

# 'Neurological literature': Cognitive Disorders

Cognitive disorders may not perhaps lend themselves well to literary description, in the way that, for example, headache disorders, as almost purely subjective states, do. Nonetheless, some attempts have been made, examples of which are reviewed here.

## Amnesia

Amnesia is, of course, a staple of Hollywood hokum (see Box: film buffs will surely be able to recall more examples); it is perhaps as popular a theme as the maverick cop or the wrongly accused. Loss of personal identity is a frequent aspect of these formulaic screen episodes of amnesia, and recovery an inevitable part of the filmic denouement, both features suggestive of psychogenic amnesia or fugue. In connection with loss of personal identity, boys of a certain vintage will recall that this is the fate which befell the quintessential toy doll action hero Action Man, sadly without recovery.

Amnesia as a feature of Alzheimer's disease has also attracted screen portrayals: Mia Farrow in *Forget Me Never* (1999), Julie Christie in *Away From Her* (2006), and perhaps most famously Judi Dench in *Iris* (2001), based on John Bayley's memoir of his wife Iris Murdoch's illness, the linguistic consequences of which have also been chronicled, more objectively, through analysis of novels written at three stages of the author's career.<sup>1</sup>

Memory problems are also the defining characteristic of Mr Forgetful, number 14 in the Mister Men series of children's books by Roger Hargreaves: entrusted with a message, Mr Forgetful forgets it, in as much as he is only able to pass on a garbled version, only to recall the correct message later, suggesting his problem is one of retrieval rather than encoding and storage. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Gilderoy Lockhart, Hogwarts' Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, threatens Harry and Ron with a 'Memory Charm' after admitting he was not in fact the perpetrator of the heroic deeds described in his books, but he is 'impaled upon his own sword', according to Dumbledore, when the charm backfires on the threshold of the Chamber of Secrets.<sup>2</sup>

An 'amnesia drug' given as a 'shot' is available at the Supreme Headquarters of the Alien Defence Organisation (SHADO) in the 1970s Gerry and Sylvia Anderson serial *UFO*, to be administered to individuals who unwittingly come into contact with aliens or SHADO. In the US TV serial *Monk*, about the detective Adrian Monk who has obsessive-compulsive disorder,



Dr Andrew Larner is the editor of our Book Review Section. He is a Consultant Neurologist at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, with a particular interest in dementia and cognitive disorders. He is also an Honorary Apothecaries' Lecturer in the History of Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

### Correspondence to:

Dr Andrew Larner, Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Lower Lane, Fazakerley, Liverpool, L9 7LJ, UK. E. a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk

the protagonist develops memory problems and goes missing after a head injury (season four: *Mr Monk Bumps His Head*). The police surmise amnesia (= loss of identity), but Monk's psychiatrist Dr Kroger states that what they suggest is very rare and thinks some kind of dissociative state more likely. Although Monk is apparently unaware of his identity, nonetheless his obsessive-compulsive traits persist, which allows him to solve a murder despite not knowing that he is a detective.

Other authors have been fascinated by memory, for example Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park*.<sup>3,4</sup> As pointed out by Papanicolaou in his textbook on amnesia,<sup>5</sup> the villagers of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez suffer loss of memory for object names following an 'insomnia plague', in response to which they paste labels to objects bearing their names and functions.<sup>6</sup> Poor sleep quality is of course not an uncommon accompaniment, and of probable aetiological significance, in memory clinic attenders complaining of poor memory, although in the case of Marquez the trope is probably symbolic rather than naturalistic.<sup>7</sup>

## Aphasia

*Wings* by Arthur Kopit,<sup>8</sup> initially conceived as a radio-play and later adapted for the stage, portrays a woman with post-stroke aphasia. Kopit was prompted to examine this issue when his father suffered a stroke, although the author describes the piece as 'speculation informed by fact' (xv) and not a case study. The central character, Emily Stilson, is in her 70s when she suffers a stroke. She has what appears to be a fluent aphasia with paraphasias and neologisms, which the author describes, evidently advisedly from the material contained in his introduction, as jargon (42). We hear her words from both her own and her medical auditors point of view, indicating the lack of self-monitoring of

verbal output. These phenomena are the result of a 'left cerebral infarction' (66), although interestingly the patient is left handed (57) which may complicate any simple interpretation. Mrs Stilson also seems to have an 'out of body experience' near the end of the play (74).

Kopit's work is also mentioned in the context of a (non-fictional) case of global aphasia characterised by recurrent utterances, sometimes also known as verbal stereotypies, stereotyped aphasia, or monophasia.<sup>9</sup> This of course differs from the total anarthria of the locked-in syndrome reported from the inside, as it were, by Bauby.<sup>10</sup>

## Apraxia

David Perkin identified a possible case of 'dressing apraxia' in Arnold Bennett's novel *Clayhanger* (1910) in the character of Darius Clayhanger, a portrait perhaps based on the illness of the author's father, Enoch Bennett. Perkin suggests a pathological diagnosis of Pick's disease confined to the parietal lobes in Bennett père, based on analogy with a case described by Lhermitte.<sup>11</sup> Certainly a corticobasal degeneration syndrome with the neuropathological substrate of tau-positive Pick body Pick's disease has been described on occasion.<sup>12</sup> However, the symptom of dressing apraxia is now regarded as a disorder of visuoperceptual function rather than an apraxia per se.

Difficulty dressing is one feature manifested by a character in the short story *No One's Guilty* by the Argentinian author Julio Cortázar (1914-1984), which has been interpreted as an example of ideomotor apraxia. Other symptoms mentioned may be thought representative of alien hand, dystonia, myoclonus and postural instability, which together have been suggested to constitute the gestalt of corticobasal degeneration.<sup>13</sup>

## Agnosia

Previous articles in ACNR have alluded to possible cases of agnosia, specifically visual object agnosia in Anton Chekhov's short story *The Kiss* (1887),<sup>4</sup> and prosopagnosia afflicting Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872).<sup>14</sup>

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### Some films featuring characters with amnesia/memory loss

**Shattered** (1991). Tom Berenger: car crash, coma, memory erased, unfaithful wife, torrid affair, etc, etc ....

**The Long Kiss Goodnight** (1996). Amnesiac suburban housewife Samantha, aka Charly (Geena Davis), was a ruthless assassin: "Like Charly's alter ego .. you may have trouble remembering what happened once its all over" (Time Out).

**Jackie Chan's Who Am I?** (1998). Any more explanation required??

**Memento** (2000). Shelby (Guy Pearce) suffers from a kind of memory loss whereby he remembers life before the murder of his wife but is unable since then to recall anything for more than a few minutes.

**Santa Who?** (2000). Santa (Leslie Nielsen) suffers amnesia after crashing his sleigh into the car of a Scrooge-like TV reporter.

**The Bourne Identity** (2002). Amnesiac (Matt Damon) was deadly CIA assassin, now the target of his former employers; memory still troubled in **The Bourne Supremacy** (2004).

**Blind Horizon** (2003). Amnesiac (Val Kilmer) believes US president in peril.

**Gothika** (2003). Psychiatrist (Halle Berry) develops amnesia after a car crash, then is incarcerated in her own hospital accused of murdering her husband. An every day tale of psychiatry practice?

**50 First Dates** (2004). Amnesiac Lucy (Drew Barrymore) must be wooed afresh each day by would-be Don Juan (Adam Sandler).