

Book Review

Seeing through the Smoke by Peter Grinspoon, MD

A Scholarly Book about Cannabis Not Just for Scholars

Seeing through the Smoke

A Cannabis Specialist Untangles the Truth about Cannabis by Peter Grinspoon, MD, Foreword by Andrew Weil, MD published 2023 by Prometheus Books ISBN 978-1633888463 (print) 440 pages, \$30 hardbound, \$21 eBook

Book review by Mark Mathew Braunstein

During the 20th century, few scholars wrote books about cannabis. The best known is the 1971 trail-blazer, “Marihuana Reconsidered,” by Lester Grinspoon, MD. Our 21st century has seen a bounty of cannabis scholarship. Among the cornucopia is “The Pot Book,” an anthology published in 2010 just before the wildfire of legalization had ignited in the U.S. and Canada. Dr. Grinspoon wrote the Foreword, and among its contributors was the renowned Andrew Weil, MD. In full circle, Dr. Weil wrote the Foreword to a new book by Lester’s son, Peter. With the publication of “Seeing through the Smoke” by Peter Grinspoon, MD, we have our century’s definitive scholarly book about cannabis. And a book written not just for scholars.

True to the adage that an apple does not fall far from its tree, Peter continued his father’s research into “the family herb” and his advocacy for its acceptances both by their own medical profession and by our own civil society. Having passed on the torch lighter to his son, the recently deceased dad would have been heartened to know that his family’s legacy continues.

Writing in a conversational and engaging style, Peter couples solid science with personal anecdotes, and tempers cold hard facts with his informed opinions. Bibliographic endnotes document the text, yet scholarly research rarely impedes the flow of the narrative. While credentialed as an MD, Grinspoon is no stuffy pedantic academic. As an undergrad lit major and grad student in philosophy, the medical doctor taps into his creative inner writer.

With wit and charm, he lightens the mood with colloquialisms and vernacular expressions. For instances: “OK, not really!” (page 56); “a big nothingburger” (page 148); “You can’t make this up!” (page 283); “If you ask me,” (page 290); “Egg, meet chicken.” (page 294); “Just kidding.” (page 303); and like on a social media video, “Wait for it!” (page 328).

Equally endearing are the one-word sentences sprinkled throughout: “Snore.” (page 75); “Bleh.” (page 144); “Easy.” (page 246); and my favorite, “Yuck.” (page 311). Humor, albeit sometimes sardonic or sarcastic, abounds in passages too long to quote here. And there’s winsome self-parody and social satire. One paragraph was prefaced as a “Mini Ted Talk” (page 42), and another as “mini-pontification” (page 141). Acknowledging his laziness to research a definition, he quipped, “Thank you, Wikipedia” (page 186).

Some of the book is akin to a lively debate staged between two opposing teams, namely the “Reefer Pessimism” portrayed in Chapter 2 versus the “Cannatopianism” depicted in Chapter 3. The author objectively summarizes both sides of the many contentious issues surrounding cannabis. While not shunning from controversy, he sometimes even reconciles the otherwise conflicting evidence. In the final chapter, Chapter 22, he issues a rallying cry for the pundits on both sides of that debate to remove their “cognitive filters” (page 361).

Chapter 4, “Doctors and the War on Drugs,” brands this MD as a heretic within his courtly profession. Nevertheless, he is respectful of and circumspect about his medical colleagues’ ignorance or skepticism regarding cannabis as a therapeutic herb. He lays blame mostly on the institutional bias of the old school medical schools whose curriculums are still teaching politically motivated falsehoods. In the United States, the falsehoods were propagandized during the losing War on Drugs and are still soldiered on by diehards and holdovers within the DEA, the FDA, and NIDA. If your own doctors plead ignorance about medical marijuana, bestow upon them copies of this book. If you must be thrifty, then make them photocopies of just Chapters 4 and 22.

Chapter 9 asks in its title the question, “People Get Addicted to Weed?” While it documents that addiction is real and does occur among some potheads, it provides ample evidence debunking the myth of the high rates publicized by government officials and addiction authorities. Some statistics claim that a whopping 30-percent of users become addicted. Grinspoon shows how the research is manipulated and the numbers are fudged. Makes me exhale a sigh of relief.

Chapter 21, as if channeling Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” could be subtitled, “Ode to Pot.” It begins with several questions, among them, “Why do people use cannabis?” and “What is its appeal?” Grinspoon eloquently and astutely answers his probing questions by exploring the “false dichotomy” between medicinal and recreational use. As though to placate those impatient among us who crave short answers, the chapter concludes: “Is cannabis a shortcut? That’s complicated. Is it harmless? No. Does it work for people? A resounding yes!”

Chapter 22, the final chapter, is the crowning highpoint of the book. In case you die tomorrow, you might want to first read this chapter today. The author calls upon science to free itself of government politics and corporate interests. He implores politicians, doctors, medical researchers, and the news media that reports the research, all to “forgo all the myths and superstitions of the past ... manufactured with an agenda.” (pages 340 and 341).

Chapter 14, “The Endocannabinoid System: Our Brain on Drugs,” warrants reading by all potheads who have ever wondered what’s going on inside their potted heads. This chapter within its sharply focused eleven pages explains the ECS better than did an entire book and the many articles that I have

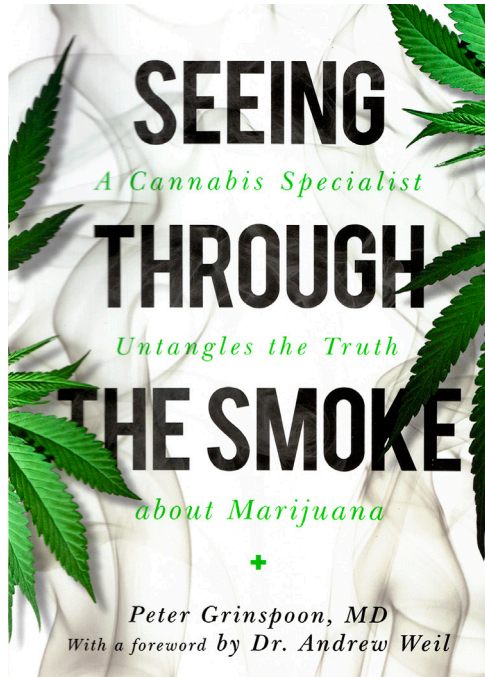
read on the subject. Unfortunately, other chapters are not as succinct. Too much of a good thing is not a good thing. Like most of us, especially those of us who sit on our duffs reading books, this book could lose some weight.

Confession. I did not read one-quarter of the book. Its scope is too encyclopedic and some discussions too detailed for even this omnivorous reader to consume in its entirety. I did read the chapters whose subjects interested me. Those on topics outside the orbit of my small world I omitted, just as I would not read from cover-to-cover any single volume of a thirty-volume encyclopedia. Hence, I skipped the chapters on use during pregnancy (I’m male), on use by teenagers (I’m already old), and on any link with psychosis (I’m already all messed up). Likewise, I dropped from my reading syllabus the chapters on using medical marijuana to treat for insomnia (I’m a sound sleeper), for autism (I’m childless), and for symptoms from cancer and for side effects from chemo (I’m planning on dying, just not of cancer).

Among the three-quarters that I did read, the author’s exhaustive analyses sometimes exhausted me. The book is grouped into four parts. Grinspoon shines in Parts One and Four, where he engages the reader in a friendly conversation as he recounts both past history and current research. In Parts Two and Three, however, momentum slackens when Grinspoon meticulously picks apart and pokes holes into long excerpts from scientific studies. Readers should tread lightly upon those overquoted studies. For our convenience, the excerpts are indented and their font size reduced, so easy to spot. And to skip.

Barbers cannot give themselves haircuts. For superfluous text and overweight chapters, I lay blame on the publisher, not on the author. Akin to an uncut and unpolished diamond, this very good book could be transformed into a very great book with some judicious deletions. Too late now for this 440-page hardbound tome, but not too late for a revised and leaner paperback edition that could appeal to the wider audience that it deserves. Until then, this sprawling big fat book is still worth reading. I just wish there were less of it to read. And if you persevered this far, you probably wish this review, too, were shorter.

The book reviewer, Mark Mathew Braunstein, is the author of *Mindful Marijuana Smoking: Health Tips for Cannabis Smokers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022). www.MarkBraunstein.Org



Foot Soldier Turned Footnote

By Judy Davis

Elizabeth O’Farrell was born into a working class family. While she was a midwife, she and her best friend, Julia Grenan, were suffragettes who joined a women’s paramilitary organization. They were trained in weaponry and first aid by the rebel Constance Booth.

Elizabeth and Julia were life partners, whose sexuality remained hidden from many.

But Padraic Pearse and James Connelly, both feminists, co-wrote “The Proclamation of The Irish Republic”, for men and women. The proclamation also included orders to allow women soldiers to fight.

During the 1916 Easter Rising, they hid medicine and ammunition in their skirts. They braved constant gunfire to run dispatches from the GPO to outpost battalions, and to nurse wounded soldiers and civilians.

Escaping the British soldiers, Elizabeth and Julia helped their fellow rebels as long as they could. Eventually, the two women were arrested, and sent to jail. After their release, they continued in the fight for Irish independence.

When Elizabeth O’Farrell died in 1957, she was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.

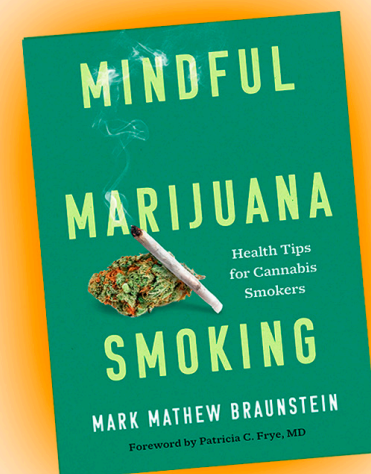
Julia died in 1972, and joined her love at Glasnevin.

For the longest time, Elizabeth’s name was never mentioned.

Now, she is remembered. Her gravestone has a verse by the poet Brian O’Higgins: “When duty called on the field of battle, she went, under orders, the foe to meet, bearing sadly, unfearingly, proudly, the flag of surrender, but not defeat.”

Remember Elizabeth and Julia as you may – just do remember them.

Health Tips for Cannabis Smokers



How to smoke in ways that reduce its risks

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Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2022

“The bible for cannabis smokers who care about their health.”
— Carol Bedrosian, editor *Spirit of Change Magazine*

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