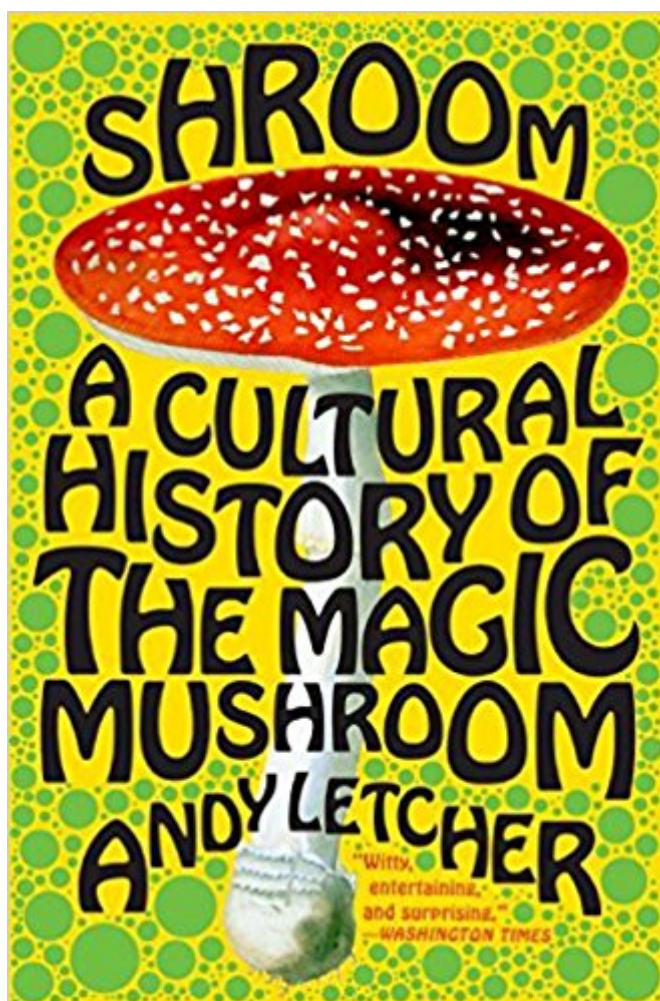


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# Shroom: A Cultural History Of The Magic Mushroom



## Synopsis

Did mushroom tea kick-start ancient Greek philosophy? Was Alice's Adventures in Wonderland a thinly veiled psychedelic mushroom odyssey? Is Santa Claus really a magic mushroom in disguise? The world of the magic mushroom is a place where shamans and hippies rub shoulders with psychiatrists, poets, and international bankers. Since its rediscovery only fifty years ago, this hallucinogenic fungus, once shunned in the West as the most pernicious of poisons, has inspired a plethora of folktales and urban legends. In this timely and definitive study, Andy Letcher chronicles the history of the magic mushroom—from its use by the Aztecs of Central America and the tribes of Siberia through to the present day—stripping away the myths and taking a critical and humorous look at the drug's more recent manifestations. Informative, lively, and impeccably researched, *Shroom* is a unique and engaging exploration of this most extraordinary of psychedelics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Letcher, an eco-protestor who once lived in a tree house, wrote this exhaustive history in order to debunk the folklore in which mushroom munchers have rooted their appreciation of the hallucinogen. The "bemushroomed," he says, proselytize that the fungus inspired humans to construct Stonehenge, found Western philosophy and even think up Santa Claus. To demonstrate that the real story is "less fanciful and far more interesting," Letcher draws on biological and archeological studies, social history and even his own diaries to chronicle phenomena like Algerian

cave drawings that look suspiciously like mushrooms and the plight of Siberian shamans. But he often buries his best material. It's startling, for example, to learn that a New York City banker helped kick-start the psychedelic '60s with a Life magazine article about Mexican mushrooms. But Letcher digresses for 18 pages before finally delivering the kicker: financier Gordon Wasson engaged in a grave deception to gain access to the goods and declared himself blameless as hippie hordes destroyed the ancient community Huautla. Major figures like Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg appear, but are also subsumed by Letcher's colorless, academic style. Readers expecting a druggie classic in the style of Aldous Huxley or Carlos Castaneda will be disappointed. (Feb. 27) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

One evening in 1916, "upright American surgeon" Beaman Douglass and his wife ate some "innocuous wild mushrooms . . . fried in butter and served on toast." En route to an evening of bridge, both experienced "preternatural waves of giddiness." After dizziness, hilarity, depression, and difficulty breathing, Mrs. Douglass required treatment with "atropine, morphine, and an arsenal of emetics." "She played cards badly that night," her husband noted. Writing later for a mycological journal, he found "no merit" in the experience and hoped to "prevent others from making similar foolish mistakes." It never occurred to him that people might deliberately seek what he chanced upon. The bulk of Letcher's text concerns people doing just that. From psychoactive mushroom usage by the Aztecs and Siberian tribesmen on, Letcher lays out the history of the use and suppression of psychedelic mushrooms and how they "went from being an obscure poison to being . . . hawked on street corners" and cultivated in cellars. Pretty much essential for popular recreational-drug-use book collections. Mike Tribby Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Great book. I always recommend it. If you have an interest in anything that relates to it consider checking it out.

love the illustrations!

great book

very pleased. interesting info.

I borrowed this book from the Rochester Public Library, and liked it so much that I incurred some library fines. I had to buy it, and I'm still not finished reading it. I love books like this. Definitely recommend it for anyone interested in mushrooms.

I was pretty disappointed by this book. Largely because it seems mislabeled. Letcher spends this entire book debunking mushroom myths and theories, like McKenna's stoned ape theory, Wasson's soma as a mushroom, Santa Claus is an Amanita. The other parts are really dry prose describing the historical events that surrounded the people and theories that developed in history and the taxonomy of psychedelic mushrooms. There is merit to these but the approach is by someone nearly uninterested by the subject. It's written like a history book they made you read in middle school. I guess I was hoping for a book more committed to the psychedelic experience. Even if the ideas are easily debunked, they were thought for a reason and Letcher talks about the subject like he's never done them, even though it's pretty clear he has.

Highly readable account of the history of hallucinogenic mushrooms. The author strikes an appropriate balance between the multiple realms he is forced to consider: science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history.

Shroom covers topics including refutation of the mushroom theory of the origin of religion, the recent U.K. psilocybin mushroom scene, a critical treatment of Wasson's research methodology and mushroom theory of Vedic religion, and Tim Leary as backdrop leading up to the later popular use of psilocybin mushrooms. This is a valuable book that contributes some new perspectives and new coverage of entheogens in Western culture; this book is a must-have for entheogen researchers. The present review focuses exclusively on his critique of the mushroom theory of religious origins, which he sometimes treats as though it is a critical refutation of the overall entheogen theory of religion. Letcher has not disproved the entheogen theory of religion, or even fully engaged with that hypothesis. At most, he has made a partial effort to call into question the mushroom theory of the pre-historical origin of religion, in the form of a secret cult spreading from a single origin over time and across regions. Letcher often comes across triumphantly as having disproved the entheogen theory of the origin of religion, but a careful reading of his treatment of that particular topic shows that he has actually only shown something far narrower; he has only refuted a highly specific point. At most, Letcher's treatment of the entheogen theory of religious origins shows that we have

no compelling archaeological evidence for a prehistorical mushroom cult that was secret and unbroken. When his rhetorical verbiage and his general discussions of history are put aside, the substance of his argumentation that remains does not amount to a compelling argument against the frequent use of mushrooms (or other visionary plants) throughout religious history. Letcher's writing style is rhetorical, so that he tells the story of recent mushroom scholarship and culture well, presenting much of interest to the audience, including valuable new material. He uses a biased rhetorical style; for example, "lunatic fringe", "conspiracy theories", "unfounded speculations", "the myth" of the entheogen origin of religion. This charged rhetorical style obscures that fact that his argument for his refutation of the entheogen theory of the origin of religion rests on only a few, fleetingly discussed points of argument. Letcher does not engage the bulk of the literary and artistic evidence that provide sufficient grounds to support the general entheogen theory of religious origins. He merely puts forth brief and rather arbitrary arguments dismissing a couple of the many depictions of mushrooms in Christian art. Letcher's inadequate selection of cases to refute, and his brief, perfunctory treatment of these cases, is not sufficient in breadth or depth to compell adherents of various variants of the entheogen theory of the origins of religion to change their position, no matter how many times or how confidently he rhetorically dubs the theory as a "myth". For example, he would need to engage the range of art that is presented in the first three issues of *Entheos* magazine, and the range of arguments such as those presented in Giorgio Samorini's articles about Christian mushroom trees. It's admirable to see an independent critical thinker comment on selected aspects of Allegro and Wasson, but only a few of those comments actually amount to engaging with the evidence for the general entheogen theory of the origin of religion. Letcher makes the risky move of overextending his specific focus on psychoactive mushrooms, at the expense of being under-informed on the general entheogen theory and the full range of arguments, interpretive frameworks, systems of assumptions, and evidence of various types in support of that broad-ranging theory. As a thought-experiment with the hypothesis that normalized religious cultic use of mushrooms is only a few decades old, this aspect of the book is a valuable contribution to the field; however, Letcher switches inconsistently between that bold but narrow hypothesis and a broader, firm conclusion that the entheogen theory of religion altogether is merely a recent fabrication of popular scholarship and merely wishful thinking. Letcher leaps from what he narrowly demonstrates, to a stance and a claim to have shown convincingly that the entheogen theory of religious origins (and fairly frequent entheogen use throughout religious history) is nothing but recent wishful thinking, a fabrication by a group that is a historical novelty: late 20th Century psychedelics enthusiasts, including mushroom enthusiasts in the U.K. from 1976-2006. All theories

involve a framework of assumptions. The fact that a scholarly theory uses a set of unproved assumptions does not instantly do away with (or "demolish") the theory. Letcher handles the evidence by the common strategy of dividing, isolating, and diminishing each piece of evidence in isolation, operating under the arbitrary silent assumption that entheogen use was rare, secretive ("conspiracy"), and deviant. But such a methodology is problematic and is controverted by the maximal entheogen theory of religion, which holds that Western history and Western culture have always been inspired to some extent by the ongoing practice of using visionary plants. The unavoidable question remains, "How are we to judge what is plausible and what was normal for that culture?" Should we assume that the use of visionary plants was normal and significantly present throughout mainstream religion and culture, or that it was rare, a secretive conspiracy, and deviant (exceptional)? Selecting our assumptions about the backdrop, of what was normal in a culture, affects the validity of completely isolating each piece of potential evidence and then attempting to judge the plausibility of reading that piece of evidence as supporting the entheogen theory of religion. What seems plausible to a critical scholar depends on the backdrop of what we assume was normal in the culture. For example, Letcher affirms that the cathedral door at Hildesheim, Germany depicts the tree of knowledge in the shape that "looks extremely like a giant Liberty Cap", but he argues that it cannot have meant a Liberty Cap, because the doors were carefully designed and the depiction cannot have been secret in that case, so the image cannot represent anything other than, or in addition to, a "stylized fig tree". It doesn't occur to Letcher to imagine and address the obvious critical arguments and questions against his hasty discussion, such as: why assume that a mushroom allusion had to be secret? why is an officially designed depiction of a mushroom automatically ruled out as unthinkable? why was the fig tree stylized in the specific form of a Liberty Cap mushroom? what about the hundreds of other specifically psilocybin mushroom-shaped trees in Christian art? Letcher has much homework to do if he wants to try to retain his hypothesis that psychoactive mushrooms were absent from Western religious history until the late 20th Century, and if he intends to convince critical entheogen scholars of that hypothesis -- a hypothesis that will be hard to maintain after seriously addressing, with responses to at least the most obvious counter-criticisms, the current full range of artistic evidence (post-Wasson and post-Allegro), which Letcher has barely engaged.

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