

An erudite, scientific explanation of magic mushrooms, both botany and how they affect you  
Hank Bryant

This is an erudite, scientific explanation of magic mushrooms by an author who has a great deal of experience with both their botanical and pharmacological aspects.

Hank Bryant provides a history of the use of magic mushrooms by tribal societies throughout the world just about as far back in time as cultural artifacts testifying to their use can be found. The human animal seems to have an appetite for mind altering substances, be it alcohol, cannabis, the coca leaf, cactuses such as peyote and certainly magic mushrooms.

The drug scene in California came on like a freight train in the 1960s. The 1950s belong to the earliest hipsters, the beats, whose culture was confined to Greenwich Village in New York City and a few neighborhoods in San Francisco and Sausalito. Disc jockeys and other provocateurs titillated their middle-class listeners with stories of the weird things that went on in these enclaves, but drug use had not arrived on campus, either colleges or high schools.

In 1960 I matriculated at Reed College, then and now one of the most liberal in the country, and it wasn't until my third year there that I was even exposed to marijuana. However, starting about 1962, singers such as Bob Dylan were popularizing the drug culture, and two years later it became mainstream with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In 1964 when I joined the California Army National Guard I believe I was the only one in the unit who had ever tried marijuana. Three years later I had become one of the conservatives who had not tried almost everything. Which, of course, included the psychedelics.

Hipsters, now called hippies and no longer even covering their indulgence in drugs with the mask of intellectualism, seemed perpetually a step ahead of the repressive legislatures. Owsley got rich on LSD, little blue dots on blotter paper, before the narcs figured it out and put it on a proscribed list. We used to order peyote williamsii by the box from the Smith cactus Ranch in Laredo Texas. One can assume that they knew that the San Francisco area had not become a hotbed of horticultural curiosity, but it was a good business. People scoffed at the law and laughed at silly propaganda such as the movie "Reefer Madness."

Other drugs long used by musicians and others in the netherworld, such as cocaine and heroin, now came into more common use. Dr. Robert duPont, the first "Drug czar" called marijuana a gateway drug because it led to the use of these harder drugs. It is certainly true that all illegal substances tended to be available through the same channels.

Magic mushrooms appear to have gotten a late start. They seem to be more of an effort than LSD or peyote. However, as Hank Bryant points out they grow wild just about every place and there is a large variety of them. The narcs could simply not effectively control them. Hence, it seems like a reasonable market for people who could take the time and effort to figure them out.

Not to disparage psychedelics in general, but the drug scene took a terrible toll on the people in the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. Several of the most interesting people I knew in high school were dead within decades. Two female cousins, a decade younger than me, are now two decades gone, having led dissolute lives and bearing children who, burdened by the absence of fathers and family stability, have experienced mixed results as adults: their own drug use, unhappy marriages, and failure to take advantage of the intelligence with which they were born.

Author Hank Bryant ascribes to the mushrooms the same kind of magic power of insight, release of tensions and resolution of past traumas as did Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey. I am not convinced. The experiences that I had with my friends of the 1960s were interesting, but hardly world shaking. We did not come out of it changed people.

Several of my drug taking friends survived into retirement. Lee, who took more LSD than one would imagine a human could tolerate, had a successful career as a diplomat. I never heard that his drug insights helped him, but neither do they appear to have hindered him. My friend Gerry ruined his lungs by simply smoking too much, both weed and tobacco. Both are about a decade gone.

The life paths of Edward and Braxton, with whom I shared a number of LSD sessions, reflect the openness that would have led them to try drugs in the first place. Edward is a successful artist in the academic world, a happily married grandfather. Braxton lives in the wilds of Oregon but maintain social contact with those of us that he knew half a century ago. It would be hard to say that whatever illumination any of us got from psychedelics helped us to become better people.

I observe the life paths of the children of my first marriage, now approaching 40, and observe that drug use has not benefited any of them. Some of them have succeeded in any case; others have allowed drugs to become a diversion, rather like video games, television, pornography or whatever else, that seduced them away from what would traditionally be considered success: career, marriage and children.

Bryant cites studies demonstrating that psychoactive drugs are proving to be useful therapies for treating posttraumatic stress syndrome and other mental disorders. The same is claim for marijuana. I am sure that this is true in certain circumstances. However, from my lifetime of observation I would propose that in normal, healthy, sane person should generally avoid them. At best they are harmless, and all too often they will seduce a person away from the activities that will lead to lifetime success and fulfillment.

I give the book high marks because it contains information that I am certain is very useful for that significant fraction of humanity who will try drugs in any case.

Chapter by chapter, he provides:

A history of magic mushrooms,

General information about them

The pharmacology – how they affect your brain

Advice on how to use them safely, specifically:

\_\_\_\_\_ which one

\_\_\_\_\_ choosing an ambience

\_\_\_\_\_ choosing the right dosage

\_\_\_\_\_ the importance of having a sitter – a sober person beside you

\_\_\_\_\_ the sequence, from ingesting it to coming down again

A chapter on the therapeutic use of mushrooms

Tips on consuming them

The biology and lifecycle of mushrooms

Why you would want to forage for them rather than just buy them

Where the different types grow

How to find them

How to identify them

As Bryant says, hallucinogenic mushrooms are behind only a minuscule fraction of institutionalized drug abusers. They are not that dangerous. This book will make their use even safer. The book will also be a useful reference for parents and others who simply wonder what is going on with magic mushrooms. It is balanced, informative, and well researched.