

the question of identity, or what exactly he or she has become. They are not, of course, Japanese and will never be accepted as Japanese. They might be thought unusual *gaijin*, like my aikido teacher Robert Mustard, a blue-eyed samurai, but especially for the older generation of Japanese who suffered during the Second World War and the US occupation, disparage-

ment and resentment are never too far below the surface. The *gaijin* foreigner is forever *keto*, a hairy white thing. Certainly nothing to emulate.

As a Japanese-speaking *gaijin*, Buruma struggled to make a virtue of his outsider status. Eventually he knew he had to leave, and yet he honestly admits that Japan was the making of him. On the plane flying

away from his Tokyo romance, he struggled for one last glimpse of Mount Fuji, which is often swathed in low cloud. Then the captain came on the air and announced that the fabled peak was visible from the other side of the plane. He had been looking through the wrong window.

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ADRIAN WOOLFSON

Final Frontiers

The Unmapped Mind: A Memoir of Neurology, Incurable Disease and Learning How to Live

By Christian Donlan

(Viking 292pp £14.99)

In this beautifully observed, lyrical and meticulously researched book, Christian Donlan details his experiences of the unpredictable anatomical ravages that multiple sclerosis (MS) inflicts upon his body and mind. His explorations of his own erratic pathology are informed by his day job as a reviewer of video games for Europe's largest gaming website. He regards video games as a compelling point of comparison for his life. In video games, it is the player who dictates the flow of events. Donlan realises that in his case, by contrast, he has largely lost control and become a passive figure in a strange and enigmatic biological game being played out on his body. Among other things, the disease causes his hands to fizz and sputter like 'dying sparklers', destabilises his psychology and shatters his visual world into disconnected units.

Donlan uses the metaphor of a journey into unknown territory – a 'wilder-ness of neurology' – that he would rather never have taken. Like the early pioneers, he benefits from only the most rudimentary of maps: although the broad pattern and tempo of MS are well documented, the idiosyncratic manner in which sufferers are afflicted turns each individual patient into an explorer of their own disease landscape. Donlan excels in his new and unexpected vocation, proving himself to be an adept tour guide of his disease as he catalogues the incremental destruction

of his bodily and mental functions. Ultimately, as he struggles to comprehend his ever-changing emotions and sensations, he concludes that the infinite and inexhaustible expanses of the human mind are in fact un-mappable.

The drama of this inwardly focused tale of a human brain's degradation and an individual's attempt to comprehend and endure it is increased by the fact that it unfolds within the mundane context of day-to-day seaside life in Brighton at a time when the horizons of the author's young daughter are gradually expanding. Donlan is simultaneously fascinated by the 'sense of being torn apart by something beautiful' and bewildered by the experience of seeing first-hand the vulnerability and dependency of human existence.

The process of mental and physical dis-integration caused by MS, a relapsing and remitting disease of unknown cause that unpredictably destroys the fatty myelin sheath that surrounds some nerves, systematically strips the self back to its most basic elements, removing the veneer of accumulated conscious modifications to reveal the naked essentials underneath. It evokes in Donlan, who at one point feels 'like a building that is slowly being burgled', a new and profound appreciation of the invisible physiological processes employed by the brain to underwrite the body's routine functions. We regularly take these 'benign tricks' for granted and they escape our consideration



Donlan: lyrical

until the moment they fail.

Like a 'doomed explorer' determined to seek out the elusive source of a great river, Donlan finds himself absorbed by an overwhelming compulsion to identify the root cause of his pathology. While meticulously avoiding other MS sufferers to prevent glimpses of the inevitable future that awaits him, he develops an insatiable appetite for neurological knowledge. Seated in front of MRI images of his brain in the hospital and browsing through anatomical sections of the 'ugly grey mass' that he reluctantly acknowledges defines him, he realises that this irregular 'gritty, ghostly lump' is where he has spent his whole life. Indeed, the brain is our secret home, an inner neurological sanctum that is assaulted and unstitched by MS. Having been forced to explore his disease without the benefit of a known destination, his brain has suffered the indignity of being transformed into an impersonal two-dimensional neurological map that barely articulates the true nature of Donlan's journey.

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