


Book inscriptions, memories, and stories



Martin Duke, MD

Dr. Duke is retired from private practice in cardiology. He was Director of Medical Education, Manchester Memorial Hospital, Manchester, CT, and Assistant Clinical Professor, Department of Medicine, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington, CT.

Not unlike diaries and old letters, book inscriptions also serve as reminders of the past. Usually hand-written on the title page or flyleaf of a book, they can vary in length from a signature, date and a brief word or two, up to as much as a full page of text.

The following are a few inscriptions written in books given to me over the years, along with some of the stories and memories they bring back to me.

A sports prize

In 1938, I was eight-years-old and living in London. Evidence of my early school years there is found in a copy of *The Little Oxford Dictionary of Current English*,¹ containing the following inscription:



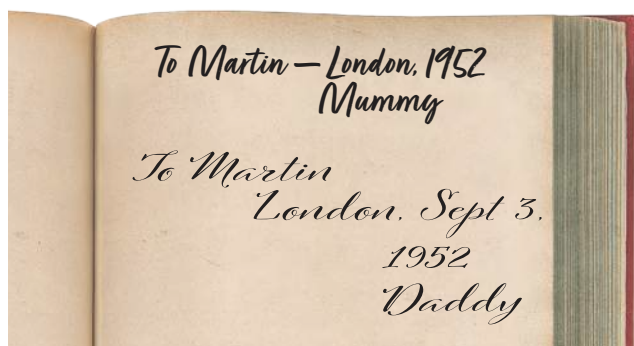
There was a playground adjacent to the school and I walked on Golders Green Road to get there while helping push the pram containing my sister. One particular day

I went with other students to a nearby park. We were instructed to stand in a line on the side of the road as a large car drove up and stopped in front of us. A tall lady in a long dress got out, said a few words as we all bowed, and then re-entered the car. I was told that she was the Dowager Queen Mary.

This dictionary has remained undamaged and in my possession for more than 80 years. I've often wondered if winning this sports prize, even one so humble as for a potato race, may perhaps have been an early indication of some possible athletic ability in future years.

A special year

In 1952, I received a copy of the eighth edition of *The Merck Manual*² from my parents when visiting them in London. They inscribed the following on the front flyleaf:



Whenever I look at that brief inscription, I am reminded of what a meaningful year 1952 was for me. On April 22, 1952, I became a naturalized United States citizen in the U.S. District Court - Eastern District of New York, in Brooklyn. I was also between my second and third year of medical school and about to enter the clinical period of my medical training, the reason I always thought that my parents chose wisely in giving me this particular book.

That summer, I returned to England, my birthplace, for the first time since having left as a 10-year-old during the early days of World War II. This was a very sentimental and exciting journey for me and I still have pictures of England taken with a Brownie box camera from the deck of the ship I was on.

In addition, and most significantly for me, a few days before boarding that ship I was introduced to the woman I would marry two years later.

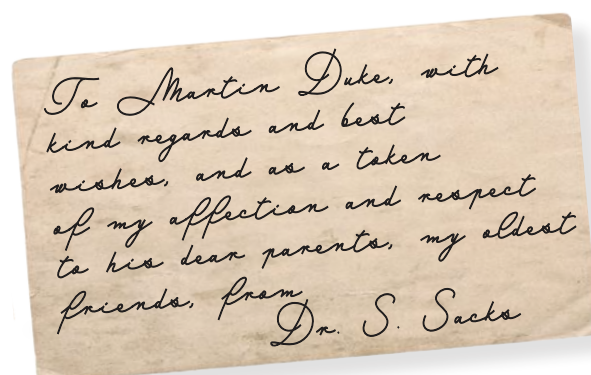
A family doctor and his son

In 1974, my father had a fatal cerebral hemorrhage and I returned to London for the funeral service and to be with my mother and sisters. Many people came to the



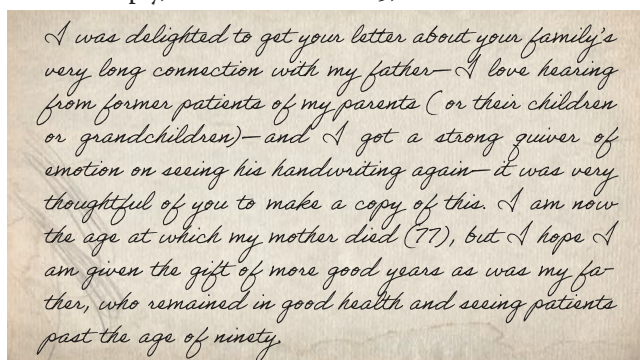
Dr. Samuel Sacks. Photo courtesy of the Oliver Sacks Foundation.

house after the service to offer condolences and pay their respects. Amongst them was Dr. Samuel Sacks, our family doctor since the early 1920s when he first opened his practice in London's East End. He brought with him a copy of his son's recently published book *Awakenings*³ in which he wrote the following inscription, dated December 1, 1974:



Dr. Sacks continued to practice into his 90s, passing away in 1990.

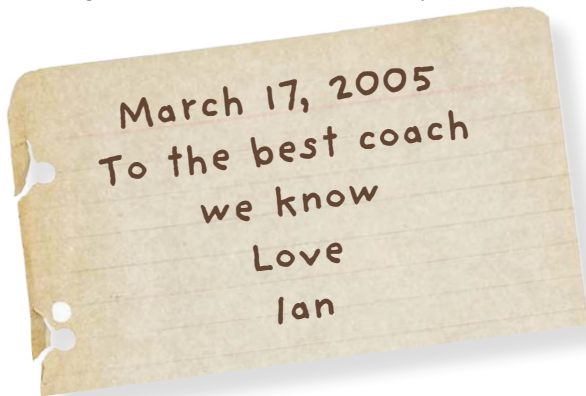
However, the story of this inscription was not yet at an end. Knowing that Dr. Oliver Sacks (AQA, Albert Einstein College of Medicine/Montefiore Medical Center, 1970, Faculty), a neurologist and celebrated author, was not well, and thinking that he might like to see a copy of the inscription written by his father many years earlier, in 2010 I sent him a photocopy with an explanation of its origin. Shortly thereafter, I received a hand written letter from Oliver Sacks in reply, dated November 19, 2010:



A few years later, in 2015, Oliver Sacks died at the age of 82.

In the eyes of a grandson

Several years ago, I received a book from a then seven-year-old grandson that was inscribed by him as follows:⁴



Although appreciative of this inscription, I have never been sure I was truly deserving of such high praise. I felt I only did what most grandfathers would do if given the opportunity.

I remember playing with my grandson on tennis and basketball courts and kicking soccer balls around wherever we found an open field. It was basketball, however, that Ian enjoyed and still continues to enjoy the most. He had posters of his favorite players hanging in his bedroom, and participated in pickup games with friends whenever possible. He is an avid Boston Celtics fan, attends their games in the Boston Garden or watches them on television, and contributes articles to a Boston Celtics fan site. He played on his high school junior varsity and varsity basketball teams, and spent one summer coaching 7th- and 8th-graders at a local Y while leading their team to a league championship.

When visiting Gloucester, MA, I would drive Ian to and from school. We talked about sports while indulging in jelly doughnuts on the morning ride (unbeknownst to his parents), and had ice cream or a soda when stopping at Captain Dusty's Ice Cream shop on the way home. Was this how I came to be "the best coach?" It matters little as these are some of my favorite memories, never to be forgotten.

Patients

I have a number of books containing inscriptions written by patients or members of their families, thanking me and expressing appreciation for the care I had provided. The following, dated December 1988, is from one of those books:⁵

To Dr. Duke,

In appreciation for the skilled and compassionate care you gave to our mother through the many years she was your patient in Connecticut. She thought of you as a friend, and was comforted by your continuing interest and concern after her move to Vermont.

We hope this book will remind you of our mother's humor.

Thank you from her children

This and other similar inscriptions are reminders of all those who put their trust in me—a truly sobering thought.

To borrow a phrase that is the title of a book about another physician, I consider myself "a fortunate man"⁶ for having had the privilege of being a doctor.

References

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The author's E-mail address is martinsetpoint@yahoo.com.