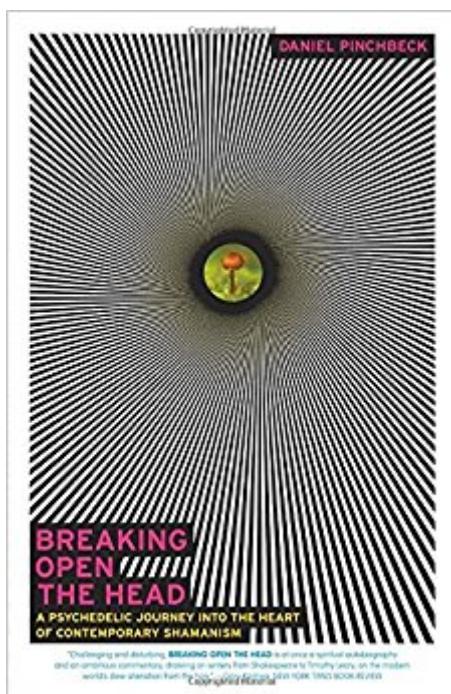


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# Breaking Open The Head: A Psychedelic Journey Into The Heart Of Contemporary Shamanism



## 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

Open City editor Pinchbeck's book debut is a polemic that picks up the threads that Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, Ken Kesey's *Merry Pranksters* and counterculture idealism left in the culture. Charting his gradual transformation from a cynical New York litterateur to psychedelic acolyte, Pinchbeck uses elements of travelogue, memoir, "entheobotany" ("the study of god-containing plants") and historical research to ask why these "doorways of the mind" have been unceremoniously sealed, sharing Walter Benjamin's melancholy about the exasperating nature of consumerism: "We live in a culture where everything tastes good but nothing satisfies." Pinchbeck travels the earth in search of spiritual awakening through tripping, from Gabon to the Nevada desert. At happenings like the Burning Man festival or a plant conference in the Ecuadorean jungle, Pinchbeck meets "modern shamans" and tells their stories as they intersect with his. In his reporting, he manages to walk a difficult tonal tightrope, balancing his skepticism with a desire to be transformed. He thoughtfully surveys the literature about psychedelic drugs, but the most exhilarating and illuminating sections are the descriptions of drug taking: he calls this visiting the "spirit world," which is "like a cosmic bureaucracy employing its own PR department, its own off-kilter sense of dream-logic and humor... constantly playing with human limitations, dangling possibilities before our puny grasps at knowledge." There's little new drug lore here, but Pinchbeck's earnest, engaged and winning manner carry the book. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this firsthand account of the world of psychedelic substances today, Village Voice and Rolling Stone writer Pinchbeck weaves elements of his personal life, including vivid descriptions of his reactions to the substances he takes, with larger topics, such as the history of psychedelic substances in the modern world and the foundations of shamanism. To aid his inquiry, he participates in visionary rituals around the world, e.g., taking iboga as part of a tribal initiation in Gabon. He also discusses key figures such as Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, and Terence McKenna. Pinchbeck repeatedly decries the rationalism and destructiveness of Western culture and the shortsightedness of completely outlawing psychedelic substances. The book is not an extended diatribe, however. The author offers various viewpoints on how certain drugs should be used and on whether a modern, Western shamanism is possible. Pinchbeck posits a universe that may be difficult to accept, but his book will be of interest for public and academic libraries. Stephen Joseph, Butler Cty. Community Coll. Lib., PA Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

What an amazing book. I was often in awe at the content. He's a very concise writer, and makes great effort to remain as objective as possible. I also love how the chapters are relatively short, making it well-organized. I learned a lot throughout the course of the book, and I plan on reading it many times later on. *Breaking Open the Head* is the perfect title for this, a journey from atheism to finding that the world around us is much more than it seems when you finally come to know and to see true reality. The ending is too perfect, I can't spoil it. This is a MUST READ!!!!

Phenomenal whirlwind of mind altering history, experiences, citations, magic, occult mysteries, and personal stories that made me re-think the nature of reality. I recommend this to anyone on the spiritual, psychonaut, shamanic or ethnobotanical journey of deeper understanding. Pinchbeck is well read and prudently cautious in his explorations. I plan to re-read this book several times.

Honest to goodness great book.

Outstanding Read. A well researched, engaging, and honest account of a disillusioned intellectual's attempt to come to terms with the loss of the sacred in the modern world, and his courageous, sometimes desperate journey to recover that which is true and beautiful in his own life. Ostensibly a book about psychedelics, shamanism, and their role in the historical and modern world, *Breaking Open the Head* is also a deeply insightful social commentary on the state of the Western psyche, and the sickness that results from our loss of connection with, for lack of a better term, the divine or natural order. Mr. Pinchbeck doesn't pull any punches regarding this sad state of affairs in our current version of society, but manages to leave the reader feeling hopeful and optimistic for the future as well. All in all, a great book. Highly recommended.

Pinchbeck's book was absolutely riveting for me. While I have no experience whatsoever with hallucinogens, I have had similar experiences, albeit not quite as intense as he describes, as a practicing mystic. He has an engaging journalistic style. I picked up the book after watching the 2 hour *Manifesting the Mind* video; I found his thoughts there most curiosity piquing, and, along with this book, I am driven to research much more deeply on the subject. I keep reading his final chapter over and over. It is creating a new paradigm shift for me, leading me to greater awareness and action. Reading his conclusion as well as the conclusions of other authors I have read subsequently, thanks to Pinchbeck's references, has been a huge Aha! experience for me. His book can be a "breaking open the head" kind of experience for anyone who approaches it with an open mind and a willingness to "test all things." The concepts to which this new thinking has led me reach

back to my childhood, bringing many more pieces of the puzzle together for me.

Daniel has performed a sweeping review and acute analysis of what goes on in shamanic cultures the world around with respect to the use of psychedelic substances for cultural understanding. Daniel's writing is wonderful, and this book is a joy to read.

Daniel Pinchbeck is an exciting and elegant erudite, hurtling through concepts, experiences and history, drawing upon and critiquing the writings of an eclectic list of authors ranging from Shakespeare to Rudolph Steiner, through Walter Benjamin and Aleister Crowley, and testing them against his own experiences with psychedelic drugs. He's also a masterful storyteller, his book gently luring you in with fascinating insights, getting you hooked on esoteric magic realism, frightening the hell out of you with occult nightmares, before climaxing in urging you to find your inner shaman. Just as with the drugs he writes about, reading this forced me to temporarily suspend reality, and gave me mixed feelings of euphoria and dread. Coming down now, I can only think of the monumental journey of self-discovery that lays ahead.

A really fascinating book. Pinchbeck is all over the place at times, but it all seems to come together as a coherent narrative.

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