of his own, out of observations on lost civilizations, mescal, cochineal insects, plants as rare as horsetails a hundred feet high, and others as common as the bracken fern. Half of our property in Michigan is covered with bracken ferns and I was always curious as to why insects didn't seem to bother them. According to this author, bracken is regarded as the 'Lucrezia Borgia' of the fern world: "the young fronds release hydrogen cyanide as soon as the insect's mandible tears into them, and if this does not kill or deter the bug, a much crueler poison lies in store. Brackens, more than any other plants, are loaded with hormones called ecdysones, and when these are ingested by insects, they cause uncontrollable molting." The Romans used bracken on their stable floors because it arrested or perverted the development of fly larvae, although Dr. Sacks doesn't specify how the ancients kept the horses from eating their bedding. Bracken also poisons mammals, and humans who eat too many fiddle-heads over a long period of time are apt to develop stomach cancer. It is tempting to open up "Oaxaca Journal" and reread an essay equally as vivid as the riff on the 'Lucrezia Borgia of ferns.' There are so many choices. By writing a journal for the National Geographic 'Literary Travel Series,' Dr. Sacks has opened himself up to every conceivable subject under the blazing Mexican sun. There is indeed joy in this book.

This book should be mandatory reading for freshmen in high school. DO WHAT YOU LOVE. (And it doesn't have to be your job!) Love what you do. Admire folks with passion. Live a life of passion. Get weird. Enjoy others getting weird.

Oliver Sacks is perfect as always

Even though this book is not based on Oliver Sacks' field of neurology, it possesses his keen and

sensitive insights into ancient cultures and botany in the context of today. All of his suggestions held true when visiting Oaxaca!

Read this book if you want to get caught up in an adventure that at first on the surface would seem to be an esoteric and even dull undertaking. If it strikes you this way, be prepared for a surprise.

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