Finding life behind the eyes

From then, Owen — spurred by the situation of his own ex-girlfriend Maureen, who had been in a coma for years after an aneurysm — was on a mission. Into The Grey Zone reads like a thriller as he recounts his teams’ efforts to explore this ‘grey zone’. There’s a major breakthrough when they work out how to get vegetative patients to communicate with them. If the answer to a question is ‘no’, they’re asked to imagine playing tennis, which makes their brain light up in specific ways. Imagining walking round their old homes triggers different brain responses and means ‘yes’. As technology and techniques improve, the neurologists can ask if patients are in pain or want to die; they can even question crime victims left in a coma by an attacker.

When Kate’s family and carers realised she was conscious, they began talking and reading to her. Within two years she’d recovered full consciousness and was able to describe her ordeal using a word-pad keyboard, recalling the horror she’d felt as she tried to call out but no sound came and staff treated her like an object. ‘They thought I was just a body. It was horrendous,’ she said.

Over the years, Owen discovers that about 20 per cent of vegetative patients are trapped in this nightmare scenario, some left ignored for years. In one heartbreaking case, he spots signs of consciousness in a Canadian patient, but her doctor refuses to tell her family that she may well be aware.

Owen’s enthusiasm for his science crackles from the pages. His determination to fight for the scores of voiceless grey-zone patients he encounters, to prove they’re ‘thinking, feeling people’ is hugely thought-provoking and deeply moving.