



Memoirs of an Addicted Brain: A Neuroscientist Examines his Former Life on Drugs

By Marc Lewis

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Marc Lewis's relationship with drugs began in a New England boarding school where, as a bullied and homesick fifteen-year-old, he made brief escapes from reality by way of cough medicine, alcohol, and marijuana. In Berkeley, California, in its hippie heyday, he found methamphetamine and LSD and heroin; he sniffed nitrous oxide in Malaysia; and frequented Calcutta's opium dens. Ultimately, though, his journey took him where it takes most addicts: into a life of desperation, deception, and crime.

But unlike most addicts, Lewis recovered to become a developmental psychologist and researcher in neuroscience. In *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*, he applies his professional expertise to a study of his former self, using the story of his own journey through addiction to tell the universal story of addictions of every kind.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #33606 in Books
- Published on: 2013-03-05
- Released on: 2013-03-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x .88" w x 6.13" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Boston Globe

"A surprising and charming addition to this crowded genre. Yes, it embraces the classic redemption narrative - teenage experimentation, late-'60s Berkeley, exotic forays into Malaysia and Calcutta, the inevitable slide into deception, crime, and desperation. But he ends up a professional neuropsychologist, able to enliven the tired streams of addled consciousness with metrical rapids of semi-hard science."

Guardian

"Marc Lewis's brilliant – if not wholly sympathetic – account of his many mind-bludgeoning drug experiences wears its biological determinism on its sleeve ... Lewis has certainly woven his experiences into an unusual and exciting book... (*Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*) is as strange, immediate and artfully written as any Oliver Sacks case-study, with the added scintillation of having been composed by its subject."

The Fix

"The most original and illuminating addiction memoir since Thomas De Quincey's seminal *Confessions of an Opium Eater*...[an] electrifying debut."

Midwest Book Review

"A powerful survey recounting the author's powerful addiction and how he broke an intense hold on drugs... This will appeal to a range of collections, from those strong in autobiographies to science and health holdings alike."

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"Developmental neuroscientist Lewis examines his odyssey from minor stoner to helpless, full-blown addict...as [he] unspools one pungent drug episode after another, he capably knits into the narrative an accessible explanation of the neural activity that guided his behavior. From opium pipe to orbitofrontal cortex, a smoothly entertaining interplay between lived experience and the particulars of brain activity."

Publishers Weekly

"Meticulous, evocative... Lewis's unusual blend of scientific expertise, street cred, vivid subjectivity and searching introspection yields a compelling perspective on the perils and allure of addiction."

Wall Street Journal

"Compelling...for readers grappling with addiction, Mr. Lewis's...approach might well be novel enough to inspire them to seek the happiness he now enjoys."

Chronicle of Higher Education

"He proceeds deftly from episodes of his drug years to neuroscientific explanations of his brain's response to drugs."

About the Author

Dr. Marc Lewis is a developmental neuroscientist and professor of human development and applied

psychology at Radboud University in the Netherlands, and professor emeritus at the University of Toronto. He is the author of over fifty journal publications in neuroscience and developmental psychology and coeditor of *Emotion, Development, and Self-Organization: Dynamic Systems Approaches to Emotional Development*.

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The first time I got drunk was with Whitney Talcott. It was a March night and freezing cold. I had been at Tabor less than six months, and depression was now a palpable daily companion, a disease to be managed. There were good days and bad days, but the good days were just tolerable and the bad days nearly did me in. I hated this school. It was bigger than me, it was stronger than me, and it seemed as natural a part of the New England landscape as the rocky coves and stands of maple. I didn't belong here. I had got here by mistake. My first two years of high school had been at a nice, normal suburban Toronto school a few blocks from my home. I might not have been the most popular kid in class, but nobody seemed to actively dislike me. I had a few friends. I got invited to a few parties. I had a girlfriend for a couple of months. And I could go home at night. That was the main thing. Here at Tabor, there was no home to return to at the end of the day—except the dorm. And I hated the dorm. I hated every whitewashed board, every hissing radiator, every creak in the polished hardwood floors. I hated my room, I hated my roommate. I hated the guy next door. And I hated my proctors, the senior boys whose job it was to supervise us and care for us while helping induct us into this bizarre paramilitary culture.

Para-naval, actually. Tabor was a para-naval academy, but that didn't mean much to me at the time. The naval terminology seemed a bad joke, an effort to reenact the Hollywood heroism of World War II. We would sometimes see men who looked like admirals strolling the pathways with the headmaster. Gold stripes on dark blue cuffs. There were special prayers at vespers, navy uniforms to be ironed and worn a few weeks a year, drill sessions with guns and a marching band. And yes, we were located on a body of water and there were a lot of boats: sailboats, rowboats, crew boats, a schooner out in the harbour. It was the boats that had attracted me in the first place, the previous spring in Toronto.

"Marc, we'd like to talk to you about your options for next year," my mother had said in her frank, slightly invasive tone.

"What options?" I was beckoned to the kitchen table, where I sat down with both parents. The table was covered with pamphlets from different private schools, most of them in New England. "You seem a little bored with school," Mom continued. "And maybe a bit discontent overall?" Those penetrating eyes—hazel and clear with mildly arched brows—scanned me for an accuracy reading. They gazed at me steadily from her pretty, mid-thirtyish face—a face surrounded by sprayed-in-place hair that became increasingly blonde as the sixties wore on. My mother seemed to wield her own sixth sense. She could look into me and find things. As usual, I soon felt I must be hiding whatever it was she was looking for.

"I'm fine, Mom. Everything's okay." My dad sat beside her, hunched over and uncomfortable. His pleasant features, thin black hair, and solemn brown eyes would have been more at home at a meeting of the family-run leather business. Dad didn't usually get involved in family discussions with an emotional theme, if that's what this was. Maybe he was in the dark as much as I was. His half-smile tried to make light of things. But this was sounding ominous.

"I know everything's fine," she said. "But remember we talked about boarding schools? And you said you might be interested?"

Remember, we'll be moving to San Francisco in two years' time. Going to an American school would save

you a year of high school. You'd be able to go straight to college the year we arrive. So . . ." she smiled encouragingly, "I've done my homework and gotten these pamphlets from some very fine schools. And we thought," with a glance at my dad, "that you might want to look at them."

It all seemed exciting, though too far off to think about. So I looked at the pamphlets piled up in front of me. We looked together, and my parents pointed out this and that feature of this and that school. I tried to pay attention, but my thoughts wandered like stray cats. I was preoccupied—some sort of creeping disorientation at the very prospect of leaving home. And beneath that, intangible but potent, a sense of dread. Were they trying to get rid of me? Had I done something wrong?

Now Tabor was my world: there was nothing left to decide. Every morning I joined four hundred other teenage boys tramping along a wooden walkway between brick buildings in a cold mist, breakfast settling, the assembly hall looming, thinking about ways to avoid attention. Our headmaster, Mr. Witherstein, looked as though he'd stepped out of an old movie. He parted his hair almost dead centre, and he was grey and crusty like a venerable admiral himself. He waited for us at the lectern, beaming with unnatural enthusiasm. He delighted in the series of routine announcements that he would soon recite with such gravity. I took my assigned seat. Each seat back held a short wire rack containing a hymnal. I reached toward mine automatically, on cue. We opened our hymnals together, the rustle of pages filling the hall, and we began to sing.

A mighty fortress is our God! A bulwark never failing. God had never appeared to me as a fort or a bulwark. Maybe that was because I was Jewish. Yet I didn't mind the singing. It numbed me. There was a comforting anonymity in being a part of this mass, this sea of boys packed row after row in a heated auditorium. I was safe for now. Back at my dorm, it was survival of the fittest, and I wasn't all that fit. A pecking order had consolidated in the early months, and I was pretty close to the bottom. At first my roommate, Todd, was the victim of some pretty vicious teasing by just about everyone, but especially Bill Reed, the handsome giant who lived in the room next door. Reed was a front-line football player, though still a junior, and for that alone he was universally admired. Todd put some sort of lotion on his face at night, giving it an awful vampiric whiteness, all the more disturbing with his black stubble poking through. He was soon known to one and all as Madame Butterfly. I was sympathetic at first, but I didn't like him much. He was caustic, whiny, and sour. I tried to like him. I tried to be nice to him. But I secretly hoped that his victimization would keep me safe, give me some breathing space.

Meanwhile, Reed had risen rapidly to power. His own roommate, Randy, was an absurd-looking, gangly outcast, with protruding ears, perfectly designed by nature for the role of village idiot. And he was Reed's roommate! I felt sorry for Randy. What torments must he suffer? But I was relieved that Reed was surrounded by victim material. Although I knew that was selfish, I needed it to be so. I needed the playing field tilted in my favour.

And then, to my horror, it tilted the other way. The dominance hierarchy heaved a final time and Randy and Todd ended up Reed's lieutenants, his slaves. Randy brought him anything he asked for. He literally stood around, waiting for orders. Todd found his niche fawning over Reed from the sidelines, grinning at his savage jokes and heaping ridicule on his victims.

I was next in line.

"Hey Lewis!" Reed smiled at me almost warmly from the doorway connecting our rooms. His broad, manly features beamed with good humour.

“Yes?”

“Come on in. Join the party.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t refuse.

“Did you see what happened to my dresser?”

“No . . .”

“Take a look.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Come closer.” He seemed so inviting. I wanted to believe that I was really being included. But I didn’t see anything unusual.

“Closer!”

“I don’t see . . .”

“Bring your head right up to the edge here, ya dummy. You have to look at it from just the right angle.” I did as I was told, moving my face to within inches of the dresser surface. There seemed to be a pool of water there.

“I see some water. How did that happen?”

Then smash! His palm came down hard on the little puddle; my face was soaked. And whatever was running down my cheeks stung my eyes, which started instantly to tear. Aftershave? Hydrochloric acid? Liquid shame? My tears were the worst part.

“How did that happen?” Reed echoed in mincing tones. “How did that happen?” His voice rose with incredulity while he danced around the room. “Did it make you cry, Lewis? Poor baby, we’d better call your Mama,” and they all erupted into laughter, Reed, Randy, Todd, and another guy. I looked through tears at Reed’s grinning hyena mask, curling now with contempt, and I wanted to slip through the floor. *What was wrong with me?!*

I began to avoid my dorm whenever I could, to synchronize my comings and goings with those of the other boys, so Reed couldn’t get me alone. I made a couple of friends and that helped. There were other misfits who had no interest—and generally no place—in the jock-dominated hierarchy. By Christmas I spent a lot of time with Schwartz and Burton. Joe Schwartz was a junior like me, but he was leather-tough in some unique way. Self-sufficient and really smart. Burton was just a big teddy bear, gruff and mischievous, whom nobody could dislike. I got to know their friends, Gelsthorpe, Perry, and Norris, all seniors. These were the guys who would graduate at the end of the year, and they all lived in another dorm, Pond House. I spent a lot of time at Pond House, and I wished I could switch. But at night I had to return to my own dorm, with its sixteen boys, often creeping up the back stairs to avoid notice. Sometimes, before going to my room and facing Todd, I’d drop in on Lawrence Carr, one of the two black kids at Tabor. That’s two out of four hundred. The other one, Lavalley, was despised by all: he wore his bitterness like an armband. But Carr stayed above the fray and was left alone. In my eyes he was magnificent.

“How do you handle it?” I wanted to know.

“I take it all for granted,” he replied. His smile was gentle, chiding.

“What did you expect, man? Tabor is no temple of brotherhood. It is exactly what it appears to be.”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Just wait it out. Keep your own council.”

It seemed easy for him.

When I finally learned how to avoid Reed’s displays of goodwill, trouble came from a guy named Roche who lived across the hall. Passing his door became an agony of nerves.

“A Jew! A Jew! Excuse me! I mean ah-choo! Bless me! Hey Lewis, did you hear someone sneeze?” His voice rang with feigned bafflement.

Roche was rotund and greasy, with small eyes and a blistering tongue. He sat chinless, unmoving, on a chair well inside his room, opposite the door, waiting for fresh bait to pass within range without his having to move from his lair. I was bait. Defenceless bait.

“Don’t let them know they’re getting you down,” my mother advised on the phone. “If they don’t get a reaction, they’ll stop.”

That was probably the worst advice I’d ever got from anyone. Or maybe I just didn’t know how to implement it. I couldn’t imagine how I might pretend that it wasn’t getting me down. It crushed me! Roche could see my face as I hurried by or see me looking down, avoiding his gaze.

But I soon got more potent advice from an unlikely source, a boy named Miles. He was a loner like Carr, and confident like Carr—in fact contemptuous of the scurrying cruelty around him. I sat at the foot of his bed one night, looking at unfathomable pictures of his enormous home in the Deep South.

“Lewis,” he asked, leaning regally against the headboard, “why do you let Roche pick on you?” He studied me carefully, trying to discern the peculiar defect that must be there.

“I don’t . . . mean to. What choice do I have?”

“What choice?” He snorted with mild disgust. “Lewis, your problem is that you have no common sense. You’re an intelligent kid, but you don’t know how to use it.”

“What should I do?” If there was some workable trick, I wanted badly to know it.

“Look at Roche. Does he have any weaknesses?”

“Well, no. He’s got lots of friends in fact.”

“Yeah, but is there anything about him that’s . . . that he’s not proud of? That he doesn’t want his friends to

see?"

"Just that he's fat, I guess."

From the Hardcover edition.

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