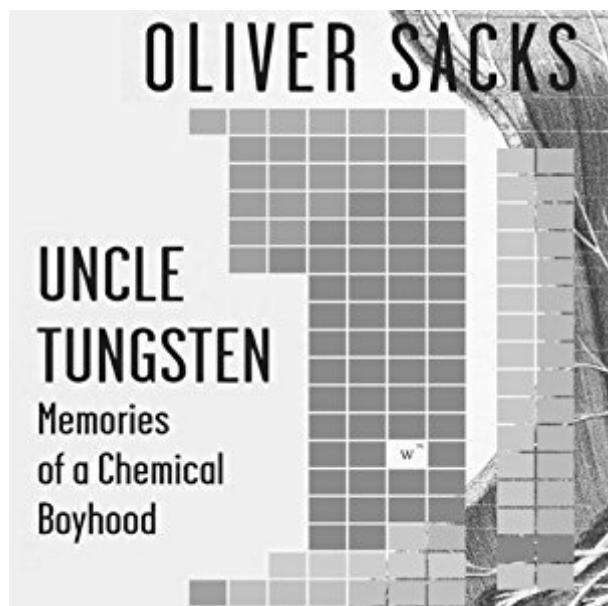


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# Uncle Tungsten: Memories Of A Chemical Boyhood



## Synopsis

Long before Oliver Sacks became a distinguished neurologist and best-selling writer, he was a small English boy fascinated by metals - also by chemical reactions (the louder and smellier the better), photography, squids and cuttlefish, H.G. Wells, and the periodic table. In this endlessly charming and eloquent memoir, the author of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings* chronicles his love affair with science and the magnificently odd and sometimes harrowing childhood in which that love affair unfolded. In *Uncle Tungsten* we meet Sacks' extraordinary family, from his surgeon mother (who introduces the 14-year-old Oliver to the art of human dissection) and his father, a family doctor who imbues in his son an early enthusiasm for housecalls, to his "Uncle Tungsten", whose factory produces tungsten-filament lightbulbs. We follow the young Oliver as he is exiled at the age of six to a grim, sadistic boarding school to escape the London Blitz, and later watch as he sets about passionately reliving the exploits of his "chemical heroes" in his own home laboratory. *Uncle Tungsten* is a crystalline view of a brilliant young mind springing to life, a story of growing up which is by turns elegiac, comic, and wistful, full of the electrifying joy of discovery.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Almost sixty years ago, I entered the Graduate School at the University of Pennsylvania to study for a Ph.D. in chemistry. There I had the opportunity to be a Lecture Demonstrator for an old-fashioned professor who believed that the basis for introductory chemistry courses be directed towards "descriptive chemistry" which was rapidly becoming out of vogue. In addition I was often called at

6:00,AM asking me to deliver his lecture at 8:00 AM . I learned more chemistry then than in any class I had taken before or since. Therefore Uncle Tungsten was pleasant visit down memory lane.I can understand why the casual reader would object to the detail that Dr. Sachs uses in his narrative. I probably requires some insight into the history of experimental science to appreciate the story. I am fortunate in having such knowledge and thoroughly enjoyed the book.. It is not a book that can be understood by many without a science background. I give the book five stars for my own selfish reasons.

I'd read my local library's copy first and was immediately engrossed. For the longest time, chemistry as a subject and a science had mystified, confounded, and frustrated me. While I had a good chemistry teacher in high school and enjoyed live demos, I never did understand what the periodic table of the elements actually meant, or why the elements were arranged in the sequence they were, or what was so significant about chemistry. Instead, I was generally more attracted to physics which seemed more readily graspable to me (in terms of basic concepts).Dr. Sacks' love of chemistry easily shone through his writing, and gave me a much deeper appreciation for the science, the history of the field, and a better understanding of what led to the current arrangement of the periodic table of the elements. His stories also helped me understand just how important a solid understanding of chemistry is to the workings of the human body.This book also left me with a greater longing for open-ended time of experimentation and discovery (much as he had had in his youth), stymied only by a desire not to burn my own home down, as well as a hope to instill the same interest in experimentation and discovery in others.I enjoyed the book so much that I bought my own copy in the hopes that my children will discover it in their future.

I used to have a copy of this book, lent it out, so just recently purchased the paperback version, and am about halfway through it (having read it several times in bygone days). I just love this book because of the way Dr. Sacks is so enthusiastic about all the things he comes across in daily life and learning when growing up. He had many mentors, both inside and outside of his family, and they seemed to know how to pique his interest. I didn't know much about chemicals before reading this book, and can't say I retain a lot of the chemical experiments that were done, but it was the sheer pleasure he received while learning, and passing it on to us, the readers that impresses me so much. This is one book I really enjoy sharing with friends, especially those with children.

I have always enjoyed reading Oliver Sacks' books. I especially thought "Uncle Tungsten: Memories

of a Chemical Boyhood" to be most engaging and interesting. The book is an elegantly written autobiography with remarkably vivid accounts of Sacks' early formative years, describing in historical detail his fascination with chemistry, numbers and natural history-subjects which revealed to him that there existed some kind of a natural order in the universe. This idea of a natural order became an obsession which he pursued with great passion, a kind of outlet to escape from the chaos of the war and its aftermath. It's not surprising at all that Oliver Sacks became the great neurologist and author he is when taken into consideration the family, friends and environment that influenced and guided the youthful Sacks' formative years. An amazing read! Recommed it to anyone who likes Oliver Sacks and/or the history of science.

I have seen some bad reviews here about this book, but I don't really agree. If you like to read about science in general and science history and/or chemistry, you will enjoy this book. If you like Oliver Sacks other books, this one will give you lots of insight as to why he is the way he is! I won't say more!As the other reviews said, he is a bit short on personal details in some areas, but then this book is not actually a biography of Oliver, it is about his uncles and extended family and their connection to the discoveries and inventions of their time, as they involved chemistry. I was amazed to realize that there probably isn't a home in America that doesn't have something in it that someone in his family didn't have a hand in inventing or developing.I was also surprised to see that when the book ends, Oliver is only about 15 years old. I suppose someone, hopefully Oliver himself, will someday write the definitive bio of him. I hope it is a long time coming, because he just keeps on writing winners.

This is an extraordinary book. I was reminded of my college experience studying chemistry and realized that my lack of interest in the subject stemmed in great part from my never having learned about the history of chemistry. Uncle Tungsten, if it had been written at the time, would have been an enormous help. It puts alchemy in perspective as it relates to subsequent discoveries. I think it should be in the curriculum for students preparing for a career in science.

Oliver Sacks is a master of creative nonfiction. This memoir is very interesting. Dr. Sacks discusses chemistry in an engaging fashion and elaborates on his lifelong fascination with elements, particularly metals. The stories of his boyhood in wartime and post-war London are interesting as well. Dr. Sacks has a way of describing all kinds of incidents in a very objective manner. If you like his other work, you will enjoy this book as well. Uncle Tungsten complements On the Move, the

memoirs of Dr. Sacks' adult life. As a reader, I felt very much a part of Dr. Sacks' large extended intellectually oriented family.

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