

Acid Test by Tom Shroder

Book Review by Ben Sessa

I have around fifteen-dozen books on psychedelic drugs on my shelves. But this new one by Tom Shroder is among the best I have come across in describing the history and development of psychedelic culture. Shroder's book is a beautifully written account of those very old, frequently told stories that we have all come to know and love. The same old tales about Hofmann, Pahnke, Leary, Osmond, Huxley and the rest have been re-hashed so many times in endless publications of recent years (not least by myself), so when I picked up *Acid Test* (itself a much over-used and cliché title) I expected more of the same old narrative. How wrong I was. Shroder's *Acid Test* takes the facts and figures of those mythical moments in psychedelic history and re-writes them in such a uniquely human manner that one feels as if one is in Albert's shoes and unfolding mind as he makes his great discovery. There is such depth and freshness about the way Shroder weaves the story of LSD's creation into contemporary psychedelic culture that one feels psychedelia is not something from the past but is rather a living and breathing entity for today, which is exactly the truth. Because unlike most books on the subject, *Acid Test* is primarily about what is happening right now – this very year – in the field of psychedelic research and culture. And Shroder achieves this goal not only by having intricately researched the latest breaking scientific studies but also by including such wonderful first person narratives from important figures that were there back then and are still with us now. These features make the book come alive in a way that none of those dusty tomes from the past have ever quite managed to achieve.

We follow the story of Nicholas. Despite coming from a loving family he suffered severe bullying as a child. I know of no better descriptions of developmental pathology than Shroder achieves in his description of Nick's journey; from childhood pain he went into a career as a US marine and then subsequently into mental illness. His reasons for escape in to the army are palpable. The reader is carried along and forced to endure Nick's childhood traumas to such an extent that one is left agreeing, much against one's better judgement, that a life spent killing other human beings a justifiable and worthwhile pursuit, such is the twisted logic of a child's pain translated into the adult world of modern warfare. But as we journey into this man's personal story we discover also that there are deeper ancient historical strands of psychedelic development being wound into the narrative. The progress of the peyote church in the context of the plunder of the Native American people links our current social upheavals with the societal abuses of the past. And in a stunning passage of four simple paragraphs Shroder takes the reader from Werner Stoll's early explorations of Hofmann's discovery, through the Catholic Conquistadors to Quanah Parker's impressive stance against authority, to the spinning eidetic imagery of Klüver, via Osmond's appreciation of the adrenal gland and then back to Stoll – all of it beautifully connected with the here-and-now. Such writing is at once both poetic and informative. It leaves the reader feeling as if it is he or her who has been there alongside these great pioneers, glimpsing the unfurling world of altered states as they have appeared through history. The warmth and humanity with which we explore the relationship between Huxley and Osmond is produced in a manner of descriptive prose that is as heartfelt and deep as if Huxley himself had written it.

Rick Doblin enters the story – an ordinary 17-year-old high school senior with a nasal drip and a knack for supernatural luck. Having known Rick as I have personally in the context of psychedelic conferences, research planning, discussions on publications and shared frustrations about the often sluggish pace of change in this remarkable field of science – to be reading about his personal development in this book has been a fascinating process. Rick is pervasive, both in his personality and in his professional stance to psychedelic research, so I am certain that a great many people who know him merely as that bobbing figure enthusiastically pushing barriers and forcing change will find Shroder's depiction of the development of his ideas as fascinating as I did. But *Acid Test* not only provides the human

stories behind the facts, legends and the oft-repeated psychedelic diatribes, it also adds something else. It adds the actual pitfalls, pleasures and the emotional aetiology behind psychedelic history as it happens. As I read this book I found myself connected with every cell throughout the world, like an LSD trip, from the archaic and ancient use of sacramental plants, through 14th century mescaline users to Hofmann, Leary and Kesey (they are all in there) right up to the viral experience of today's online cyberspace community. Acid Test is the glue that seeps between the gaps, bonding together the themes and individuals that have brought us to where we are today. We move with Doblin, framed in his own internal debate, as he takes on and battles with his cognitive dissonance to the highly polarised topic of LSD as it was understood by a sensible, well-brought up, teenager in the early 1970s. What is this evil and dangerous forbidden fruit? And why am I so tempted to taste it despite everything I have heard?

The book flips in and out of Nick's story and his march towards the frontline. Shroder presents the futility of war with graphic verse equal to that of Wilfred Owen or other writers of human conflict. Indeed conflict seeps through the pages of the book; the battle between science and religion, faith and fact. Few subjects more perfectly conceptualise the similarities and the simultaneous gulf of differences between spirituality and dogma than that of the psychedelic experience. Stanislav Grof enters the scene, describing this phenomenon with statements honed from years of research and clinical experience with thousands of guided LSD sessions, reminding us that LSD does not create joy, ecstasy, pain, fear, trauma, birth, death and spiritual revelation; rather it uncovers them, revealing these aspects of ourselves unto us. Once again it is the clarity and precision with which Shroder drops us right into Grof's mind-set and makes us believe it is we, the readers, who are making such realisations as if we are on the couch beside Grof as the visions are coming forth.

And from one developmental hippie story to another, we learn about Michael Mithoefer; slowly cruising the sidewalks on his motorcycle, high on LSD, freaking out, breaking through and finding himself, inevitably, dropped into the arena of clinical medicine. A lovelier man than Michael one is likely never to meet. And like Rick, I have known Michael through our shared work together. So reading his life story in this book offers once again a peculiarly voyeuristic glimpse into a fascinating backstory that merely serves to validate the Michael I have come to know and warmly respect. All of us have a memorable LSD trip story inside of us – whether we have experienced the drug or not yet – and Michael's is quite spectacular; leading as it did to his subsequent journey into hippie communes and off shore escapism, only to end in the eventual realisation that: "Fuck it, I may as well go to med school" – if only to become something more than the hippie he always was and still remains.

Personally I cherish this book with greater affection than those dozens of other books on the same subject because I know the people in these pages - but also because I am made to feel as if I know those other names too; the people I have never met. I feel as if I have lain in those luxurious pools at Esalen with Murphy and McKenna. It feels like we are all in the same fight together, set against the twisted logic of Nick's war and all those other hapless soldiers who commit to the military for all the wrong reasons (what is the right reason, exactly?) and all those blind politicians who send them there. America is a land of inconsistencies; fighting its adolescent foreign wars just as my great patriotic Empire did, so foolishly in the past, spreading her self-righteous message of 'killing for peace' as she tramples her do-gooding message of globalisation into fragile communities throughout the world who surely do not need Starbucks and McDonalds transplanted into their deserts any more than India ever needed polo grounds and cricket. The hypocrisy of the violence inflicted by war is played out in the mind of Nick, the marine armadillo, with his friable centre and Kevlar exterior. We watch as his friends, those scared little boys with their powerful toys, are blown apart and stitched up – leaving internal mental wounds that never return from the deafening pounding of the battlefield. Suck it up, marine, he tells us, suck it up.

Enter MDMA and its magical ability to seduce everything in its path. There is an evangelical understanding of MDMA's therapeutic potential from everyone it touches for the

first time. We see Shulgin, Zeff, Doblin and Mithoefer glide so gracefully but also so powerfully into the realisation that *here* is the answer, the new kid on the block to take over where LSD left off. MDMA provides a unique subjective experience and also a matchless tool for clinical medicine. In watching the realisations of these colleagues and like-minded psychedelic researchers I relish in reflecting on my own experiences; my initiation into the mystical world of psychedelic royalty in 2005 when I first published on psychedelics in the British medical press and quickly found myself in communication with the likes of Doblin, Hofmann, Grof, Mithoefer, Nichols, Strassman, McKenna and Shulgin – many who came to become friends as well as colleagues. They are all here in Shroder's book, alongside Nutt, Roberts, Jesse, Griffiths, Vollenweider, Passie and Fadiman. It seems we all had the same almost identical realisations that Michael experienced when he embraced an understanding of mental disorder framed as a result of unresolved psychic trauma. PTSD, in its broadest sense, is at the root of all mental health problems and many physical ailments too. All clinicians and healers of sorts have come to realise that eventually. They also soon understand that the traditional drugs for treating unresolved trauma are at best ineffective maskers of the problems and at worst reinforce the patient's helplessness and dependence. I can feel the description of Michael's frustration in wanting to talk about psychedelics with one's patients but not knowing the right language to do so until one discovers the world of psychedelic research. But unlike those glamorous places like the Californian cliff tops of Esalen, in UK psychiatry I had to dig deep to find like-minded souls – eventually finding what I was looking for in the likes of Doblin and Mithoefer.

Shroder takes us painstakingly along Rick and Michael's journey of Kafkaesque legal and regulatory battles as they slowly piece together their MDMA project. We experience the blows delivered by the DEA, the knee-jerk socio-politically motivated decisions of the regulatory bodies who stand on their high moral horses, choosing to remain blind to the obvious safety and efficacy evidence-based data regarding MDMA. At one point it seems the dirty footprints left by Leary in the history of conflict between today's psychedelic proselytises and the authoritarian law-makers are enough to almost, but not entirely, take the wind out of Doblin's sails when in 1985 the drug is irrationally banned. Then as the book progresses we see new characters woven into the plot. Enter Charlie Grob, appearing from the jungle floor of the Peruvian rainforest with his support for the healing power of ayahuasca and then Mithoefer's harrowing and equally enlightening first experience with the vine. Grob works with then separates from Doblin in the development of an MDMA for cancer anxiety study, which then morphs into Charlie's psilocybin study and finds a home in the newly developing Heffter research group.

Meanwhile Nick continues to push it down, with one repression after another. There is no release from his conflicts, from childhood to battlefield, just endless fabric sticking plasters until we eventually see frank PTSD emerge and the demons breaking through. The book's passages' documenting the development of PTSD are spectacular: flashbacks, hallucinations, nightmares and the straining impact on his long-suffering partner. These and other conflicts continue in the field of MDMA's battle for regulatory approval. The infamous story of George Ricaurte's attempts to demonise MDMA is given a much greater level of explanation than I ever knew as the reader learns how this research originally grew out of a friendship between Doblin and Ricaurte. We feel Rick's vexation, his constant uphill struggle against negative political bias, which comes not only from the politicians, for some reason, but also from so many apparently neutral scientists with big chips on their shoulders and hidden agendas to follow. But even an earthquake is not enough to thwart Doblin's dogged progress. Rick's meeting with Michael, which again reminds me so much of my own, kicks the process of MDMA research back into gear as the somewhat more timid and humble psychiatrist comes face-to-face with the whirlwind that is 'Operation Doblin', thus beginning a relationship that will culminate in the production of the best possible data in support of the development of MDMA as treatment for PTSD. Yet still the obstacles appear. We hear about the 'Holes in the Brain' fiasco, the travesty of Ricaurte's (apparently accidental) mislabelled bottles in which primates get dosed with the methamphetamine instead of the intended

MDMA, which causes surprising dopamine damage as well as grossly exaggerated negative effects on the serotonin system. Although subsequently discredited the message spreads like wildfire through the media and threatens to knock the Mithoefer-Doblin ship off course - having already sunk Bouso's Spanish study. At this point Doblin's inimitable position begins to waver, especially following a further bloodied nose from the DEA and the repeated let-downs from the IRB. He enters a "dark depressive funk" – but only briefly – before light appears at the end of the tunnel, Ricaurte gets the tearing down his deserves and we see Mithoefer's work surge forward.

It is here that the patients arrive and start spilling their hearts and heads onto the couch to Michael and his inspiring wife Annie Mithoefer. We hear about Donna's journey into PTSD – on the surface very different from Nick's military combat traumas – but no less frightening or subsequently disabling. Through her experience of brutal rape she is left living a non-life, trapped in a dissociative bubble with the same emotional binds that paralyse Nick. Through the stories of the patients with their traumas the reader is given a wonderfully clear and precise picture of the phenomenology of PTSD and a brilliant description of the neurobiological processes that underlie the condition, explained alongside the real-time descriptions of neuroimaging research as it happens through the unfolding years. Michael and Annie play out the patient's lives on their couch with writing that is as beautiful as it is scientifically accurate and enlightening. We are then taken to Johns Hopkins University and hear the backstory of another remarkable figure in contemporary psychedelic research, Roland Griffiths. Having been so familiar with his work and having met him on a number of occasions, not least when I brought him to England to talk at our UK psychedelics conference in 2011 (which he described as "like Berkley campus in 1965"), it was fascinating to hear about Griffiths' trajectory from meditation to pharmacology and back, which inevitably lead to psychedelics. More threads are woven together as we see Bob Jesse's aspirations for induced spiritual experience coalesce with Griffiths' pharmacological understanding of altered states of consciousness. It all seems to fit so perfectly.

I am reading this book at a time in my own psychedelic research development when I have just learned that our UK-based MDMA for PTSD study is now fully funded, thanks, among others, to Rick at MAPS. Michael is due over to England in a few months to teach me and one other UK psychiatrist the method of delivering MDMA Therapy, so I am destined to be the first such (legal) clinician with that ability in the UK. So there is much pride and excitement as I turn the pages of this book. It reaffirms my privileges as a clinician, feeling deeply proud to be alongside my patients, who are just like Nick and the others; patients who so bravely share their stories from childhood and beyond, their fears and traumas and with whom I have the pleasure to work as they unravel their pain and watch themselves being nursed back to health. The verbatim account of Nick's MDMA sessions so wonderfully describes Michael and Annie's use of the MDMA mental space; sculpting like a pair of skilled craftsmen the emerging interpretations that arise, weaving the patient through their own narrative and watching as realisations are alchemically brought into being.

She is a kind and forgiving mistress, MDMA. And the pioneers who brought her into the field of medicine deserve all the praise and accolades that this tremendous book heaps upon them. All I am left to ask is when will Tom Shroder be coming to the UK to document with similar mastery the story of the development of UK psychedelic research? And if that day happens, will he give me a call? In the meantime I urge everyone to get out and buy a copy of this tour de force, Acid Test. As far as I am concerned, it passes.

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