

"With the experience of a patient, the heart of a storyteller, and the lens of a scientist, Lauren Slater chronicles the evolving, perplexing relationship between the physical and the mental."

—David Eagleman

BLUE DREAMS



The Science and the Story
of the Drugs
That Changed Our Minds

Lauren Slater

Author of *Prozac Diary* and *Opening Skinner's Box*

John Carranza // "I wrote this book because I have been taking psychotropic drugs for thirty-five years, with different drugs or drug combinations during different decades of my life." [1] Lauren Slater's frank disclosure of taking psychiatric medications and the effect they had, and continue to have, on her body opens her new book *Blue Dreams: The Science and the Story of the Drugs That Changed Our Minds*. Slater's narrative is twofold throughout this book. On the one hand, she explores the history of the drugs that were found to be effective in treating people with mental illnesses, but on the other hand, this is a narrative of her life. In Slater's words, she wrote this book "to discover my own body—its beginning, middle, and end." [2]

Blue Dreams details Slater's experiences and insight with drugs such as Thorazine and lithium, as well as her exploration of the therapeutic potential of psilocybin ("magic mushrooms") and MDMA (ecstasy). She then turns her attention to the future of medical technology in treating mental illness. Equal in importance to Slater's personal experiences are the narratives that trace the history of a single drug, one per chapter, in treating people with mental illness. Both forms of narrative—the personal and the historical—are interwoven throughout each chapter, which breaks the monotony of reading a single narrative continuously. Slater moves the reader from past to present, and from the scientific community and its institutions to the personal.

One of Slater's guiding frameworks for understanding the scientific and medical community's work is Thomas Kuhn's concept of the "paradigm shift." Each discovery or breakthrough in medication challenges what the scientific and medical community knew about mental illness and the effects of drugs on the human body. With each such challenge to knowledge and authority comes a new paradigm, or way of thinking. Slater repeatedly points to the psychiatric community's break from psychoanalysis to treatment with medications. This specific paradigm shift happened as it became easier and more lucrative for psychiatrists to write prescriptions rather than have lengthy visits with patients for therapy. By the conclusion of the book, Slater suggests a new paradigm shift through her discussion of psilocybin and MDMA, and the possibilities that legalizing such substances might mean for the health and well-being of the person taking them.

Blue Dreams relies on a wealth of secondary sources to construct the histories of each drug. But the accompaniment of Slater's own narrative shows that every scientific development has real social, physical, and affective outcomes on the people who use it. The reader should keep in mind that this book is particularly Western in its understanding of mental illness and medical treatment, though Slater does point to other cultures and how they have used psychedelics, for example, to help people live fulfilling lives. Slater's writing style and personal narratives about her experiences with her own mental illness makes *Blue Dreams* highly accessible to a wide audience, from the reader with little knowledge of the subject to academics and medical professionals.

[1]Lauren Slater, *Blue Dreams: The Science and the Story of the Drugs That Changed Our Minds* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018), ix.

[2]Ibid., xv.

Further Reading:

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Luhrmann, T.M. and Jocelyn Marrow, eds. *Our Most Troubling Madness: Case Studies in Schizophrenia Across Cultures*. University of California Press, 2016.