



Smoke Signals: A Social History of Marijuana - Medical, Recreational and Scientific

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The bestselling author of *Acid Dreams* tells the great American pot story—a panoramic, character-driven saga that examines the medical, recreational, scientific, and economic dimensions of the world's most controversial plant.

Martin A. Lee traces the dramatic social history of marijuana from its origins to its emergence in the 1960s as a defining force in a culture war that has never ceased. Lee describes how the illicit marijuana subculture overcame government opposition and morphed into a dynamic, multibillion-dollar industry.

In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 215, legalizing marijuana for medicinal purposes. Similar laws have followed in more than a dozen other states, but not without antagonistic responses from federal, state, and local law enforcement. Lee, an award-winning investigative journalist, draws attention to underreported scientific breakthroughs that are reshaping the therapeutic landscape. By mining the plant's rich pharmacopoeia, medical researchers have developed promising treatments for cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, diabetes, chronic pain, and many other conditions that are beyond the reach of conventional cures.

Colorful, illuminating, and at times irreverent, this is a fascinating read for recreational users and patients, students and doctors, musicians and accountants, Baby Boomers and their kids, and anyone who has ever wondered about the secret life of this ubiquitous herb.

***Smoke Signals* is the winner of the American Botanical Council's James A. Duke Excellence in Botanical Literature Award for 2012**

Smoke Signals: A Social History of Marijuana - Medical, Recreational and Scientific Details

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Author : Martin A. Lee

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Mason says

A highly educational deep-dive into the cultural and scientific narratives around marijuana. Lee does an excellent job interweaving dry medical lingo with riveting character drama, producing a lovely hybrid of fact-filled fun.

Mark Jr. says

Indefatigable. Argument by avalanche. That's the method here. Story after anecdote after study after reason why cannabis should not only be legalized but recognized for the panacea that it is.

But Martin Lee's journalistic prose style doesn't sound like something coming from a crackpot (or a pothead). If there isn't much life, or any humor whatsoever, in his dogged prose, there is skill and there is clarity.

What isn't clear, what never really seems to get addressed, is why, in the face of "ample evidence," the Feds and narcs and presidents and attorneys general who are Lee's nemeses in this book would go to such great lengths to keep people from this wonder drug. As I listened to the book (nearly 22 hours, though I listened at 2.5x speed), my jaw dropped further and further as Lee persistently refused to show any real curiosity as to why so many smart, successful people would so utterly oppose and persecute marijuana smoking. He says they believe it's a gateway drug. He says the early opponents thought it led to criminal behavior. He says that "big pharma," tobacco, and alcohol companies have financial reasons to oppose the rise of a competitor. But he doesn't probe. He doesn't really listen to the other side. He doesn't seem to believe that the Feds really believe their own reasons, but he doesn't seem to want to explore what their real reasons are.

It could have been just me, but it seemed that as the book progressed Lee became even more dismissive of his enemies and less journalistic. He said of one expert witness called by the government, "She obviously knew zilch about the endo-cannabinoid system." (I paused to take that one down verbatim.) In the final words of the book he called his opponents "venal and dishonest." Even Barack Obama, despite campaign promises to the contrary, has come down hard on marijuana.

Frankly, I don't (yet) know what the opponents of marijuana legalization are saying right now. I'm just getting into the debate. But methinks Lee doth protest too much. When a writer can't see any validity at all in the utterly brain dead opinions of his malicious and demonic enemies; and when he piles on the amazing cancer-fighting, brain-cell creating, mood-assisting benefits of the magical marijuana plant—I'm suspicious. Good and evil rarely line up neatly along us and them lines, and cost-benefit analyses are usually simpler in this fallen world than 100% benefit, 0% cost.

I'm open to the idea that the active ingredients in marijuana could be viewed as medicines, particularly if they don't cause the self-control-marring "buzz" which seems to be the Bible's real concern with regard to the analogous issue of alcohol. If THC truly is an analgesic with minimal side effects and no tendency to cause dependence, who am I to condemn what other people receive with thanksgiving? Who doesn't want a wonder drug?

But I'm not convinced. The jury is still out. Way out. *Far* out, man.

Bruce says

Kudos to Martin A. Lee. He deserves the Pullitzer Prize and the National Book Award for this well documented, beautifully written and engaging book on a marvelous and ancient herbal medicine, probably the most clearly mistaken target of the U.S. Government's "War on [Some] Drugs". Perhaps you will become as furious as I did, reading about the U.S. government's decades-long war against its own citizens, one of the best indicators of a long-term slide towards totalitarianism. Although the government's war against us has been going on for a very long time, our main weapon as citizens consists in getting as well-informed as possible. Time will tell whether the legalization votes in Colorado and Washington will turn the tide or just bring the Federal Government boot down even more ruthlessly. But now's the time for citizens to put the pressure on and reading this book can help!

Maggie says

I'm not usually a non-fiction reader, but WOW. Really great read, though by the end the pretense of impartiality is pretty much gone (I think referring to Ronald Reagan as a "Narc", while subjectively justifiable, somewhat surrenders journalistic neutrality).

I also think that the pacing/focus of the book was a bit lumpy, specifically that the amount of time devoted to the history of pot in California was a bit over-represented. The state's historical relationship with marijuana, while fascinating, dominated the landscape of about 40% of the book. I wonder if such hyper-focus on one state in the US did not cause us to miss out on other protests, legislation, and uproars in other states.

Still, very informational, well-researched, and convincing.

Tauhid Chappell says

Probably one of the densest books on marijuana that I've ever read. This book goes into many of the facets and nuances surrounding the plant: from cultivation, distribution to chemical makeup of the plant, connection to war on drug, racism and incarceration as well as the overall damage the war on drugs created to communities of color. Also highlights some big names and events who fought to legitimize cannabis and make it legal again. A pretty considerable history book in my opinion.

Richard says

Very important, very timely review of the war that has been waged against cannabis, driven by racism, fear, and financial dictatorships. Required reading for anyone who wants to have an informed opinion about cannabis and its place in our culture.

Harold says

Martin A. Lee, investigative journalist, has written an articulate, compelling, fact-filled book on the social history of marijuana use in the United States and the corresponding prohibitionist mentality which has forever demonized the plant.

Now, with the states of Colorado and Washington legalizing adult recreational use of cannabis (Cannabis is the preferred scientific term for marijuana), this book is an excellently written, pertinent resource for anyone wanting to know more about this controversial plant.

A few fascinating factoids gleaned from the book:

*Louis Armstrong was a lifelong user of reefer, preferring it to alcohol. He was horrified at the use of heroin by fellow Jazz greats as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Bud Powell.

*Hashish and other cannabis tinctures & confections were readily available from (without a prescription) from 19th century drugstores and mail-order outlets for the treatment of depression, insomnia, migraines, muscle pains and menstrual cramps.

*Harry Anslinger, chief of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) created the "reefer madness" mythology when alcohol prohibition was repealed and the 1930's depression era government slashed his budget. His ally in spreading this ludicrous misinformation was the megalomaniacal newspaper magnate, Randolph Hearst, who hated Mexicans and spoke openly of his admiration for pre-war Nazi Germany. He notoriously printed false articles in his paper about Mexicans high on marijuana attacking anglo men and seducing anglo women.

*In the 1950's and early 1960's, the US Army Chemical Weapons division experimented on soldiers (without their consent or knowledge)by administering THC (one of the active compounds in cannabis), LSD, PCP and other psychoactive drugs in a vain attempt at discovering a "truth drug" and/or nonlethal incapacitant.

*Richard Nixon, who was a heavy user of sleeping pills, amphetamines & liquor, hated marijuana because he associated its use with hippies and Jews.

*When First Lady, Nancy Reagan was sanctimoniously telling the nation to "just say no" to marijuana and illegal drugs, she was a chronic user of prescription tranquillizers.

*The United States is the only industrialized nation that prohibits growing low THC industrial hemp for paper, fiber, fuel, etc. The DEA in 2001 unsuccessfully attempted to ban hemp food products.

I give this book a resounding triple THC "kind bud" rating.

Joseph Valoren says

Lee's work is an impressive piece of journalism, and I think it's important to be mindful that this book isn't meant to be an academic work, but is, as stated, a work of journalism. One could be forgiven for presuming this is a scholarly work as Lee goes to some lengths to attribute the mountains of citations and assertions that he makes throughout his to their first-hand sources, but this book is an expose, not a thesis. As the subtitle proclaims, it is 'a social history of Marijuana - medical, recreational, and scientific', and throughout the

length of this impressively long work, Lee delivers on his subtitle by tackling a staggering breadth and depth of information on the history, science, and cultural significance of cannabis without overstaying his welcome.

I think most of us are familiar with the old narrative that marijuana first came under fire in the early 20th century when William Randolph Hearst pushed to outlaw hemp, which threatened his timber interests, and that the drug was further demonized in the 1960s due to its associations with youth culture and the efforts of Richard Nixon, who kicked off the abject failure that has been America's "War on Drugs". Lee takes this narrative and thoroughly unpacks it, expanding upon it in ways that I was never aware. He traces the history of cannabis back centuries, where it was a commonly-used medicant throughout much of the world and enjoyed for both medicinal and palliative purposes by members of all creeds to whom it was available.

The real demonization of cannabis in America, Lee asserts, occurred first in the early 20th century, when marijuana went from being a common curative added to commercially-available lotions, tinctures, and other medicine and became associated with the Mexican immigrants who brought smokable cannabis with them. Because of its hardiness to different climes, short growth cycle, and nearly universal availability with relative ease, marijuana quickly became a way of creating a cleavage between white Americans and the undesirable casts of black and Mexican Americans: the first attempt at marijuana prohibition can be attributed to little more than racism. Much like the laws condemning the opium trade in San Francisco in the late 19th century, the laws against the drug were really engineered to be laws against certain groups of undesirables. This was more fully expressed in the 1960s, when the focus shifted away from criminalizing being black or Hispanic and shifted to the criminalization of radicalism and youth. Richard Nixon's war on drugs was a war on his detractors, and he fabricated a mountain of lies, a bureaucratic maze, and a muscularly aggressive police force in order to crack down on dissidents. Reagan doubled down on Nixon's treachery, blatantly ignoring reports and scientific evidence which overwhelmingly depicts cannabis as non-addictive, medicinal for a host of ailments, and a natural stimulant of the endocannabinoid system of the human body. This willful repudiation of scientific fact somehow continues to this day, in absolute disgrace to our nation's manifest failures to create a villain for our national narrative.

While Lee at times fumbles with his objectivity, he is, in truth, under no onus to be objective. He gives a few tentative nods to hemeopathy, a psuedoscience that is pure bunkum, but does not labor overlong on these brief mentions, and the overwhelming majority of the scientific information that he presents comes from reputable sources whom he empowers the reader to investigate on their own.

Lee's is an important work on the subject, well worth a read whether you support or oppose access to cannabis. His book does what it sets out to do. One can hope that as we stand now on the event horizon of what would seem to be a wave of legalization of marijuana in the United States, that the scientific and medical advances forecast on the proviso of greater access to the herb will be made manifest to the benefit of all humankind, and that we as a nation will at the very least stop wasting time and resources enforcing a losing war on a plant whose narcotic effects are qualitatively far less harmful or dangerous than those of alcohol or tobacco.

Randy says

Here's a book that will turn you into a Libertarian. If you weren't distrustful of government before reading this very detailed social history of marijuana in the United States, after reading you will begin to question every position espoused by the powers that be. The War on Marijuana has proven to be a entirely wasteful and hurtful program, jailing thousands of people unnecessarily, persecuting ill citizens who were obviously being helped by the medicinal benefits of herb, wasting tax dollars, enriching people undeserving of riches

and empowering police and prison agencies.

It's all here in sometimes too great of detail frequently so painful to read that one has to slam the cover of the book to regroup. It's amazing to me that it's taken eighty plus years for just two states, Colorado and Washington to legalize weed. Even though many states had authorized medical marijuana over the years Presidents, both Republican and Democratic, continued to raid, confiscate and jail citizens authorized by their state governments to smoke pot to gain the documented health benefits. Marijuana is a wonder drug that aids and even cures many adverse health conditions. Presidents like Clinton and Obama know this yet continue to authorize their "Justice" Department to harass and put in prison authorized growers and retailers and advocates. Ironically, the Federal Government has a pot growing operation and a handful of people are provided with medical marijuana by the Feds. Go figure.

The War on Drugs, War on Terror and other bogus government initiatives are money making schemes that injure thousands of innocent people as the huge bureaucracies created to administer these programs ride roughshod over the populace benefiting, in the case of drug companies, monopolies and an un-level playing field.

Thankfully, in the case of marijuana, millions of people know from experience that smoking or eating pot is not harmful and we can expect that more states than Colorado and Washington will get on board and legalize marijuana.

This is a terrific and comprehensive book that details the medical, social and legal history of marijuana in the US.

Kevin says

Yes, this book gets repetitive and it's abundantly clear this writer has an agenda, but if even a tenth of his seemingly well documented claims are true, we have been lied to for decades. It angers me. While I have a little trouble believing this ubiquitous plant cures everything from hang nails to cancer as the book suggests, I'm convinced thousands of lives are ruined on an ongoing basis for the sake of profit and politics and it must stop. At the very least we must allow for medical research into the properties of cannabis compounds. I myself could probably benefit from the calming but non-intoxicating effects of CBD oil, but it is not yet available in my state. Maybe someday the more educated will prevail.

It's kind of a shame the plant also has the side effect of making people feel good. We can't have THAT, can we? Oh, the horror!

Michael Shore says

This book was frustrating.

Whilst the historical accounts are fascinating at times, the author is incredibly bias and it clearly shows. This does not feel like a balanced journalistic survey, rather like a weed loving advocate preaching for hundreds of pages. it gets tiring quickly.

I'm pro legalization, and agree with many of the points made in this book.

However, Lee fails to acknowledge the other side once throughout the entire book. It's black and white all the way, the pot angels vs the government devil's. Case closed.

I'd recommend finding another book on the subject instead.

Ryan Barker says

If you're looking for an unbiased or objective view of the history of marijuana, this is not the book to find it in. It is very biased in favor of marijuana, it's legalization, and it's use. It focuses only on studies and positive history, even to the point of citing conspiracy theories at some point.

If you're looking for a persuasive case for why marijuana should be legalized or are trying to convince friends or family members, then this is not the book. It is one-sided to the point of rewriting history. While there are good points and good material, it paints marijuana users as saints, law enforcement as nefarious in their purpose and goals, and fails to adopt a more reasoned view that would allow it to be it to be more persuasive.

If you want conspiracy theories, and marijuana activism extremist history/viewpoints then this is the book for you. If you're looking for something unbiased or even a reasoned case for marijuana usage this book is one to avoid.

I was indifferent towards legalization/leaning towards being in favor of it even though I don't partake myself, I picked this book to get informative history and information, but came away turned off by the whole legalization movement. The title and description are very misleading, Lee is a poor writer, and this book was ultimately a waste of my time.

Nathan Triz says

Highly informative and thoroughly researched, this was hands down the best book on Marijuana I've ever read. I highly suggested that everyone gets their hands on a copy and read it immediately. It's sickening and disgusting to read about the horrible lies and bigotry that has gone on for years and years through pot prohibition and the thousands of lives that have been ruined because of it, but on the other hand it makes me feel proud to live in time where change is finally on the horizon.

Reiden says

Wow, there was so much information in this book that it took some time to digest. This book tells the story of how cannabis became illegal. What started out in the US as a small time conspiracy mission to demoralize the controversial plant, quickly snowballed into an ignorant populous, hell-bent on eradicating the once common-place medicinal herb. What I found most interesting were the accounts of numerous studies (often ordered by the government) in attempts at discovering health concerns. The results repeatedly revealed no adverse effects whatsoever. According this book, marijuana is far less harmful to humans than is alcohol. Besides the lack of harm brought about by its use, the plant can also be used as medicine to treat countless conditions including epilepsy, ALS, MS, migraines, nausea, depression, and much more.

Industrial fibers from hemp can also be turned into the building materials to construct homes, make paper, clothing, and cars. Even the plant's seed oil has properties that make it essential for health and can be used as a possible fuel source. As detailed in this book, cannabis has the potential to completely revamp the world's economy. The plant can also be easy grown in almost any environment and can be transformed into a

countless number of every-day commodities.

This book was well written and researched. It left me excited about a greener future especially with the (hopefully soon) use of hemp products to start replacing paper products made from trees. There is no longer a need to cut down forests at devastating rates - we have something better!

Jeanne says

SO many benefits to marijuana and hemp and still it remains largely illegal for mostly unenlightened political reasons.
