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## ARTS

# Review of reviews: Books

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### Book of the week

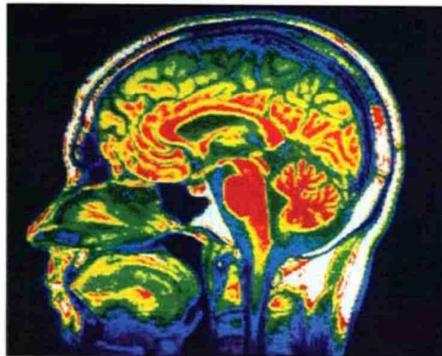
#### **Into the Grey Zone**

by Adrian Owen

Guardian Faber 320pp £16.99

The Week Bookshop £14.99

The author of this “fascinating” book is a British neuroscientist renowned for his work scanning the brains of supposedly “vegetative” patients, said Helen Davies in *The Sunday Times*. Unlike victims of “locked-in” syndrome, who can “talk” by moving their eyes, those in “persistent vegetative states” (PVS) are awake but physically unresponsive – which once led doctors to assume that they couldn’t be conscious. However, in a series of experiments that made “medical history”, Owen found evidence to suggest that many are, in fact, conscious. In 2006, he became the first doctor to “communicate” with a vegetative patient, when he asked a young car accident victim to imagine two separate scenarios – playing tennis and walking around their home – and watched as her scans “lit up” exactly like those of a “fully conscious person” would. This was Owen’s “eureka moment”: an ability to follow instructions is a hallmark of consciousness. This absorbing book, written with “infectious” enthusiasm, should be “required reading” for “caregivers, doctors, ethicists, lawyers and philosophers”.



An MRI scan of a conscious brain

Based on his experiences scanning the brains of PVS patients, Owen estimates that “as many as a fifth” may be conscious, said Helen Rumbelow in *The Times*. There could, in other words, be “hundreds” such patients in the UK, and “thousands” in the US. Their plight must be hellish: the “modern equivalent of being accidentally buried alive” – except that they are “buried in their own bodies”. And it “gets worse”: one apparently vegetative woman, who later recovered, was “played a Celine Dion album on repeat for months”. (On recovery, she told her mother: “If I ever hear that Celine Dion album again, I will kill

you.”) “I loved this book,” said Rumbelow: it is an honest and moving account of an astonishing discovery.

Owen’s discoveries are certainly “remarkable”, and he writes with “evangelical fervour”, said Henry Marsh in the *New Statesman*. Yet his book should be treated with “some care”. At times, he comes close to making it sound as though most vegetative patients are “potentially wide awake but locked in” – when all he has really shown is that a minority have “some kind of inner life”. Not everyone in this field agrees with Owen that demonstrating awareness is “the same as having a conscious sense of self”. Consciousness is a complex phenomenon, “not simply a matter of on or off”. The truth is that, despite his efforts, “we cannot know what these patients are experiencing”.