



Blue Dreams: The Science and the Story of the Drugs that Changed Our Minds

Lauren Slater

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A groundbreaking and revelatory history of our major psychotropic drugs, from "a thoroughly exhilarating and entertaining writer" (*Washington Post*).

Although one in five Americans now takes at least one psychotropic drug, the fact remains that nearly seventy years after doctors first began prescribing them, we still don't know exactly how or why these drugs work--or don't work--on what ails our brains. *Blue Dreams* offers the explosive story of the discovery, invention, people, and science behind our licensed narcotics, as told by a riveting writer and psychologist who shares her own intimate experience with the highs and lows of psychiatry's drugs.

Lauren Slater's account ranges from the earliest, Thorazine and lithium, up through Prozac and other antidepressants, as well as Ecstasy, "magic mushrooms," the most cutting-edge memory drugs, and even neural implants. Along the way, she narrates the history of psychiatry itself, illuminating the imprint its colorful little capsules have left on millions of brains worldwide, and demonstrating how these wonder drugs may heal us or hurt us.

Blue Dreams: The Science and the Story of the Drugs that Changed Our Minds Details

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From Reader Review **Blue Dreams: The Science and the Story of the Drugs that Changed Our Minds** for online ebook

Christina Dudley says

This is a truly fascinating and excellent book by the author who also wrote another favorite of mine, *OPENING SKINNER'S BOX*. I picked *BLUE DREAMS* up because my mother-in-law suffers from dementia (and now related psychosis) and has moved beyond non-pharmacological solutions, so I wanted to learn more about the psychotropic drugs that are out there. Slater combines personal memoir, history of science, and cultural critique in looking at conditions as varied as depression, bipolar condition, schizophrenia, OCD, and autism, and finds good and bad news.

One of the most discouraging bits of bad news is how little is still understood about what causes our brains to go wrong. Before I read this book I thought depression, for example, was a "chemical imbalance." Turns out that's not true. There isn't any consistency to levels of neurotransmitters and mental illness. You can find schizophrenics with high dopamine or low dopamine. You can find depressives with high serotonin or low serotonin. But once you introduce a drug that ups the level or receptivity to certain neurotransmitters, then you have *created* a chemical imbalance, and a new, genuine problem to be fixed down the road. Not knowing exactly what causes mental illness means you can't just point at something in a blood test or x-ray and say, "Ah-ha! We see exactly what's going wrong." So you throw drugs at it, trying each one in turn at different dosages. And, even when you find one that seems to help, the body eventually tolerates it and the cycle begins again. Ugh.

The drugs also have some heavy side effects. No one has studied long-term effects of psychotropic drugs. Nor do most of them out-perform a placebo when tested double-blind. Slater points out that the placebo effect is actually a great thing--our brain healing itself! How could we maximize this natural ability to fool ourselves into getting well? (Sadly, the placebo effect doesn't work on Alzheimer's patients because they don't remember that they took something that will supposedly make them well, and they can't imagine a future in which they are "better.")

On the plus side, for whatever reasons, oftentimes a drug will "help" for a certain period of time, and if you struggle just to function, this bargain sounds worthwhile. A window of time is better than nothing.

More promising might be little electrical stimulators placed at positions in the brain (though even the doctors doing this surgery can't be very precise and tend to have "favorite places") and clinical use of psychedelic drugs. I think Michael Pollan has just come out with a book about psychedelic drugs and their new uses as well, but, not knowing his mental history, I only hope people will read Slater's for its personal street cred and thoroughness.

Kent Winward says

This book does a couple of things very well. First, it gives an excellent background on the history of psychiatric medicine and at the same time shows, more than it tells, just how hit and miss our use of psychotropic medications are. These drugs are dangerous and while they work for some, they certainly also come with a price.

My wife and I are currently living daily with the price she paid for her psychiatric meds and I can guarantee that the cost would have been significantly less if I had known what is in this book. These drugs aren't penicillin curing a bacterial infection or insulin stabilizing a diabetic. These drugs change how our brains interact with the world. Once you see that variable -- the drug versus the outside world -- then you realize just how tenuous the efficacy of these drugs can be.

The future of the psychiatric meds appears to be therapy-based hallucinogenics, as long as the political forces can be prevailed upon to allow this important work. This isn't get high and have fun, it is get high and get well, as opposed to the current slate of SSRIs and AAPs that don't even get you particularly euphoric and damage your brain. I wrote about that a little here.

Meredith says

I'm pleased to say that I have zero first hand experience with prescription psychiatric meds. They seem like a shadowy world to which I have a tough time relating. But the author has decades of intimate knowledge, and uses that experience in weaving the stories of the development of various top-selling meds with her own needs and desires.

This started off well, with a description of Thorazine, MOAIs and Prozac, then got a little slow in the part on psilocybin, then picked up again with the stuff on MDMA, and then slowed again for the section on brain electrostimulation. The book did hold my interest throughout although I felt some parts were a bit more poetic than factual. It does lay bare how politically fused and financially driven the prescription drug game really is. If this book is to be believed, then I'm shocked to think how many people must be walking around medicated all the time.

Lisa says

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by Clinical Psychologist and best selling author of Prozac Diary, Dr. Lauren Slater, is a fascinating history of psychopharmacology told with scientific rigour along with the empathic recounting of the author's own experiences. I enjoyed the chapters on antidepressants and on placebos but the chapters that really blew me away were the ones on psychedelics. Reading these chapters on MDMA and Psilocybins made me cautiously optimistic that a breakthrough for treating mental illness may be in our not too distant future. At times, the book got a little long winded, but overall I recommend this important book for anyone wanting a better understanding of treating mental illness.

With gratitude to Dr. Slater for this important book and bringing empathy to a subject that is still too often stigmatized. Thank you to NetGalley and Little, Brown and Company for the ebook Advanced Readers Copy.

Rachel Blakeman says

This is a solid 3 star book. I was really interested in reading this after hearing the author interviewed however the boom takes detours I was underwhelmed by. The chapters on psychedelics, ecstasy and deep brain stimulation felt like a distraction. The SSRI chapter was probably the best. The book was the most interesting when she was writing about her own accounts. The researched sections suffered from a lack of

editing by dragging on and on. In sum, the book is a good reminder of just how little we know about psychiatry and mental illness.

Rhonda Lomazow says

Lauren Slater is open honest and raw holding nothing about her use of psychotropic drugs. This book is a fascinating at times horrific look at these drugs their use the havoc they can cause in your body your life & those around you. Highly recommend. Thanks @littlebrown & @netgalley for advance readers copy,

Ashton says

This book BREATHTAKING! It was shocking! And anyone who says you shouldn't read it I think has something to hide!!!

I received an advanced reader's copy of this book from the publisher, and because of how far behind I am on my reading schedule, took a couple of weeks to read it. Life just kept getting in the way, but no matter how many times I came back to it, I was blown away all over again. NO matter how many times. It would take only paragraphs for me to pick the story up again, which I'd read for as long as I possibly could with the deepest fascination, not just for the information presented, but the beauty of the author's mind. This book is unlike any other I have ever read, and it was one of the most shattering experiences to have read it.

Today I finally finished it, much to my dismay and displeasure. I wanted it to be longer. Three times longer. Four. It wouldn't have mattered, I would have read every word and still wanted more, and then I came went to write my review on Amazon and was stunned to see an irresponsibly written 1 star with so little information it legitimately made me angry. I am an enormous fan of critical reviews, but if you're going to blast a book, you should include enough information to help fellow readers in making the decision to purchase or not for themselves.

But that isn't the point of my review at all. The point of my review is that this book literally blew me away. The "poetic language" that so repelled the other reviewer I found to be beautiful and rare, and fascinating. This wasn't a book written for doctors, it was a book written for people exactly like me: People who were offered anti-anxiety medications over and over, without any attempts made at offering talk therapy. I tried the medications a couple of times, but I have an extremely sensitive system, and I hated the way they made me feel, so I went off them immediately. And it turns out, my problems, that so many doctors tried to treat with those medications, were easily treated in talk therapy.

I am not the same person that I was. My extreme social anxiety came from a single incident I hadn't realized was so traumatic, and my therapist and I are almost finished working together. I'm happy, well-adjusted, and healthy, and I got chills as I read this book and realized how close I came to being casually prescribed medication that could have potentially changed my entire future and not for the better. Of COURSE medication is necessary for many. Not every debilitating mental illness can be cured in talk therapy. I have no illusions about that. However, what I was always certain of, and I am still certain of now, even more so, is that casually prescribing brain-altering medications to people who can be treated without medications at all is my definition of insanity.

This book was amazing. The research was profoundly in depth, and presented in a way that was fascinating, gripping, and shocking. And even better was that sprinkled throughout the presented research were memoir-type chapters about the author's own personal experiences, and honestly, I wish I had the words to describe how beautiful I found them. How deeply they affected me. How utterly unique I found her mind to be.

If you're looking for a book written for a doctor, this one isn't it. However, if you are a non-medically inclined individual much like me, and want a solid foundation from which to gain a better understanding of the drugs you are being offered, pick this one. Please, before you take the medication, do the research. Look into it for yourself. Check the facts found in this book. I did. I didn't just take it at face value, and the information it contained, and that I then researched myself, I felt was so profound I wanted more copies of this book to send out to everyone I know.

And though I know this review is already too long, I have to say that I have a thing about people who naysay information that can easily be fact-checked and individually researched. People who say that information is wrong, and you shouldn't read it, and that you shouldn't have every side to every story, usually has something to hide, or has ulterior motives. And considering the content of this book, I'd say there are a LOT of people out there, an entire industry in fact, that hate the fact that this information saw the light of day.

I received a copy of this book from the publisher, but my opinions are my own, and I want everyone I know to read this book. Everyone. EVERYONE!!! And you'd better believe that it's gone on my list for gifts I'm saving up for. Your doctors aren't telling you the whole story, and I just can't plead with you enough. Please! Before you take the medication they offer you, look at the sides of the story they aren't telling you. If not this book, then another. The internet. Do the research on your own.

However, with that being said, this book is a rock solid place to start, and I'd recommend it to everyone who is struggling with mental disorders of any kind, and are on, are not on, or have been offered medication in the past. Bottom line is, I'd recommend it to EVERYONE!!!

gingersreviews.com

Emily Crow says

A few years ago, I read the author's first book, Prozac Diary, which left me oddly dissatisfied. I was interested in her almost miraculous response to Prozac, after what she described as a decade of repeated hospitalizations, self-harming and eating disordered behavior, but I also found myself wondering if Prozac would really be her savior for the long haul. I ended my review of that book wishing her well, but wondering if she would still be singing Prozac's effects today....

When this book appeared on my kindle daily deals last weekend, I saw that I would get my answer, as well as Slaters' research and philosophical ideas about psychiatry. And of course, I had to snap this book up. On the whole, I would say it was an interesting read. (As I keep mentioning in my reviews, to me, a three star review is not negative...it means "I liked it!") Long story short, no, Prozac alone has not maintained Slater on her path to mental health. She has had to switch up drugs, and add new medicines to the mix (such as the anti-psychotic Zyprexa), which have kept her stable mentally, even as her physical health has taken a nosedive.

What I liked most about this book is how Slater has managed to stay objective in her discussion, as much as

possible considering her own personal history. The first half of the book was fascinating. Despite how many books I've read on this topic, I still learned quite a few new facts, and I found her own personal experience to be a very interesting counterpoint. The second half of the book, which delved into psychedelic drugs and neural implants, was less interesting to me. In addition, I have to admit that occasionally I struggled with the author's writing style, which was quite flowery and poetic (too much so for my tastes).

Overall, despite my quibbles, I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who is interested in psychiatry or mental health. Slater definitely has some interesting things to say on the topic, and I did appreciate her perspective as someone who has been a long-term patient/mental health sufferer, and not just some random journalist or therapist with an axe to grind.

Tyler says

Liked: history and science of psychoactive drugs. First person descriptions of being on various drugs and of symptoms of mental illness.

Disliked: massive speculation about efficacy of particular treatments (very down on SSRIs despite self-described decades of benefit; very excited about hallucinogens despite never trying them and thin evidence).

Judy says

Absolutely terrifying. Hard to imagine that our powerful psychotropic drugs can be so ineffective and misused. I found the section on placebos to be especially scary.

Nancy says

Lauren Slater's way of describing the history of psychiatric medication is easily accessible and engaging for the lay reader. Her background as both a therapist and a patient gives the reader a believable look at this topic.

The book moves from the well documented successes and failures of past mental health treatments to the benefits and side effects of current drugs to speculation on what might be possible when deep brain stimulation is approved for general use or psychedelic drugs are rescheduled so they can be used under supervision for treatments.

I won this through a Goodreads giveaway and am very pleased that it turned out to be such a good book.

Alisha Bennett says

4 stars with reservations.....this could have used a more effective editor to reduce the repetition which bogged down the technical aspects. Slater's personal travails are of course the most gripping and put a face to the

many problems of psychiatry and medicine. Provides a wonderful background on various techniques and takes head-on the criticisms psychiatry faces (lack of biological diagnoses or understanding of why some drugs work and others don't). Towards the end, Slater visits several treatments (LSD, Deep Brain Stimulation etc) that are being researched; and here my reservations flared up. No mention was made of whether studies have been made on the addiction potential for LSD and psilocybin (magic mushrooms) and there is much to study still such as long term effects and yet Slater seems a bit too willing to declare them a success and jump on the wagon. It's inevitable that having suffered through depression and other related diagnoses she is a bit too close to the situation to give us a properly thought out wrapup. This was a Goodreads giveaway book.

Ivana says

An extraordinary book, and one that left me with so many questions and so much desperation over the fact that, big pharma has once again determined the course of treatment for millions of people with various mental disorders, while all along crushing medicine that stands in the way of profits, and in its wake leaving those same millions of people suffering unnecessarily, denying them potential cure. It's a sobering account of the state of our mental health inadequacy and the horror it causes daily.

Ann Campbell says

This was a fascinating mix of autobiography and nonfiction focusing on the history of treatment of mental illness and depression in particular. The author is forthcoming about her own history of depression and obsessive compulsive disorder and the cost her treatment exacts on her health. She is also a smart and coherent researcher with a personable writing persona. I hate "social science case study style" for lack of a better term. This book avoids that cold wanna-be science-speak style while also avoiding an overly casual or slangy approach. I enjoyed this book thoroughly and learned a lot from it.

Karen Adkins says

There's a lot to like in this book; Slater's a psychologist and an experienced writer, so her history of medical treatments used to treat mental health is informative without being overly technical, comprehensive, and efficient. She's fair-minded, paying attention to the ways in which treatments have made the difference between people having lives outside of institutions, and also addressing the downsides (serious side effects, increased tolerance for medicine, etc.). Given that she also has a thirty-year history of mental illness and has been both institutionalized and been prescribed many medications, I admired her fair-mindedness all the more: she included her experience with treatments as it was relevant (the book is organized according to the kinds of treatments, going in rough historical order), but her experience did not dominate the discussion. I learned a lot from the discussion.

But the book's last third made me uncomfortable. I want to be clear that I understand that for folks with mental illness medical treatment, particularly prescription drugs, can be important and can make the difference between having a meaningful, autonomous life and not. But Slater's recounting of some of the ways in which the treatment of her mental illness has clearly shortened and damaged her life in the process of giving her a life outside of institutions gave me pause. (She's in her early fifties and has several medical

conditions--obesity, diabetes, memory problems, blood pressure problems--that she can trace pretty directly back to the medications she takes. Her midlife divorce, she believes, is also partly due to the personality and sex drive changes of her SSRI use.) But the final third of the book focuses on newer avenues of exploration--using drugs like LSD, Ecstasy, or Ketamine in small occasional doses. Her discussion in these chapters seemed eerily like the tones of the prior chapters, where unending scientific optimism is eventually complicated by a depressing reality of drugs' only moderate effectiveness, sometimes only temporary, and even then coming with side effects. It was hard for me to reconcile the realism of her scrutiny of the past with her unchecked optimism about a medical future. This is particularly the case because her one chapter devoted to what she groups as 'placebos' (essentially, mental-not-physical treatments of mental illness: talk therapy, touch or massage, meditation) demonstrated that they have as good a reputation for effectiveness for at least some forms of mental illness, and no side effects. I absolutely recognize that for severe mental illness these treatments wouldn't have much effect, but given that the population taking drugs for mental disorders has greatly increased since the early 90s, the final part of the book just made me uncomfortable. To be clear, it's still overall a valuable and well-written book, and I do recommend it.
