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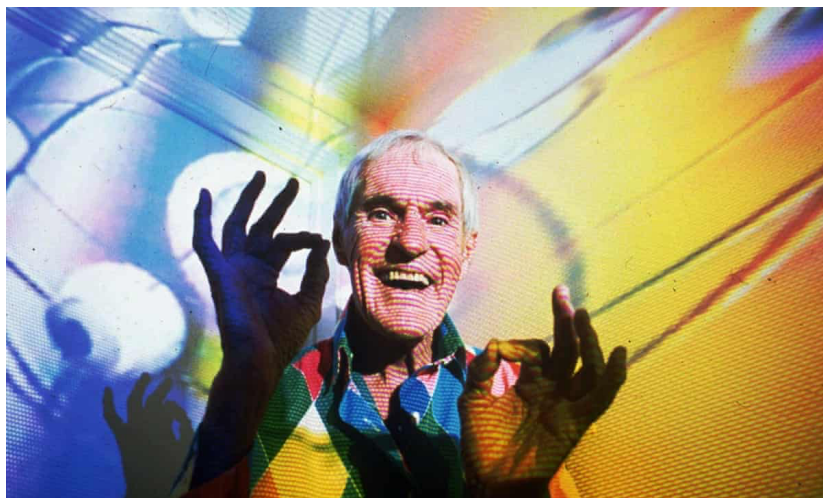


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How to Change Your Mind: The New Science of Psychedelics by Michael Pollan - review

Pollan's illuminating history of hallucinogenic drugs reveals that their mystical and medical benefits are indivisible

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▲ Timothy Leary in 1992: 'would have been more help piping down than turning on'. Photograph: AP

In 1938, the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann, seeking a new drug to stimulate blood circulation, accidentally invented lysergic acid deethylamide, or LSD. Later, after inadvertently absorbing a minuscule quantity through his skin, he was obliged to stagger home and lie down on his sofa, where, “in a dreamlike state, with eyes closed... I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colours”. It was more than an impressive display, though: Hoffman felt convinced he’d been inducted into a secret of the universe, “the mystical experience of a deeper, comprehensive reality”. Mere days after the birth of LSD, scientists split the first uranium atom. One of these two world-jolting events went on to reshape civilisation, but by the mid-1960s, the other had been banished to the shadows. Research funding ceased and LSD was outlawed along with psilocybin, the psychedelic ingredient in magic mushrooms, introduced to the west in 1955 by an open-



Michael Pollan: 'I was a very reluctant psychonaut'

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minded Manhattan banker. A trapdoor to another dimension had briefly opened, but now it seemed decisively slammed shut.

Michael Pollan, author of *In Defence of Food* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, was born a bit too late (though also, I think he'd admit, a bit too square) to participate in the psychedelic era. "The only way I was going to get to Woodstock," he writes, "was if my parents drove me." But then in the 1990s that trapdoor reopened a crack: American scientists quietly began research indicating that psychedelics might enormously benefit the terminally ill, alcoholics and those with "treatment-resistant" depression. *How to Change Your Mind* is Pollan's sweeping and often thrilling chronicle of the history of psychedelics, their brief modern ascendancy and suppression, their renaissance and possible future, all interwoven with a self-deprecating travelogue of his own cautious but ultimately transformative adventures as a middle-aged psychedelic novice. In other words, this is a serious work of history and science, but also one in which the author, under the influence of a certain Central American toad venom, becomes convinced he's giving birth to himself. Improbably, the combination largely works.

It is to Pollan's credit that, while he ranks among the best of science writers, he's willing, when necessary, to abandon that genre's fixation on materialist explanation as the only path to understanding. One of the book's important messages is that the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics, for the dying or seriously ill, can't be separated from the mystical experiences to which they give rise. Judging from the testimony here, it's because the drugs allow a glimpse of "boundless awareness" - a perspective beyond the small and solitary ego - that patients with advanced cancer find themselves at peace with the notion of death, while depressives learn to feel hope. "Oh God, it all makes sense now, so simple and beautiful," says one dying man and that feeling persists for the remainder of his life.

Why assume that "normal" consciousness is the real one, while the boundless and transcendent variety is somehow fake?

The book makes clear that it's no mere hippy cliché to say that LSD and psilocybin were banned because of the threat they posed to the established social order. (The real health risks of these non-addictive drugs, Pollan explains, are for most people exceedingly small.) LSD "truly was an acid, dissolving almost everything with which it came into contact, beginning with the hierarchies of the mind... and going on from there to society's various structures of authority". Timothy Leary, though he emerges from these pages as a showboater who'd have been more help piping down than turning on or tuning in, probably had it right. "The kids who take LSD aren't going to fight your wars," he predicted. "They aren't going to join your corporations." It was an outcome that couldn't be permitted.

The big risk for a writer here, as Pollan is aware, is that first-person reports from the frontiers of consciousness have a way of seeming utterly banal on the page: there's an inverse relationship between how amazing it is to perceive that "I was God and God was me", or that "the core of our being is love", and how tedious it can be to read about it. Still, he gamely makes the attempt to put the ineffable into words. Pausing in the middle of a guided psilocybin trip to visit the lavatory, he watches himself pee: "The arc of water I sent forth was truly the most beautiful thing I had ever seen," he writes, "a waterfall of diamonds cascading into a pool, breaking its surface into a billion clattering fractals of light."

It's interesting to ask what psychedelics do to the brain in order to cause such effects and Pollan devotes a solid section to the neuroscience of tripping. But to wonder how neurons create these illusions, as he notes, is to begin from the assumption that they are illusions. Why assume that "normal"

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consciousness is the real one, while the boundless and transcendent variety is somehow fake? Almost all reports of psychedelic-induced spiritual experience share what William James called the “noetic” sense: people are convinced they’ve experienced not just some impressive mental theatre, but something more true than everyday reality. *How to Change Your Mind* is at its most gripping in the moments when Pollan, with a wry nod to the sceptical rationalist he always thought he was, allows himself to wonder if they might actually be right.

• *How to Change Your Mind: The New Science of Psychedelics* by Michael Pollan is published by Allen Lane (£20). To order a copy for £17 go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99





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