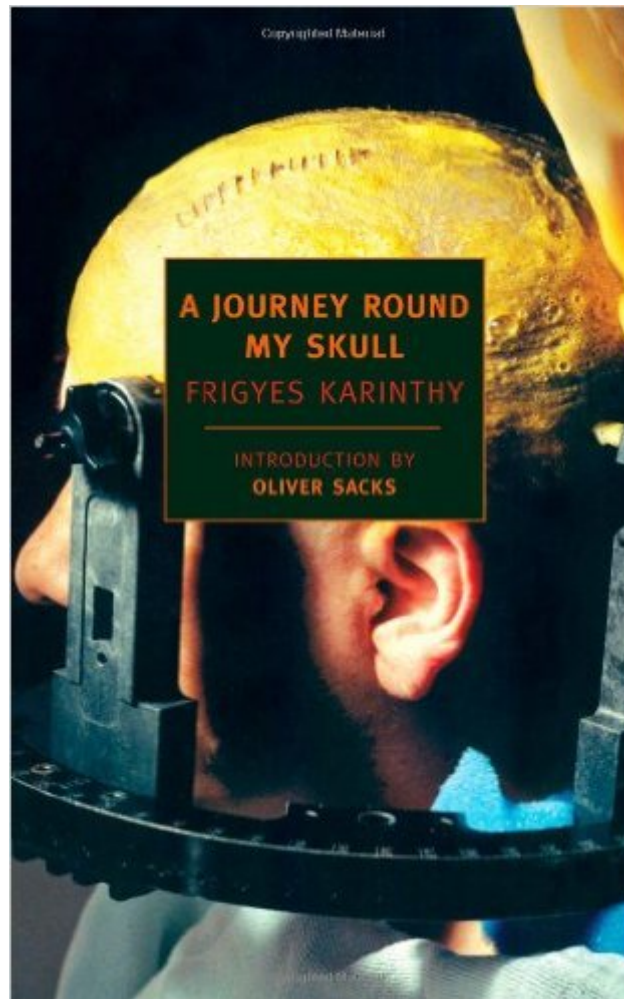


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A Journey Round My Skull (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

The distinguished Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy was sitting in a Budapest café, wondering whether to write a long-planned monograph on modern man or a new play, when he was disturbed by the roaring "so loud as to drown out all other noises" of a passing train. Soon it was gone, only to be succeeded by another. And another. Strange, Karinthy thought, it had been years since Budapest had streetcars. Only then did he realize he was suffering from an auditory hallucination of extraordinary intensity. What in fact Karinthy was suffering from was a brain tumor, not cancerous but hardly benign, though it was only much later "after spells of giddiness, fainting fits, friends remarking that his handwriting had altered, and books going blank before his eyes" that he consulted a doctor and embarked on a series of examinations that would lead to brain surgery. Karinthy's description of his descent into illness and his observations of his symptoms, thoughts, and feelings, as well as of his friends' and doctors' varied responses to his predicament, are exact and engrossing and entirely free of self-pity. *A Journey Round My Skull* is not only an extraordinary piece of medical testimony, but a powerful work of literature "one that dances brilliantly on the edge of extinction.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I purchased this book because, upon browsing it in the bookstore, it mirrored much of my experience with seizures and brain surgery. His descriptions and the unreal experience of having a

brain disease hit the bulls eye. The floating, stream of consciousness-like storytelling brings home the feelings involved with such a curious experience. I'm enjoying it immensely.

Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938) was an influential Hungarian novelist, playwright, poet and journalist. *A Journey Round My Skull* is a literary account of the development and successful removal of his brain tumor, which occurred near the end of his life. His symptoms begin insidiously, with auditory hallucinations, followed by headaches and vomiting of increasing severity, and loss of visual acuity. Despite these symptoms, which are suggestive of a brain tumor or another process that would cause increased intracranial pressure, the doctors in Budapest ignore his symptoms and fail to reach an accurate diagnosis. He eventually travels to Vienna, where clinicians there eventually reach the correct diagnosis. He undergoes surgery in Stockholm by a brilliant young neurosurgeon who prefers to operate on Europeans while they are awake, to minimize postoperative morbidity. Karinthy's description of the surgery is unforgettable, as he is conscious for all but the last portion of the procedure. I was in awe of the clinicians who were able to accurately diagnose his tumor without the benefit of advanced radiographic tools such as CT or MRI scans, but I was also horrified by the time it took to reach an accurate diagnosis and to remove the tumor, and the ineptitude and brusqueness of most of the clinicians Karinthy encountered - including his own wife, who was a renowned psychiatrist. Also of interest is the varied reactions of his friends and colleagues to his illness, especially when the seriousness of his condition became apparent. There are a number of digressions throughout the book, which were a bit distracting and seemed to contribute little, if anything, to this amazing story. Nonetheless, it was a very enjoyable read.

People interested in medicine and the history of medicine will enjoy this memoir by a middle-aged man who had a benign brain tumor removed in 1936. Karinthy, a Hungarian writer and journalist, was a bit of a celebrity in his native country and it was thanks to his social connections that he was able to be operated on by one of the best brain surgeons in the world. But the operation and Karinthy's recovery are only a small part of the book; he also covers in detail the months leading up to the operation, beginning when he first experienced symptoms. What followed were visits to many different doctors who misdiagnosed him and pooh-poohed his concerns. (Sound familiar?) Karinthy actually diagnosed himself long before his doctors did. The tumor skewed Karinthy's perception and he often hallucinated noises, images and even entire events. The way he writes about these periods, the reader is often unsure as to what is real and what is not. It makes for a somewhat jarring experience, but also helps the reader see just what he was going through. A few months I

read this book, I woke up one morning with a severe headache the likes of which I had never experienced before, and the excruciating pain didn't go away for the next fifteen months. My headache was not caused by a brain tumor, but during this experience I often thought of Karinthy's book, especially the passage where he was in so much pain he was on the verge of committing suicide. I could also definitely identify with his struggles with the medical establishment. Certainly this isn't for the average reader, but those who like works by people like Oliver Sacks (who wrote the intro to this memoir) will enjoy *A Journey Round My Skull*.

A Journey Round My Skull appears (based on reviews and cover blurbs) to be a classic of the 'sick patient' genre. I'm not exactly sure why. I found it to be a little challenging to stick with to the end. Part of the problem is the stilted translation from Karinthy's native language. It never flows well and reads very much like a translation inasmuch as the English phrases seem awkward, rough and not-quite-right. I almost never forgot that I was in fact reading a translation -- surely a sign of a less than stellar job. That aside, Karinthy's style never really caught on with me. What I expected to be a straight-up tale of what happens to a patient with a brain tumor saddled with diagnosis and treatment using only mid-20th century technology, turned out to be a more dreamlike, stream of consciousness experience that was often a little confusing. Also surprising was Karinthy's baffling attitude at being stricken with a brain tumor. Never did he admit to self-pity, sadness or fear for the future. Instead he tells his story from a detached, "what will be will be" perspective. It's rather hard for me to imagine facing blindness and possible death with such a cavalier attitude. I question if he really did either.

A bit dense, considering the topic and what, apparently, the author was attempting.

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