



Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal

By Tom Shroder

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“A book that should start a long-overdue national conversation.” —Dave Barry

With the F.D.A. agreeing to new trials to test MDMA (better known as Ecstasy) as a treatment for PTSD—which, if approved, could be available as a drug by 2021—*Acid Test* is leading the charge in an evolving conversation about psychedelic drugs. Despite their current illegality, many Americans are already familiar with their effects. Yet while LSD and MDMA have proven extraordinarily effective in treating anxiety disorders such as PTSD, they still remain off-limits to the millions who might benefit from them. Through the stories of three very different men, award-winning journalist Tom Shroder covers the drugs’ roller-coaster history from their initial reception in the 1950s to the negative stereotypes that persist today. At a moment when popular opinion is rethinking the potential benefits of some illegal drugs, and with new research coming out every day, *Acid Test* is a fascinating and informative must-read.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Shroder filters the psychedelic world [and] presents a compelling case for supporting responsible, rigorous research of psychedelic compounds....Empty your mind of any preconceptions about psychedelic drugs and enjoy a fascinating trip through the politics, science, history, and promise of these controversial chemical compounds.”

—*Booklist*, STARRED REVIEW

“A well-respected journalist offers evidence, both empirical and anecdotal, about the therapeutic benefits of psychedelic drugs....this clear-eyed account [explores] both the complex history of the issue and the current thinking on the use of LSD, Ecstasy and other psychotropic substances for healing troubled minds....Occasionally, the stories are amusing...often, they're moving...a perceptive criticism of the failings of America's war on drugs, and Shroder delivers an important historical perspective on a highly controversial issue in modern medicine.”—*Kirkus*

“[Acid Test] explores the therapeutic possibilities of LSD and Ecstasy (MDMA), and, more broadly, the potential of the human mind....Guided by Shroder's easy narrative tone, readers follow an activist, a marine, and a physician-turned-psychiatrist who developed a philosophy of psychedelic therapy through self-experimentation....Shroder both informs readers about the drugs' shadowy pasts and provides insight into the future of mental health.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“This is not about the 60's. This book reveals the ongoing struggle to create valuable lasting therapies for PTSD in all its forms. Funny, hopeful, and sad by turns, these stories make me believe that someday soon, MDMA will be accepted as valuable, even desirable, to counteract the despair of so many returning veterans and other souls whose lives are turned upside down by PTSD. If ever interventions are needed, it is now. *Acid Test* presents an alternative to anguish and anxiety, showing a route of return to balance by use of compassionate therapies along with an outlaw drug. Millions of Americans suffer from the terrors of war or crime, and perhaps soon, we can say help is on the way.”

—Carolyn Garcia, also known as Mountain Girl, a former Merry prankster and wife of Jerry Garcia

“Over the last thirty years women have gone from the kitchen to the boardroom, people of color from the woodshed to the White House, gay men and women from the closet to the altar, and all of us have embraced a new vision of life itself on this fragile blue planet. Yet when we recall the factors that unleashed these dramatic transformations there is one ingredient in the recipe of social change that is always expunged from the record: the fact that millions of us lay prostrate before the gates of awe having ingested LSD or some other psychedelic. Tom Shroder's *Acid Test* is an inspiring and profoundly hopeful book.”

—Wade Davis, author of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*

“Tom Shroder has written a book that is at once captivating and utterly surprising, with mind-blowing revelations of a lost history. The scourge of war and trauma and the mysteries of human consciousness fills virtually every one of the gripping chapters. With its impressive research, masterful storytelling and ultimately, the possibility of hope and healing, *Acid Test* is destined to be an important book.”

—Brigid Schulte, author of *Overwhelmed*

“*Acid Test* is a trip of a different kind. Tom Shroder makes the hunt for relief from modern wars' biggest killers—depression and post-traumatic stress disorder—come alive in bright, unforgettable colors, characters

and emotions.”

—Dana Priest, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter and author of *Top Secret America*

“*Acid Test* is a breath of fresh air after half a century of general hysteria, misinformation, confusion and questionable decisions of scientific, political, and legal authorities concerning psychedelic substances. Tom Shroder's fascinating, well-researched, and clearly written account of psychedelic history, from the discovery of LSD to the current worldwide renaissance of interest in these remarkable substances and revival of research in this area, is a *tour de force*. Most important—socially, economically, and politically—is the book's focus on the psychedelic newcomer MDMA (Ecstasy). The pilot studies of this substance suggest that it might play an important role in helping to solve the formidable problem of PTSD that kills more American soldiers than the weapons of enemies.”

—Stanislav Grof, M.D., author of *LSD Psychotherapy*, *The Ultimate Journey*, and *Psychology of the Future*

“I read *Acid Test* with wonder and excitement. Wonder at seeing a controversial topic through Tom Shroder's fresh and lucid eyes. And excitement at the promise of healing that he reveals.”

—David Von Drehle, author of *Rise to Greatness: Abraham Lincoln and America's Most Perilous Year*

“Tom Shroder weaves together three compelling stories with such mastery that *Acid Test* reads like a first-rate novel. The book is that much more intriguing and consequential though because the stories are true and the subject matter—the healing of post-traumatic stress—of great currency and importance. We need to know how to treat the trauma that afflicts most of the world or we're in deep trouble.”

—Richard Rockefeller, former chairman of U.S. Advisory Board of Doctors Without Borders

“If you think LSD is a relic of the Sixties, or good for nothing except getting high, you need to read this riveting and important book. It's the fascinating story of how LSD and MDMA can, with controlled use, bring near-miraculous benefits to people suffering from mental trauma. Tom Shroder is a fine journalist and a terrific writer; in *Acid Test*, he's written a book that should start a long-overdue national conversation, and someday may help to end a lot of unnecessary suffering.”

—Dave Barry

“A captivating narrative with irresistible characters. It will leave you wondering whether we have the moral right to oppose this breakthrough therapy.”

—Gene Weingarten, two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Fiddler in the Subway*

“*Acid Test* is a superb book. The people Tom Shroder introduces us to are across-the-board fascinating, the reporting he's done is deep and persuasive, and the writing is dazzling. Best of all, though, is what any open-minded reader will feel after finishing *Acid Test*: In a world of hurt, here is a new version of hope.”

—David Finkel, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Good Soldiers* and *Thank You for Your Service*

“*Acid Test* is a trip of a different kind. Tom Shroder makes the hunt for relief from modern wars' biggest killers—depression and post-traumatic stress disorder—come alive in bright, unforgettable colors, characters and emotions.”

—Dana Priest, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter and author of *Top Secret America*

“*Acid Test* represents such a critical contribution to our societal awareness, one that I am honored to wholeheartedly support. Faced with the challenge to alleviate the suffering of today's combat veterans, we must open ourselves to considering new modalities, revisiting therapeutic agents criminalized by fear and ideology, and harnessing the power of healing rituals and ancient wisdom. Tom Shroder offers a timely and compelling story of stories, illustrating the struggles and opportunities for hope and healing. Put politics and

preconceptions aside; open your mind; read this book; follow the data; and speak truth to power so that scientific rigor and emerging knowledge can lead the way. We owe our fellow humans no less.”

—Loree Sutton, psychiatrist, retired US Army Brigadier General and founding director of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury

About the Author

Tom Shroder is an award-winning journalist, editor, and author of *Old Souls* and *Acid Test*, a transformative look at the therapeutic powers of psychedelic drugs in the treatment of PTSD. As editor of *The Washington Post Magazine*, he conceived and edited two Pulitzer Prize–winning feature stories. His most recent editing project, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, by Brigid Schulte, was a *New York Times* best-seller.

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Foreword

In 1975 I was a twenty-one-year-old college journalist, home on spring break in Sarasota, Florida, when I noticed a blurb in the local news- paper about a charismatic hippie with a pet wolf who was building himself a spectacular house in the woods near town. I decided to go out and see it for myself. I don’t remember anything about the blurb. I doubt it mentioned anything about the influence of psychedelic drugs in this project. But I am guessing that I inferred it, because while I didn’t much care about techniques of home building—nor would my college-student readers—I was extremely interested in the implications of the psychedelic experience.

I’m looking at a taped-together, Xeroxed copy of the story that resulted from that visit. Still no mention of drugs, but there it is between the lines. I wrote about the philosophy of the young builder, a guy named Rick Doblin, just a year older than me. It was about trying to live authentically, guided by an inner light rather than society’s preconceived ideas; consciously working to discover and create his own destiny rather than trudging along the rutted tracks set before him.

These were the kinds of notions floating around a certain subculture in those days; it was evident in the woodland home itself, with its giant, rainbow-themed, spiritually suggestive stained-glass window. Maybe we discussed psychedelics, maybe we didn’t. But they were in the air.

I myself was not entirely unfamiliar. Under the influence of the psilocybin mushrooms my friends and I had learned to pluck from cow dung in the rural fields not far from campus, then boil into tea and drink, I had seen the world-and myself-from a novel vantage point.

It was like being able, for a few precious hours, to climb above your life

and view it from on high, a perspective every bit as revealing as seeing a too-familiar landscape from the top of a mountain. Instead of individual cornstalks or oak trees or buildings, you saw checkerboard patterns of fields, serpentine forests following the course of a river, villages arrayed around ascending spires of churches. You saw, for once, how it all fit together.

One experience stands out in my memory, because it is something that I have carried with me, every day since, for four decades. As the drug took effect, instead of feeling the usual lift, I grew increasingly entangled by anxiety. I began to obsess about an ethical problem I was struggling with, which generalized to feelings of inadequacy in life overall and my inability to find solutions.

The more I struggled against these feelings, the weightier and more intractable they seemed. And then suddenly I had a vision: I saw myself with my arms wrapped around a boulder. I could feel its weight, almost unbearable to hold, and yet I was clinging to it. I knew that the heavy stone consisted of all my doubts and anxieties, and as I desperately clutched it to my chest, I saw in a flash that part of me *chose* to be anxious-as a way to avoid making choices and evade responsibility for them. To be free of that awful weight, all I had to do was open my arms, which I did. The stone simply dropped away.

Ever since, although it has rarely been easy, I've been able to see negative emotions, on a profound level, as a choice, and the will to let them go as something I could develop, like a muscle. The more I practiced, the better I got, and I no longer needed the mushrooms to do it.

There wasn't a moment I decided to stop doing psychedelic drugs. When I left the college environment they became less available, and I gained more responsibilities-a job, a family, a professional reputation all of which made any illegal activity, and the potential health risks, unacceptable. But I never lost my interest in those psychedelic experiences, or forgot their profundity, and the lasting good they did me.

Ten years after graduation, I had become an editor at the *Miami Herald* Sunday magazine, *Tropic*, when I noticed a story in the Tampa newspaper about a perennial college student who was promoting the party drug Ecstasy as a breakthrough in psychotherapy. I did a double take: it was Rick Doblin, the hippie with the house in the woods, the same guy I had written about a decade earlier. I assigned a *Herald* feature writer to do a cover story on him. We headlined it: "A Timothy Leary for the '80s."

Twenty years passed. Now I was editor of *The Washington Post Magazine*, and once again an article that spoke to my lingering interest in the possible positive effects of psychedelics caught my eye. This time it was in the *New York Times*, about Harvard initiating a study testing the use of MDMA- Ecstasy- to treat anxiety and depression inter minal cancer patients. The man sponsoring the study: a very sophisticated-sounding Harvard Kennedy School PhD named Rick *Doblin- the hippie in the woods*.

I got a phone number and Rick answered. When I told him my name, he laughed. He not only remembered me and the two stories from twenty and thirty years earlier, he still had copies of them both. And just that morning, he told me, he'd held up the "Tim Leary" cover of *Tropic* at a board meeting of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), his nonprofit organization, to demonstrate how completely he'd remade his image, from a rebellious hippie to the sponsor of cutting-edge scientific research in some of the nation's more conservative institutions.

This time I wrote the story myself, focusing on the MAPS sponsored research a psychiatrist named Michael Mithoefer was conducting in Charleston, South Carolina, treating with MDMA-assisted psychotherapy mostly female victims of sexual abuse. The story appeared in *The Washington Post Magazine* in November 2007, and much of it has been adapted here in chapter forty-two.

I was pleased enough with the piece as published, but I felt it barely scratched the surface, both because of rapidly accumulating developments in psychedelic research and because I sensed that the significance of any given study could not be fully assessed without a deeper understanding of the people behind the studies, not to mention the century-long struggle of Western culture to come to grips with these powerful and, in some ways, profoundly threatening drugs.

This is what I have attempted in *Acid Test*. Whatever success I have had I owe entirely to the openness and honesty of the principal characters. Those people listed in the acknowledgments have granted me access to scores of records and privileged documents and agreed to sit for what amounted to a combined total of more than a hundred hours of interviews, unflinchingly answering the most intimate and sensitive questions, revealing things that were personally painful and might very well expose them to negative judgments or

significantly complicate their lives.

Their reasons for agreeing to all the above are transparent. They accepted my contention that the full and complete disclosure of all the information surrounding the use and abuse of psychedelic drugs, the history of psychedelic therapy, the motivations of the researchers, and the experiences of the subjects is the best argument for continued and extended support of rigorous and responsible investigation.

I owe a special debt to those among them who have undergone clinical trials to treat debilitating post-traumatic stress, a disorder that makes it particularly difficult and potentially painful to open up. In particular, I am indebted to Donna Kilgore, Tony Made, and, above all, Nicholas Blackston. They all spent hours reviewing their case histories with me, leaving nothing off the record, as well as giving me permission to listen to or watch voluminous audio- and videotapes of their therapeutic sessions. It is hard to imagine a more naked vulnerability than allowing an outsider to witness hours spent delving into your deepest, most charged and haunting intimacies explored under the powerful effect of MDMA. Yet, these people made that sacrifice willingly, for no other reason than a sense of duty. They felt the therapy benefited them and quite possibly saved their lives, and they believed sharing their stories might help make the therapy available to others.

I am moved and awed by their courage.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alberta Sanchez:

Do you have favorite book? Should you have, what is your favorite's book? E-book is very important thing for us to find out everything in the world. Each publication has different aim or goal; it means that e-book has different type. Some people sense enjoy to spend their time for you to read a book. They are really reading whatever they get because their hobby is usually reading a book. Why not the person who don't like examining a book? Sometime, man feel need book if they found difficult problem or even exercise. Well, probably you will want this Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal.

Betty Adkins:

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Rosie Zimmerman:

In this period of time globalization it is important to someone to get information. The information will make someone to understand the condition of the world. The fitness of the world makes the information better to share. You can find a lot of referrals to get information example: internet, paper, book, and soon. You will observe that now, a lot of publisher this print many kinds of book. The particular book that recommended to your account is Acid Test: LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal this reserve consist a lot of the information of the condition of this world now. That book was represented how do the world has grown up. The language styles that writer make usage of to explain it is easy to understand. The particular writer made some analysis when he makes this book. This is why this book acceptable all of you.

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