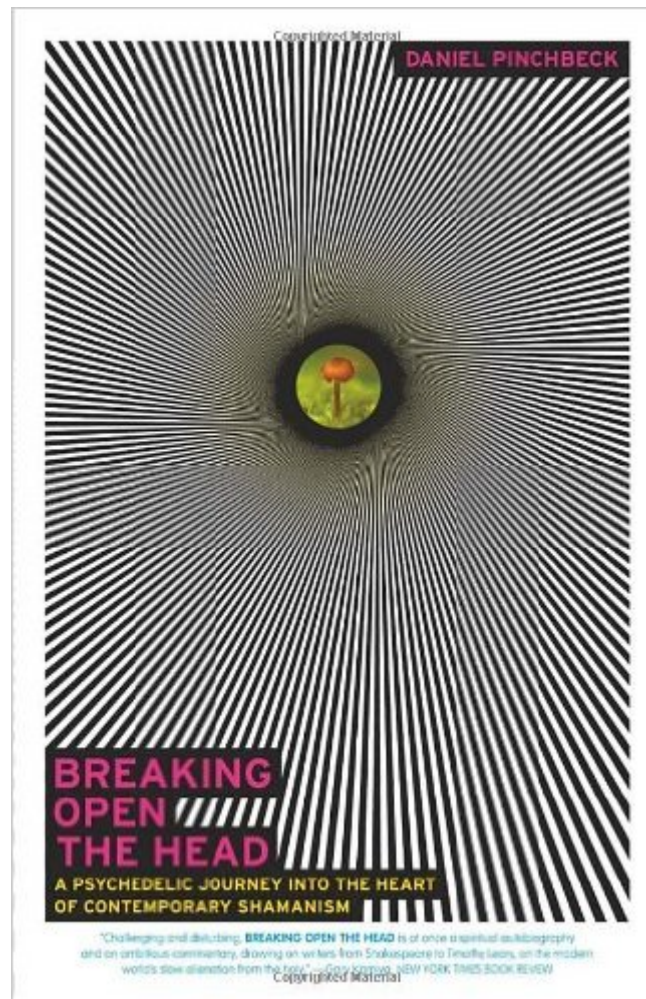


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# Breaking Open The Head: A Psychedelic Journey Into The Heart Of Contemporary Shamanism



## Synopsis

A dazzling work of personal travelogue and cultural criticism that ranges from the primitive to the postmodern in a quest for the promise and meaning of the psychedelic experience. While psychedelics of all sorts are demonized in America today, the visionary compounds found in plants are the spiritual sacraments of tribal cultures around the world. From the iboga of the Bwiti in Gabon, to the Mazatecs of Mexico, these plants are sacred because they awaken the mind to other levels of awareness--to a holographic vision of the universe. *Breaking Open the Head* is a passionate, multilayered, and sometimes rashly personal inquiry into this deep division. On one level, Daniel Pinchbeck tells the story of the encounters between the modern consciousness of the West and these sacramental substances, including such thinkers as Allen Ginsberg, Antonin Artaud, Walter Benjamin, and Terence McKenna, and a new underground of present-day ethnobotanists, chemists, psychonauts, and philosophers. It is also a scrupulous recording of the author's wide-ranging investigation with these outlaw compounds, including a thirty-hour tribal initiation in West Africa; an all-night encounter with the master shamans of the South American rain forest; and a report from a psychedelic utopia in the Black Rock Desert that is the Burning Man Festival. *Breaking Open the Head* is brave participatory journalism at its best, a vivid account of psychic and intellectual experiences that opened doors in the wall of Western rationalism and completed Daniel Pinchbeck's personal transformation from a jaded Manhattan journalist to shamanic initiate and grateful citizen of the cosmos. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

We can now speak of an entheogenic renaissance and this book is part of the growing literature of that movement. "Breaking Open the Head" is an autobiographical account in which the author details his transformation from a cynical Manhattan atheist to an entheogenic psychonaut. Along the way, the writer introduces us to the various psychedelics in use, their effects and cultural history (i.e. how they have been used throughout history &/or at present). One element that differentiates this book from other psychedelic accounts is Pinchbeck raises criticisms of capitalism, often via the voice of Walter Benjamin. We are all under the spell of capital. We are hypnotised by commercials and advertising jingles. We are told, by the powers that be, that capitalism is "natural", that we have arrived at some kind of Hegelian "End of History", in which capitalism has won and any attempts to imagine a different scenario, a different form of global exchange, is empty utopianism. Unfortunately, many of us have accepted this fabrication. And so it is, that the rainforest continues to be depleted, many people in Third World countries live in poverty (thanks to multinational corporations and the politics of debt played by such organizations as the World Bank); spiritually empty we, in the post-industrial capitalist countries, greedily seek to fill our spiritual emptiness with things, commodities. We consume more and more, yet still cannot fill the emptiness. We're like rats on a turnwheel. Psychedelics MAY be PART of the antidote to all of this. Through psychedelics we are awakened from our trance and can see the world from a completely different perspective. Psychedelics spark creativity.

(Four and a half stars) Dreams are fascinating, and psychedelic experiences are fascinating, to the one who has them. And the rule of thumb is, that people's descriptions of their fascinating dreams and trips rate right up there on the boredom meter with hole-by-hole narratives of your boss's last golf game. It's not coincidence, I think, that the two great, readable narratives to come out of the psychedelia's da-glo glory days in the sixties (Wolfe's Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test) and its nightmarish decline and fall in the seventies (Thompson's Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas) came from two fellows whose primary love and loyalty was to journalism. Then the substances that Daniel Pinchbeck calls "entheogens" fell into cultural eclipse, the interminable pathology known as the War on Drugs took center stage, and little original or noteworthy has been published on the topic for quite a while. Terence McKenna, brilliant but sometimes barely in touch with the real world, has had the field pretty much to himself. Now we've got another entrant, not quite up to Wolfe or Thompson, but as wide ranging as McKenna, while staying more level-headed and instructive. The strengths of "Breaking Open the Head" are once again journalistic. Pinchbeck undertakes an odyssey in search of genuine shamans, who can properly initiate him into the authentic use of psychoactive plants. He

takes us with us on his journey, sets us into scenes from West Africa, to the invisible perennial contemporary Woodstock in Nevada known as the Burning Man Festival, to the , to the peyote fields of Mexico, to labs in New York City where chemicals the plant kingdom never quite got around to inventing are concocted and consumed. We get Pinchbeck's trip reports, yes.

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