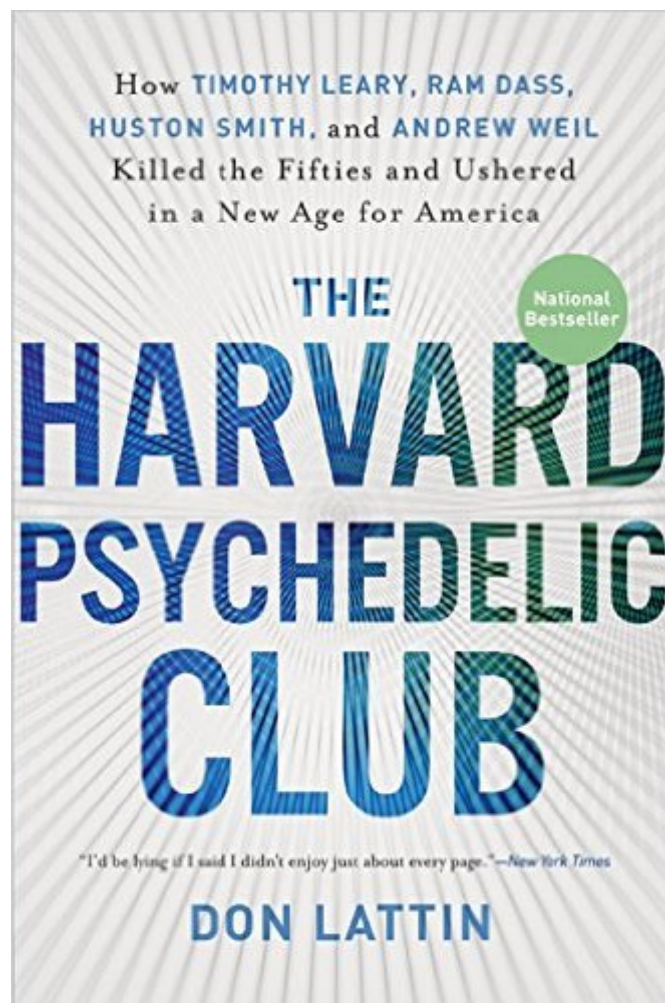


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The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, And Andrew Weil Killed The Fifties And Ushered In A New Age For America



Synopsis

Don Lattin has created a stimulating and thoroughly engrossing read. "Dennis McNally, author of *A Long Strange Trip: The Inside History of the Grateful Dead*, and *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* It is impossible to overstate the cultural significance of the four men described in Don Lattin's *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*. Huston Smith, tirelessly working to promote cross-cultural religious and spiritual tolerance. Richard Alpert, a.k.a. Ram Dass, inspiring generations with his mantra, "be here now." Andrew Weil, undisputed leader of the holistic medicine revolution. And, of course, Timothy Leary, the charismatic, rebellious counter-culture icon and LSD guru. Journalist Don Lattin provides the funny, moving inside story of the Cambridge Quartet, who crossed paths with the infamous Harvard Psilocybin Project in the early 60s, and went on to pioneer the Mind/Body/Spirit movement that would popularize yoga, vegetarianism, and Eastern mysticism in the Western world.

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Customer Reviews

The story of Ram Dass/Richard Alpert and Timothy Leary is well-documented. But the new news in this extremely readable and enjoyable book is how the psychedelic tendrils that emanated from Cambridge in the early 1960s also included an MIT professor who would become the foremost expert on comparative religion (Huston Smith) and an ambitious Harvard freshman who would become the most successful exponent of alternative medicine -- Andrew Weil. How these four lives intersected, how they supported and betrayed one another, makes for fascinating reading. But what

gives this book its heft is the fact that Lattin lets us know what happened to these men in the subsequent 50 years, how they feel now about what they went through then, and what the social and political implications are of the revolution they helped to foment and promote. Lattin understands that the key conflict in the 1960s wasn't so much between those who took LSD and those who didn't, but rather between those who felt that the revolution would occur if enough people took psychedelics and re-calibrated their perceptions; as opposed to those who felt that change would happen only if enough people agitated and protested, radically altering political and social structures. Lattin also understands that among those who took a great deal of LSD, there were two main outcomes: having been exposed to mystical/psychotic experiences, you either looked for ways to change your life according to what you'd seen and learned while on psychedelics; or you got hooked on the high itself, trying to repeat that experience as often and intensely as possible. The Harvard Psychedelic Club is a wonderful book, full of insight and compassion. It also casts a cold eye on what those events mean when looked at now, 50 years after they occurred.

The psychedelic movement suffers from a public relations problem. Hallucinogens have been lumped into the sloppy category "drugs." Thus, the history the author recounts has been buried under generic rhetoric about the ways misguided people use chemicals in their attempts to "escape" from "reality." Tripping is viewed as comparable to indulging in three-martini lunches, cultivating a deadly crack or heroin habit, or taking prescribed pharmaceuticals to make a high-stress grind tolerable. Apparently it took a religion journalist to state the obvious: misguided or not, at least some users of psychedelics are on a quest to find reality not escape it. I just finished the book and was struck (though not too surprised) to see reports of formative episodes in the lives of authors and others whose work has influenced me. It was a big "a-ha" to see Jon Kabat-Zinn, Dan Millman, Daniel Goleman, writers who I don't immediately associate with psychedelics, and Mirabai Bush, who led a training I attended, tied to the Fab Four protagonists. The twin lenses of biography and religion are used very effectively. This text paints a vivid picture of how people blessed and cursed with extraordinary intellects responded to the question, "Is this all there is?" when graced with the means to explore it, and how they shared the results of their inquiry with the rest of us mortals. The writing is sharp, fun, and clear with a strong narrative arc. Highly recommended.

Don Lattin has done a fine job creating a contemporary reprise/review of the remarkable confluence of influences that occurred in Cambridge, MA, USA in the early 1960s. I personally knew pretty well a lot of the folks he writes about. Dick Alpert (a.k.a. Baba Ram Dass) was one of my students when I

taught karate for the Harvard Athletic Department in the early 1960s. Tim Leary was a long time friend I had met at the old Harvard Center for Research on Personality at 5 Divinity Avenue in 1961 and saw on and off over the years in various contexts. Tim visited with us on (as I recall) his 64th birthday and gave me a copy of a book by William S. Burroughs that Bill had given to Tim shortly before, inscribing it to him as an "old comrade in arms". (I'd first met Burroughs at Tim's house on Homer Street in Newton, MA in 1962 or so, while Bill was visiting there). Andrew Weil was a classmate (Harvard '64) though not a friend. I attended various of Huston Smith's lectures in those days, too, though I did not know him personally. Many (perhaps most even) of the other folks mentioned in the book are also people I knew back in the '60s and '70s. Don's book does a great job conveying some of the extraordinary flavor of those remarkable times. It is a splendid introduction to this most peculiar and interesting nexus of American history for younger folks and a great 'flashback' document for all the Baby Boomers I watched tripping their way through the 60s and '70s as well! Get this book and read it. You will enjoy it. *;-)

An absolutely fascinating account of the American psychedelic movement. I give it 5 stars for readability and research, and I knock it down one star because I disagree with the author's conclusion. But you don't need to agree with the conclusion in order to enjoy this well written and informative book; at the least you will find his thesis thought provoking and not easily dismissed. And if you read the book and agree with Lattin, then you may very well have a 5 star experience!

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