ARTS
Review of reviews: Books

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".

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".