

Trippin' with Tim

by [Jeff Plude](#) (August 2019)



Speculators, Abe Gurvin, 1977

Fitzhugh Loney doesn't believe in God because it doesn't make sense to him, and he also can't believe that his classmates in the graduate psychology program at Harvard can't stop talking about "oneness" and the "face of the Divine." They're supposedly scientists, after all. He makes no bones about why he's there—to escape, as he sees it, his hellish life as a high school guidance counselor in the small town of Beacon, New York.

So, as the spring semester starts in January 1962, to ensure

his ascent out of the middle-class pit, Fitz desperately wants to be part of the “inner circle” of his doctoral adviser, Tim, as his students blithely call him at his request. Naturally, Tim doesn’t believe in God either (but he believes in “*something*—call it brain chemistry”), but he’s the one responsible for drumming up all the mysto-babble in the Psych Department.

Tim is in his early forties, a decade older than Fitz, but he looks just as young and fit, with a killer smile and charisma to spare. He’s the hottest thing on campus and in clinical psychology. He’d written an influential book published five years before called *Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*, which rejects the old Freud-Skinner model of cigar phalluses and white rats for a transactional one, a more equal and personal relationship with the patient, “not probing him like an Inquisitor.”

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But Fitz, who comes from “a long and undistinguished line of Irish drunks,” is wary. To enter the sacred circle, he has to take part in an initiation, a “session,” at Tim’s house. Two summers before, Tim had been given a wonder drug in Mexico by a *curandera*, a shaman, “that could dissolve a patient’s defenses in a single session.” And shamans, of course, are all-knowing, unlike American or European medicine men and women. Psychotherapy was now obsolete.

Therefore, all the Inner Circlers have to ingest it. For science—it's part of The Psilocybin Project, which Tim started at Harvard right after he splashed back down in his cramped office on campus.

This is the setting for T.C. Boyle's new novel *Outside Looking In*, and the Spaceship LSD-25 has just blasted off for internal universes unknown. And Tim, who is Timothy Leary to us outsiders, is in the commander's seat. Back on *terra firma* (if you can call it that) he's the high priest of a growing and thinly masked cult that now includes Fitz, his wife, Joanie, and even their son, Corey.

Mr Leary, with Aldous Huxley and Ken Kesey, make up what I see as the unholy trinity that promoted and popularized psychedelics, or as it used to be jokingly called, "better living through chemistry." *Psychedelic* comes from the Greek words *psyche* (mind) and *delos* (manifest, reveal); in other words, such a drug is supposed to reveal a hidden part of the mind and expand consciousness.

Mr Huxley's essays "The Doors of Perception" and "Heaven and Hell" (both titles derive from William Blake) provided intellectual appeal. Mr Leary threw in psychology and publicity (perhaps an inspiration for Steve Jobs, who used and praised acid). And Ken Kesey, the *wunderkind* novelist who wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and formed and led the Merry Pranksters, lightened it all up with pseudo-artistic tribalism (chronicled and, I believe, satirized by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*). The Beatles and The Grateful Dead were house bands for the Psychedelic Circus

Maximus, which appears to still be drawing a good-sized crowd after a half century, judging by what I read on the internet, and by the recent decriminalization in Oakland and Denver of “magic” mushrooms. Mr Leary and Mr Kesey both did stints in jail (comically) for possession of marijuana, which, unlike its much more potent hallucinogenic cousin LSD, was illegal at the time. Their imprisonment, unpleasant though it must’ve been, paid off in the long run in their martyrdom for the great pearl they’d put all their hope and faith in.

And now we have *Outside Looking In*. This isn’t the first time Mr Boyle has cannibalized the counterculture for a novel. *Drop City*, published in 2003, and a finalist for the National Book Award, was the name of a real commune in Colorado in the late sixties and early seventies. He’s also no stranger to historical fiction, which makes up a good share of his seventeen novels, or to charlatans, like the sexologist-pervert Alfred Kinsey in *The Inner Circle* (a title that could’ve been used for his current novel). He won a Pen/Faulkner award in 1988 for *World’s End*.

The title of his latest book comes from a lyric in a Moody Blues song about Timothy Leary called “Legend of a Mind.” I’d never heard it before, or if I had, I’d forgotten it. But one of the novel’s epigraphs is drawn from an even higher rock ‘n’ roll source, perhaps the highest—John Lennon’s creepy, trippy 1966 Beatles song “Tomorrow Never Knows”:

Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream

It is not dying, it is not dying

Along with the opening lines, the music, if you can call it that, sounds like shamanic drumming accompanied by a choir of squealing devils. Trying to mimic an acid trip, Mr Lennon chants the rest of the song in similar Zen-like pairs of verses like the first one. I knew this tune well.

What I didn't know when I was listening to it back in high school in the mid-to-late seventies was that, according to Albert Goldman in his biography *The Lives of John Lennon* (1988), Mr Lennon lifted the theme and sometimes the exact wording of the lyrics from Mr Leary's book *The Psychedelic Experience*, which in turn Mr Leary lifted from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Mr Lennon recorded an excerpt of Mr Leary's book and listened to it to avoid a bad trip, to guide him so he wouldn't freak out, which is exactly what the book was intended for.

Indeed, Mr Lennon was my own door to psychedelics. My rock friends and I knew all the Beatles drug lore, which centered around Mr Lennon. That the moaning police sirens at the beginning of "I Am the Walrus" was what it sounded like to hear them when he was tripping. Or that "She Said She Said" was partly based on a dinner party the Beatles were at in L.A. and Mr Lennon was tripping and Peter Fonda kept saying, "I know what it's like to be dead"—Mr Lennon kept telling him to shut up and was so out of it he couldn't even pick up his fork and knife. Or that his first acid trip was courtesy of "Dr. Robert," a dentist who secretly slipped it into Mr Lennon's and other guests' coffee after dinner. (Dr. Robert, coincidentally, was the name of the old physician in Huxley's *Island*, his 1962 novel about a utopia that featured the psychedelic "*moksha*-medicine.")

Myself, I always was a bit afraid of trying acid. But after I graduated from college, at a low point in my life for several reasons other than usual post-graduation difficulties, one night I took a hit of orange sunshine. It was the longest most horrid eight or so hours of my life. I never took acid again.

Speaking of Mr Fonda, the fiftieth anniversary of the release of the hippie classic *Easy Rider*, which he co-wrote and co-starred in, was in July. In the film he and Dennis Hopper (who directed) take a road trip from L.A. to New Orleans on motorcycle choppers, with cash from a big cocaine score squirreled away in Mr Fonda's character's gas tank, which is painted like a U.S. flag. During a big scene near the end, they trip on LSD—in a French Quarter cemetery during Mardi Gras with a couple of whores, punctuated by repeated haunting shots of a young woman reciting the Apostles' Creed amid the gravestones. It's a bad trip, in both senses of the word, considering the end for the two antiheroes.

A month after *Easy Rider* was Woodstock, where hippies showed the world in August 1969 what peace and love were all about—getting high and getting it on. (Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll was at least more honest.) But just the weekend before, on the other side of the country, Flower Power was blasted when Charlie Manson, a wannabe rock star, created helter-skelter by ordering his “family” of duped young zombies to murder seven people. Susan Atkins, perhaps the most well-known of the killers, later claimed that LSD was to blame for the sadistic bloodbath.

Surely Mr Boyle and his publisher, HarperCollins, considered these milestones when they chose Mr Leary for a fictional treatment at this time, since his life has been thoroughly

covered in nonfiction books and video. Mr Boyle, who appeared in April at the New York State Writers Institute, told the hundred or so in the audience that Mr Leary interested him because he wondered how a guru can be so self-involved that he doesn't see what he's doing to others. For me, there's little mystery in it—a guru misleads people not because he doesn't see what he's doing, but because he doesn't care what he's doing. In other words, he's a narcissist at best; at worst, a psychopath.

At any rate, Mr Boyle contrasted his own mentor in grad school at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, literary scholar Frederick P.W. McDowell, with Harvard's Mr Leary:

What did he want from me? He wanted me to be excited about literature and to work hard. But Leary, what did he want from his psychology students? He wanted them to be disciples.

In fact, *Outside Looking In* is teeming with religious references and imagery, which is no surprise, since a guru is by definition a spiritual leader of sorts. But what is surprising is that in this case most of it is Christian. But perhaps it's not so surprising either, since the United States of America was created with a Judeo-Christian foundation, even if the founding fathers were not exactly Jewish or Christian; nor were they, excluding Thomas Paine, atheists.

Along the same lines, the novel is suffused with images and references to light—both seeing it during the *experience*, as in “The Light,” i.e. God (even though they say they don't

believe in such a thing), and descriptions of it in everyday life in all its countless manifestations. The latter of which became tiresome, at least to me. I suppose it's partly meant to show how Fitz is becoming more perceptive after the kaleidoscopic and synesthetic phantasmagoria induced by LSD. The Bible calls it *pharmakeia*, which *pharmaceutical* is derived from. According to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, *pharmakeia* in the Old Testament refers to "sorcery, magical arts, often found in connection with idolatry and fostered by it," and in the Book of Revelation, "the deceptions and seductions of idolatry."

The novel opens with a brief section, called "Prelude," set in Basel in 1943, and shows Albert Hofmann as he synthesizes lysergic acid diethylamide and tests it on himself and a young fetching assistant. His Swiss lab eventually became Mr Leary's supplier; LSD was legal until 1966, when California outlawed it, and until 1968 nationwide.

The real action starts when Fitz, though he wavers throughout the first quarter or so of the novel, predictably attends the session at Tim's and takes the sacrament, psilocybin, which is in turn derived from magic mushrooms. What's even more insidious is that Fitz, like the other Inner Circlers, has to bring his wife with him. (Tim, a consummate salesman and former husband—his first wife committed suicide, leaving him with two young kids—knows how to dispel objections.) So Joanie trips too, and along with the hallucinations, she and Fitz have pyrotechnic sex right there in Tim's rented three-floor Georgian house. ("Really, God is in the f-ing, isn't that right?" Tim tells Fitz.) They are now hooked, at least psychologically.

Entheogens, Tim calls the drugs, a Greek word meaning “generating the divine within.” This is where all religion comes from, Tim tells Fitz, “tripping, that’s all it is. Did you see the Light?”

He didn’t. But at the very next session, Fitz and Joanie “graduate” to LSD, which is “two to three thousand times more potent.” But Fitz fails the first exam. He flips out, sees demons instead of God, strips off all his clothes and starts charging around the backyard—and runs smack into a tree. Not that he remembers that or much else, except that he was praying “*Our father who art in heaven*, the cant of his Catholic youth come back to him till he was staring into the slit eyes of the Devil.” Tim later tells him that another Inner Circler, Walter Pahnke, a physician who is now a grad student at Harvard’s Divinity School, had to inject him with Thorazine to bring him safely down.

Not to worry, Tim tells Fitz.

The point is revelation and there’s no promise of that—or that it’ll be all milk and honey either. Read Huxley . . . Sometimes it’s heaven, sometimes it’s hell . . . our job is to be patient and follow it where it wants to lead us.

The very next morning Walter asks Fitz to be part of an experiment to test the reactions of twenty students from the Andover Newton Theological Seminary as they trip, since they’re more “attuned” to religious experience. He tells Fitz:

What I'm interested in is the religious aspect of the psychedelic experience—that is, whether or not these drugs . . . can facilitate the kind of transcendence or agape the saints and mystics experience . . .

On Good Friday, the experiment begins in the basement of the Marsh Chapel at Boston University, away from the regular churchgoers. Before the service, some of the students are dosed with psilocybin, and some get a placebo. Fitz and other Inner Circlers are acting as guides, though some of them will be tripping too, including Fitz. As the service progresses, being piped into the basement, the student Fitz is guiding starts freaking out when the priest thunders, "Go out into the world and tell everyone you meet, 'There is a man, a man on the cross!'"

Next thing you know the student stands up and starts babbling and waving his arms and charges the altar, which has a statue of Christ, under which reads "AND YE SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE," and bolts. Fitz chases him into the B.U. School of Theology, and Walter does too, and they calm him down. But when a mailman appears out of nowhere, the student freaks out and Fitz and Walter and the mailman wrestle him down and Walter gives him a shot as the student shouts: "A man on the cross!"

Eventually the uncool but real Psych professors catch wind of Tim's sessions, which seem to them more like parties; they believe the whole program has "an anti-intellectual bent" and refer to reports that psychedelics in some cases have caused "psychotic reactions." And though flashing his "unflagging smile" during a public meeting held to "crucify" him, Tim has already planned his and the Inner Circlers' escape from these

“lab rats”—to Mexico, of course, where it all began.

But after a summer and a half of occupying a hotel in Zihuantanejo, they are summarily deported by the *federales* for their wife-swapping, drug-taking, pagan ways. The thirty or so Inner Circlers and their families land in Millbrook, New York, this time in a three-floor, thirty-four-room gothic mansion owned by the wealthy family of Tim’s girlfriend, Peggy Hitchcock.

Here, out in the boonies on this huge estate, what little there is still alive of the Loneys finally dies. When they blindly draw names to see which male-female pair will trip for a week in a guest house on the property, it’s Fitz and Lori. She’s an “eighteen- or nineteen-year-old” flaky, nymph half his age, who dropped out of a nearby college and dropped right into the commune one day and stayed. As Fitz bonds with her sexually and spiritually during the tripathon, he becomes obsessed with her. She barely knows he exists.

Joanie, at last, gives Fitz an ultimatum, and when it fails she angrily takes her teenage son (who has also been tripping on “microdoses,” as have the handful of other kids there his age) and gets out of there. A couple of weeks later she calls her husband and asks him to come home and he says, “I am home.” When she goads him about Lori and he goads her back about one of her flings, she tells him she’s not ever going back to the Millbrook mess: “Fitz, it’s a disaster. Look what it’s done to us. To me, Fitz, to *me*.”

Then Lori leaves too—but not with Fitz. She splits with the

Pranksters, no less, on their converted Day-Glo school bus further when they show up out of the blue one summer afternoon on their cross-country ramble in 1964. (The Pranksters unexpectedly get a cool reception from the Inner Circlers, who are not quite hippies; they love jazz and hate the Beatles, whom they consider juvenile. And the East-West Coast acid summit never materializes—Tim is on a three-day trip in his room and isn't giving audiences, even to a fellow psychedelic pioneer like Mr Kesey.)

In the end, back in Tim's office, this time on the third floor in the mansion in Millbrook, Fitz begs Tim for some "heavenly blue"—he wants to see the "Second Light" (what exactly the First Light is supposed to be is unclear). "I want to see God—or whatever passes for God when . . . there's nothing between you and the universe." Then pathetically: "Tell me you've been there. Tell me you've seen *God*."

Tim's answer? He duly curses God, and he and Fitz party on.

For Fitz, the road of excess leads not to Blake's palace of wisdom, but to a mansion of sorrows. The way was wide and easy, and now strewn with his own psychological and spiritual carnage. So much for the Proverbs of Hell.

What became of Fitz after that, I wonder, since he's only in his mid-thirties when the novel ends? Did he ever recover all he lost—his career as a psychologist, since the Inner Circlers all dropped out to live in Millbrook? his wife and son? his dignity and humanity? his right mind and eternal soul?

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Perhaps when Fitz was a kid he never learned that even Moses wasn't permitted to see God, except for His back as He passed over Mount Sinai, because he would've died (as it was, Moses' hair and beard immediately and completely turned white). Perhaps Fitz never learned that Jesus said that anybody who tries to climb into the sheepfold instead of going through the door was a "thief and a robber."

We know what happened to Tim—he tripped his brains out, chanted hosannas to LSD in lectures and interviews, went to prison, became a fugitive, and eventually wound up a showman. It was in his last role that I saw his act in the early 1980s, during a nationwide tour of universities in which he debated Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy, who as a former assistant DA busted Mr Leary in 1966 in Millbrook. The last time I saw Mr Leary before he died in 1996 was in a PBS interview, and I remember him saying that his credo was "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law," which he took from Satanist Aleister Crowley, "The Wickedest Man in the World" (who in turn took it from Rabelais).

But for Mr Leary's victims like the Loneys, I think of Dante's warning above the gates of Hell: "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE."

As for now, "Timothy Leary's dead," as the Moody Blues sing.

But he's also singing, perpetually, his siren song of "Turn on, tune in, and drop out" in videos on the internet, still looking to steal whatever undiscerning soul he can.

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