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Neurological Novels
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Like everyone else, the older I get, the more frightened I become with each memory lapse. It’s not hard to reassure my many elderly patients that it’s normal to forget things, that their friends and relatives do this all the time and joke about their “senior moments,” but it’s a bit different when reassuring myself. I’m sure all of the older people reading this (and you may use your own idea of what “elderly” means) do this frequently. When you know something about the disease you worry about, you know more about what to look for, when the alarms should go off and when they shouldn’t, but you also know that one of the problems with dementia is that you lose that insight that tells you when you need to really worry. Putting your car keys in the fridge may start looking like a reasonably good hiding place. So, a knowledgeable person knows that dementia can sneak up on you, especially if you tend to deny problems. It is a scary thing, perhaps the scariest. It is not something to be made into fiction unless you really can get the story right.

In preparing for a book club discussion on a story about a brain-injured victim, I first read a book by the same author about someone developing Alzheimer’s disease. I usually shy away from novels in which neurological problems play a central role. I fear that I will find the description of the deficit distracting, since I’m a neurologist with a lot of years under my belt. Oliver Sacks, MD, a trained, albeit non-practicing neurologist, who writes non-fiction descriptions of real people with real, and always interesting problems, is quite a different story. He accurately describes what patients look like to others, how they see themselves, and often how they think they appear to others. In this he is unsurpassed. His explanations of these frequently bizarre situations [e.g.: The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat] are, perhaps, a bit less insightful, but do not interfere with the amazing and wondrous true stories he has to tell. His goal, I think, is to describe how differently we all see and interact with the world, especially those whose brains work in ways different from the norm.

Novels are not true stories, although one can argue that real life is best described in fiction, and, as Oliver Sacks’ works demonstrate, reality is stranger than fiction. Novels incorporating neurological problems too often miss the mark. They become science fiction, either misusing a neurological deficit, or relying on it, falsely, to make a point.

In Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilyich, one of the great novellas of all time, the illness afflicting the main character is never specified. It’s not important. His increasing disability and his impending death are the important issues. The selection to be discussed in the book club, written by a person with a PhD in neuroscience, focuses on a particular neurological deficit as its central feature. The brain damage to the right parietal region causes neglect, a form of agnosia, which results in a lack of comprehension or even appreciation for the left side of space. In the extreme situation the left half of the world doesn’t exist. Imagining what it is to suffer from left neglect is like imagining what it would be like to have never been born. Oliver Sacks tells the story of the man with a right parietal stroke who is found on the floor next to his hospital bed. “How

Bestselling author of Awakenings and A Leg to Stand On
OLIVER SACKS
The MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE for a HAT and Other Clinical Tales
"Engaging, compassionate, moving . . . the lucidity and power of a gifted writer.”
did you get there?” asks the nurse. “I noticed a big, hairy leg in my bed so I pushed it over the side.” In this extreme situation, the patient failed to recognize his own leg, and confuses it with someone else’s, although, clearly that can’t be the whole story, since we generally get quite alarmed at finding a leg in our bed.

Nevertheless, a book is based on a traumatic brain injury inducing left-sided neglect, and the protagonist’s attempts to compensate for the problem. Meanwhile the author insinuates the notion that this person has neglected many things in her life, and, as in the neurological problem, had no insight into these neglected parts of her life, like her children and her mother. The problem with invoking a real, well-defined syndrome, is that people, namely neurologists and neuropsychologists, will expect the syndrome to behave as it does in real life, and not morph into a literary device.

A book about Alzheimer’s disease probably cannot be told from the outside in. The most frightening book I’ve ever read is a novel in which the central figure describes his life and the bizarre and troubling adventures and restrictions he experiences as his understanding diminishes and his world shrinks. It begins with him realizing his memory is slipping, and then describes others stopping him from going to work in the middle of the night. From his perspective we deduce what this looks like to the rest of the world. We feel his frustration when he sees his dog outside and, unable to figure out how to get to it, throws a chair through a window. The accurate description is the novel’s strength. We feel the character’s fear and frustration, and his inability to make sense of what is going on.

When a novel incorporates aspects of a disease, without full understanding, we get a superficial picture, which, for the unsophisticated, is merely a diminished version of what can be truly terrifying. For the sophisticated reader, it is exaggerated, annoying and artificial. When diseases are part of a story, they need to be woven in carefully and not take center stage, not unless the author is truly knowledgeable. Great novels never rely on superficial devices.

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Our Passion Protects Your Practice
You need not be a tenured professor to invent a new word. Just about anyone can accomplish this task. Listen, for example, to the energetic babblings of three-year-olds, the linguistic struggles of newly arrived immigrants, the inventive mentality of those in the advertising industry or even the ramblings of the chronically intoxicated adults.

A new word, a neologism, may represent the fusion of two established words, such as brunch (the merger of the words, breakfast and lunch); or it may be an acronym such as NATO; or it might be the conjunction of initial syllables of previously established scientific terms (such as aspirin, laser or radar); or even well-established words but now assembled so as to define something new, such as soccer-mom or cyberspace.

For some 50 years, the contrived words googol and googolplex hibernated...

A new word is born, typically, to fulfill an immediate, visible need; and when its purposeful mission is realized, the concocted word may then quietly disappear never to be heard from again. Sometimes, though, if the invented word is surrounded by other words of surpassing elegance, it may survive; and with persistence or patient advocacy it may flourish and even be invited into the family of established dictionaries. Consider, for example, William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and his relentless search for new words and phrases. He knew of no simple word to describe an infant regurgitating its food; and so he devised the word, puking. In Act II, Scene VII of As You Like It, Jaques says:

They have their exits and entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.  
At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

The spontaneous new words of youngsters, never found in conventional dictionaries, are nevertheless cherished by grandparents, endlessly repeated at family gatherings and then forgotten or replaced by yet other idiosyncratic utterances. Sometimes, though, a child's new word fits a singular need beyond the family's amusement and achieves an enduring role in the canonical vocabulary of a science, or even an industry.

The story begins in New York City with an enthusiastic mathematician named Edward Kasner (1878–1955), a gifted, intuitively inventive science teacher whose pedagogic genius provided his young students with a scientific understanding and love for basic mathematics. And so, in elaborating upon the dynamics of mathematics, Kasner often stressed the language of size and number.

In one such gathering in the 1930s, Kasner asked the assembled children: “It is raining outside. How many raindrops do you think have fallen on the school roof in the last hour?” The responses were widely varied but never exceeded 100. Gradually, though, the children began to realize the immense numbers of raindrops in an average storm. They learned the meaning of the word, million, and even the word, billion; and in so learning, they began to appreciate the enormity of the world around them: the number of grains of sand on the beaches of Coney Island, the number of miles to the nearest star and even the number of atoms in a single potato chip; and further, they began to understand that there were sums in nature far greater than a billion; that some numbers, even when astonishingly large, were nonetheless finite in amount; they just lacked proper names.

And so, while on a hike over the Palisade cliffs of the Hudson Valley, Kasner challenged his 9-year-old nephew, Milton Sirotta, to construct a new name for an immense number represented by the numeral one followed by...
one hundred zeros. Milton thought and then exclaimed: “A Googol!” And for an even greater number? “A Googolplex!” Accordingly, in the Kasner circle of avid students, googol and googolplex were now added to the transnational vocabulary of mathematics.

For some 50 years, the contrived words googol and googolplex hibernated, standing idly by, patiently in a few arcane mathematics texts, while awaiting for someone to assign it to some grand purpose in life, some reason to justify its continued existence. Then, toward the end of the 20th century, two amazingly gifted and imaginative Stanford University graduate students – Larry Page and Sergey Brin – retrieved the words, changed their spelling slightly, and created Google, Inc., and its world headquarters, Googleplex. Their unique corporation – now with 20,000 employees – has operated under the unlikely operational premise: “A healthy disregard for the impossible.” Its inaugural mission? To scan all of the world’s books and thus to create an immense artificial intelligence in the best interests of humanity. Since Page and Brin launched their unique enterprise called Google, the world has not been the same.

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The author has no financial interests to disclose.

Quotes: Rx for Life

“It is the hardest stone you can throw at a man to tell him that he is at the end of his tether and yet, put in the right way to an intelligent man, it is not always cruel.”

— Sir Thomas Brown, MD (1605–1682)

Submitted by Kenneth S. Korr, MD
100 Years Ago: Denial of Charges

The editors of the Providence Medical Journal, irked by an insurer’s denial of charges involving the care of an accident victim in the summer of 1913, vented their frustrations on the editorial pages of the publication and called for a just reimbursement fee schedule.

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FRANK E. BURDICK, M. D., Business Manager
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During the summer in the city of Providence a girl was injured by being thrown against a shaft in a mill and suffered, besides various contusions, fracture of three ribs. She was attended by a member of the State Society and at the end of the two weeks allowed by law he sent to the insurance company a bill for $25 for reduction of fractures and $9 for after attendance during this period of time. Payment of this bill was denied by the insurance company on the grounds that the physician was not their regular physician employed to care for these cases and that these charges were greater than the amount they were willing to pay for similar services, and they informed the physician that if he would accept $12 for his bill, which was the price which they had established, that they would pay it, otherwise they would not. Such an insult to the intelligence of the profession demands some action, and if for no other reason the adoption of a fee table similar to the one recommended by the committee would be of great service.
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