

Book Review: Memoirs of an Addicted Brain

A neuroscientist examines his former life on drugs

By Marc Lewis, Scribe, 2011

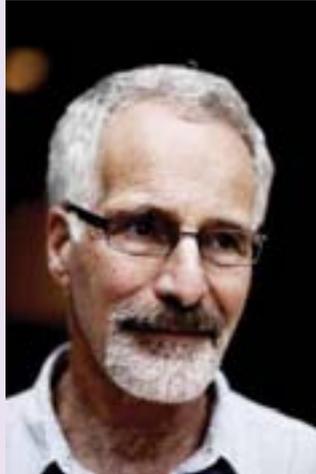
Review by Jo Kelly

Memoirs of an Addicted Brain is a memoir that also includes popular science and, although the author does not see the book as a self help manual, it contains insights into the complexity and fragility of humanity and the importance of finding meaning in our lives.

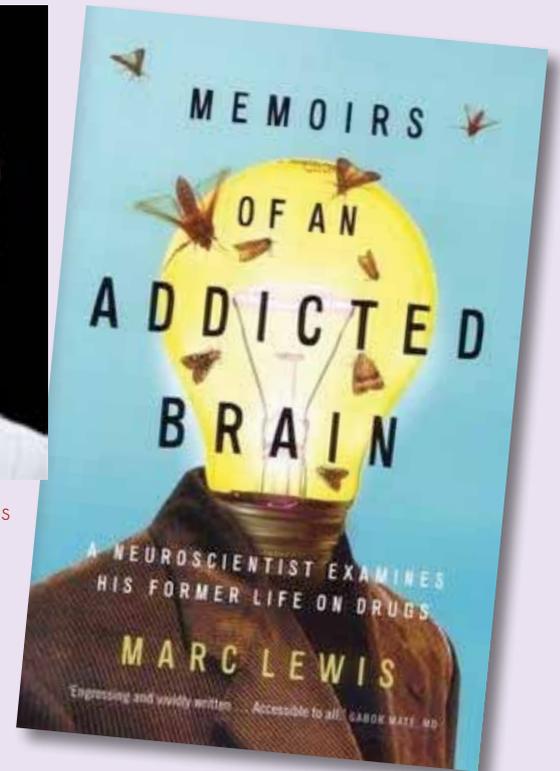
This book is a confronting account of a young man's experience of drug taking over many years. Marc Lewis describes his initial experimentation of cough syrup and alcohol while a teenager at boarding school in New England and his intimate and growing relationship with a range of drugs throughout his university days and travels to Asia. The book describes his risky flirtation with LSD, cannabis and heroin in the California of the psychedelic 60s. Lewis chronicles his travels overseas that not only broadened his mind but his repertoire of drug experiences. Finally, he recounts his descent and desperation as relationships falter and his career nosedives, to eventual arrest and conviction.

At the age of thirty, Marc Lewis slowly turned his life around. He undertook intensive psychotherapy and returned to his studies, specializing in integrating children's cognitive and emotional development. He has experienced the ups and downs of life since his drug-addicted days and survived. Lewis trained as a developmental neuroscientist and is now professor of human development and applied psychology at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

This book fills a much-needed gap of examining in an absorbing, readable and accessible style, the subjective experience of drug taking, alongside which the book examines the nature of addiction from a neuroscientific perspective. Lewis skillfully interweaves the latest neuroscience on the workings of the brain within a personal and brutally honest narrative. He explains in layman's terms the importance of dopamine, peptides, neuromodulators and receptors, and the impact of drugs on the neural pathways. He examines how drugs feed the reward centres of our brains, fulfilling our basic needs and cleverly links the science with his own experiences. Through this interplay, Lewis illustrates the vulnerability of the brain to addiction. The ugly and shameful face of addiction is revealed, destroying cherished values, feeding self-destructive mechanisms that reinforce the feedback loop further justifying the self-reinforcing cycle.



Marc Lewis



Lewis has simplified the complex language of neuroscience to narrate a story that is a searing, troubling account of the devastation of drugs on a young life. The hopeful epilogue to this personal account is that the ugly feedback loop of addiction can be altered, that even though the brain can never again return to innocence, it is possible to beat addiction. Lewis admits that he does not really know how he recovered and how his brain could be so resilient to enable him to not only recover, but to thrive. He considers that even though he is no longer an addict, the modelling of his brain through drug taking in his earlier years is inscribed and unalterable on his nervous system to some degree, and sees addiction as incurable. His experience has enabled him to better understand the troubled young people he works with, because as he states, "I will always be one of those kids."

Memoirs of an Addicted Brain has endnotes for further reading, including journal articles as recent as 2010. As Lewis mentions in his introduction, many 'brain books' publish out of date and simplified information to appeal to a wider audience. Lewis has used latest journal references alongside his own personal journal account. This book is an engrossing read for the general public but also of interest to professionals in the field of addiction, social work, psychology and related areas.