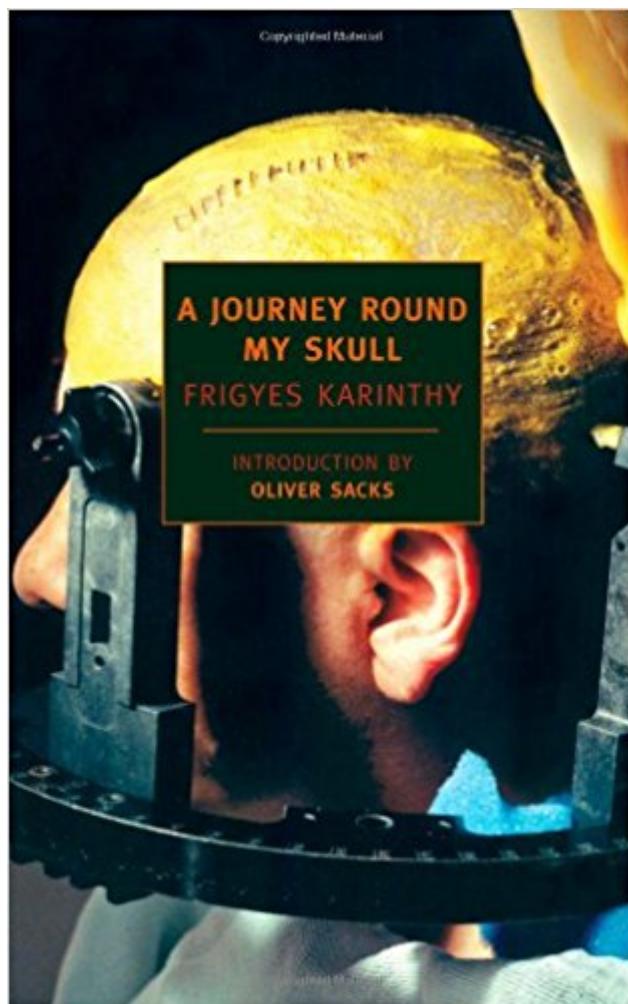


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# A Journey Round My Skull (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

The distinguished Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy was sitting in a Budapest cafÃ©, 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

"Karinthy's book is, to my mind, a masterpiece. We are inundated now with medical memoirs, both biographical and autobiographical—the entire genre has exploded in the last

twenty years. Yet even though the technology may have changed, the human experience has not, and *Journey Around My Skull*, the first autobiographical description of a journey inside the brain, remains one of the very best. — Oliver Sacks (from the Introduction)

“The first patient’s eye-view account of a brain operation in medical history is remarkable.” The London Evening Standard called *A Journey Round My Skull* “an extraordinary book. The New Statesman and Nation called it a very remarkable book. The Spectator an unusual and extremely interesting book. The Glasgow Herald a terrible and marvelous book. The British Medical Journal a book of the highest value. This chorus of praise is not too strong.” *A Journey Round My Skull* is a document that few other men would have written and that no reader will easily forget.

“Here is a book of surpassing interest and power.” Written with utmost clarity and candor, Karinthy’s account of his illness and operation is a compelling, unique achievement which needs no artifice. The patient’s narrative holds the reader in a spell.

“Pirandello could not have written it better.” *a triumph of writing, a very remarkable book.*

“It would be impossible to read anything so moving, so frightening or so exciting.” *a terrible and marvelous book. It will be treasured by the courageous reader for its beauty, its poetry and its revelation of an experience that happily comes to few men.*

“John O’London’s Weekly” *A remarkable subject, and the book is as remarkable as its subject. Not a touch of morbidity adheres to the story.* *indeed an extraordinary book.*

“The Evening Standard” *This unusual and extremely interesting book* *as well as being a brilliantly imaginative record of an illness, the book is also a very revealing autobiography.* *The Spectator* “Karinthy was a magnificent parodist and a ruthless but never pompous social critic. His poetry was a mixture of carefully polished, effectively classicist and broadly-rolling, Whitmanesque verse.”

“Adam Makkai” *Karinthy gives a minute description of his skull, a description that covers both the physical and psychological* *but he also incorporates his readings (Thomas Mann’s Joseph and his Brethren, Scott’s account of his journeys to the South Pole, Jules Verne’s Michel Strogoff) and a variety of philosophical musings.* *What a pleasure to sit down with a witty, urbane, eminently well educated human being, to bask in his presence as he recounts to you something of vital importance to him. We could do with a few more Karinths nowadays.*

“The Hungarian Quarterly” *A brilliant humorist and prose-writer.* *The Independent*

[UK] "Karinthy] possesses the sharp and biting satire of Voltaire; the provocative doubt of Shaw; the poetic fantasy of Maeterlinck. Karinthy is a universal literary genius: playwright, humorist, poet, novelist, critic, essayist, literary caricaturist, etc." He has that rare ability of our own Charlie Chaplin, in that whatever he attempts to do, he can make us feel that he is a genius." • "Los Angeles Times" "This book is both a human document and a piece of authentic literature, not devoid of humor." • "The New York Times"

Frigyes Karinthy (1887–1938) was a Hungarian author, playwright, poet, journalist, and translator. He was the first proponent of the six degrees of separation concept in his 1929 short story, *Láncszemek* (Chains). Karinthy is known in English for his novellas *Voyage to Faremido* and *Capillaria*. Father of Ferenc Karinthy, he remains one Hungary's most popular writers. Oliver Sacks practices neurology in New York City. His books include *Awakenings*, *Uncle Tungsten*, and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

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

*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.

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*.

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.

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.

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