



# Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century

*Lauren Slater*

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## **Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century** Lauren Slater

Beginning with B. F. Skinner and the legend of a child raised in a box, Slater takes us from a deep empathy with Stanley Milgram's obedience subjects to a funny and disturbing re-creation of an experiment questioning the validity of psychiatric diagnosis. Previously described only in academic journals and textbooks, these often daring experiments have never before been narrated as stories, chock-full of plot, wit, personality, and theme.

## **Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century Details**

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# **From Reader Review Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century for online ebook**

## **Cecily says**

Many years ago, I wanted to be an educational psychologist. For various reasons, I didn't (and I'm now happy that I did what I did and became what I am), but it's experiments like this that drew me to the subject.

This describes great psychological experiments of the 20th century, told in a chatty, narrative style. Lots of fascinating food for thought, but the literary pretensions and irrelevant imaginings are an irritating distraction.

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## **Bianca Sy says**

I read this book for one of my Psychology classes. I liked how the situations flow, and I learned a lot. Even though I do still have the questions about a few experiments, I loved how this book turned me on.

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## **Dave Comerford says**

The raw material of this book deserves 5 stars. The ten experiments that Slater has selected tell stories of the human condition as effectively as any art. But the experience of reading the book is like being guided through the most fascinating museum by someone who laughs like hyena, bursts into tears at random intervals and occasionally pisses on the exhibits.

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## **I Love to Read! says**

This book was actually a lot better than I expected it to be! The experiments in here were fascinating, and I learned a lot. I read this book for my AP Psychology class, and I think it gave me a great introduction to the subject of psychology. I definitely wouldn't recommend this book as a fun, casual read, but it is a great read for anyone interested in learning about why we do what we do :)

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## **Jamie says**

The full title here is Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century. Author Lauren Slater reviews 10 famous experiments from the various niches of psychology and attempts to understand them and their participants in new ways. It's really not very good.

And that's too bad, because these psychological experiments and the scientists involved with them are gold mines of fascinating stories --they're famous for a reason. Examples include getting average Joes to shock

other people to death, imprisoning babies in boxes constructed to shape their psyches, turning rhesus monkeys into antisocial lunatics, faking your way into a psychiatric hospital on flimsy pretenses, crowds of people watching impassively as their neighbor is stabbed to death, and inserting false memories into the minds of people who should know better.

This is crazy, fascinating, outrageous stuff! Slater devotes a chapter to each set of experiments and attempts to delve deeper into the concepts that each one left in the landscape of psychology. She usually does this by writing about the people underneath the lab coats, including their personalities, their drives, their flaws, and their humanity. Unfortunately when she's short on information Slater had an annoying habit of just making details up, along the lines of "I imagined him blah blah blah" or "Did he look at this spectacle and blah blah blah?" Its an entirely ineffective literary technique that really only serves to yank you out of whatever flow you might have gotten into to be reminded that we're resorting to conjecture in an attempt at spicing things up a bit and to live up to the dust jacket's doubtful premise that there are great mysteries here to be revealed through personal research and fact checking.

In fact, this brings me to my major problem with the book: the author's writing style. The prose is so purple, sloppy, and florid, so full of itself and laden with pointless metaphores and descriptors that it strains credibility for something claiming to be non-fiction. She also has a flair for the dramatic, as when she breathlessly drew parallels between Stanley Milgram's subjects administering painful shock and his own doctors trying to revive him with defibrillators.

It's just not well done. It's great source material (or at least I think so), but Slater just can't hold a candle to better science writers like Bill Bryson or Mary Roach.

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## **David says**

This is a fascinating, monumentally flawed, book. Its central conceit? Slater, a psychologist, "revisits" ten of the most (in)famous historical experiments conducted in psychology, work which has played a key role in establishing the prevailing dogma about human behavior. Each experiment gets its own chapter in the book.

Obviously, the success of this kind of gimmick depends critically on (a) the particular set of experiments chosen for inclusion, (b) the author's insight - her ability to interpret the experimental results correctly and to situate them within the broader context, and (c) (assuming that the previous step has been accomplished), her ability to communicate the message effectively to a non-specialist reader. Can she spark readers' curiosity and hold their attention? Can she chart a course between the Charybdis of breezy superficiality and the Scylla of excessive detail to write clearly, at a level that is appropriate for a general audience?

Slater scores highly on the first criterion. The experiments she has included were thought-provoking when they were first published, and they remain fascinating. Many of them achieved canonical status precisely because the results were so counterintuitive, confounding expectations and forcing investigators to reexamine prior beliefs. This tends to be true in any discipline - often it's the experiment that yields anomalous results that turns out to be important. Among the ten experiments that Slater discusses are: B.F. Skinner's work on operant conditioning, Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments, Harry Harlow's experiments demonstrating that a (monkey) baby's need to be held and cuddled is more primal than the need to be fed, studies that showed the importance of "social cuing" and the bystander effect in determining people's response to an emergency or a request for help, and Elizabeth Loftus's work which essentially debunked the whole "recovered memory" trend that had become popular in the 1980s.

What does Slater have to tell us about these experiments? The good news is that she is quite capable of providing a lucid description of the various experimental protocols, results, and explaining their significance in the broader scheme of things. This despite the fact that, at some fundamental level, the woman is borderline unhinged. This is someone who, as part of the "research" conducted for the book, tries to see if she can personally duplicate results of one of the earlier experiments (in which nine healthy subjects presented themselves at the admission units of different mental hospitals, claiming to hear voices in their heads saying "thud", to see what would happen - answer, 8 diagnoses of schizophrenia, with hospital stays ranging from 7 to 52 days, despite behaving completely normally and never repeating the initial complaint). I should note that Slater does this not just once, but **nine** times: "It's a little fun, going into ERs and playing this game, so over the next 8 days, I do it 8 more times" (each time she receives a diagnosis of psychotic depression and a fistful of pills).

Of course, long before reaching this episode, the reader will have figured out that Slater has a pathological need to make herself the center of attention. Almost every chapter contains a perfectly lucid account of the research and the issues, which is marred by whole swaths of extraneous irrelevant stuff about Slater's own life. This material is easily recognized, as the prose switches into a mode best described as "histrionic", but it gets very old very fast.

Unfortunately, there are other, more disturbing issues as well. As the book progresses, it becomes evident that Slater's view of what constitutes truth in reporting is more flexible than one might wish in a science reporter. See, for example, these links:

Deborah Skinner's rebuttal

NT Times article

To me, the most distasteful aspect of the book, other than Slater's persistent self-aggrandization, is her habit of adding superfluous negative editorial comments when describing people who have agreed to speak with her (she has a related tendency to engage in uncharitable speculation about the thoughts and motivation of people who are dead, and thus unable to defend themselves). And what kind of person seeks out one of the participants of the Milgram study and forces them to spend an afternoon resurrecting what are obviously extremely disturbing memories of their behavior during the study? Well, the same kind of person who evidently has no qualms about tracking down a Stage 4 cancer patient to browbeat them, not just once, but several times about what she perceives as "dissonance" between the patient's faith and her medical prognosis. It is a testament to Slater's monstrous self-absorption that she ends the chapter in question by reassuring us that she herself is at peace. It's as if the skinhead with the baseball bat came over to reassure you that he's OK, really, he'll be fine. Just a little blood on his boots, nothing that can't be cleaned up. And that he's never felt so *invigorated*.

But, as we know, loathsome people sometimes write books that are worthwhile. "Opening Skinner's Box" is a case in point.

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## Ahmed Samir says

The book is a very good introduction to psychological aspects of the modern world. It takes the reader through 10 defining moments in psychology and presents them in a way that can basically direct you where you want to go.

The writing style is excellent and had me latched on to the book for as long as I had it. Highly recommend for psychology enthusiasts.

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## Nicole says

This is a strange book. While the experiments were interesting, Slater's attempt to "fill in the blanks" and add storylines to the lives of psychologists who performed the experiments often felt forced. more than once, as Slater narrated a scene, she would throw in a sharp word seemingly out of nowhere, jarring the reader. (I'll be happy never to read about scat again.) She also talked about herself, but failed to connect her experiences with the experiment or psychologist she was discussing. For example, she tried to replicate David Rosenhan's experiment in which he and other psychologists faked their way into psychiatric hospitals, then acted perfectly sanely, waiting to see how long before they were released. Slater reveals that she had been committed to several mental hospitals when she was younger, but does not tell the reader when, why, nor for how long. Why would she now want to voluntarily have herself admitted to a psych ward? Or why, when studying addiction, would she decide to take her husband's opiate pain meds to see if she got addicted? Slater identifies herself as a secular Jew and insisted on writing god instead of God throughout the book. It is interesting, then, that nearly all of the psychologists she chose to focus on were Jewish. I don't say that to be anti-Semitic. It is just that Slater had thousands of experimental psychologists to pick from and the US is only about 2% Jewish. (It would be as noteworthy as if, say, Amy Tan wrote an anthology of American writers and only chose those of Chinese descent.) She even chose Harry Harlow, whom we find out was born Harry Israel. She changed tactics slightly when discussing a female scientist, Elizabeth Loftus. In the chapter, nearly all the other psychologists she sites are also women, even though the topic they were studying, repressed memories, is not gender-specific. (The one notable exception to the "women only rule" is Avram Goldstein.) Slater stated that she found Loftus to be pretty strange. By that point in the book, I found Slater to be pretty strange herself. So, I don't recommend this book, but would encourage other readers to find better books about twentieth century psychological experiments.

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## Mandi says

Lauren Slater's "Opening Skinner's Box" is an insightful recounting of the ten most influential psychological experiments of the twentieth century. From B.F. Skinner to Harry Harlow, Slater outlines all the most important experiments, leaving out extraneous details but adding enough that it is still an enjoyable read. Each chapter is devoted to a description of the experiment, an anecdote about her own research into the experiment and its goals, and an expansion of the ideas and conclusions gleaned from each experiment. Slater begins her book with the psychologist of the title, B.F. Skinner. Skinner is known for his infamous box and the discovery of operational conditioning. Skinner devised two experiments using box contraptions. The box was simply a container with a lever that the rat could press. Skinner then experimented with changing how and when rewards were given to the rats. He found that the rats would learn when the lever would give them food, when it would not, or if there was a pattern to the job. Taking the experiment further Skinner was even able to teach common pigeons to play ping-pong through simple operant conditioning. Slater then moves along describing fascinating experiments like Stanley Milgram's research concerning obedience in which unsuspecting citizens were told to administer shocks to a helpless "learner". More than sixty five percent of participants went to the end of the experiment, even when they believed they had killed the "learner" from the shocks.

The seventh chapter of the book is perhaps the most interesting and biologically relevant. It features an experiment dealing with addiction and whether it is biologically or environmentally based. Bruce Alexander, Robert Coombs, and Patricia Hadaway first built two cages for groups of rats. One cage was small, cramped,

and dirty, built to resemble poor, overbuilt, and overpopulated habitats of humans. The other cage, deemed “rat park”, was large and roomy with brightly colored fixtures as well as tubes and wheels for the rats to play in. In both cages the experimenters placed two bowls of water, one laced with morphine and sugar and the other with plain tap water. The rats in the dirty cage all drank from the morphine laced water and left the tap water untouched. In rat park however almost none of the rats touched the morphine water and stayed away from the opiate. Alexander, Coombs, and Hadaway then took morphine-addicted rats from the dirty cage and introduced them to the wonders of rat park. Surprisingly they found that all the rats easily switched from drinking the morphine water to drinking the tap water once introduced to rat park. The rats showed no signs of biological withdrawal or physical dependence on what is supposedly one of the most addictive drugs known to man. These results point to the idea that addiction and withdrawal may not be a biological function of dependence as is commonly thought.

Slater’s book is a fantastic adventure into the world of twentieth century psychology. Slater does an excellent job of weaving her own experiences and, in some cases, her own versions of the experiments mentioned as well as expanding on the conclusions and applying them in a more modern sense. Readers completely ignorant of psychology as well as readers well versed in the subject will enjoy themselves immensely throughout the completely manageable two hundred and fifty four page journey.

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## **Katerina Charisi says**

?μουν μεταξ? 3 και 4 αστερι?ν, αλλ? τελικ? επικρ?τησε η τσατ?λα μου κι ?φησα τα 3. Το βιβλ?ο και μ?νο λ?γω του αντικειμ?νου με το οπο?ο καταπι?νεται ε?ναι πολ? αξι?λογο και πλο?σιο σε υλικ? και χα?ρομαι π?ρα πολ? που το απ?κτησα.

Η ?κδοση θα μπορο?σε να ε?ναι εξαιρετικ?, ε?ναι μεγ?λο βιβλ?ο κι αυτ? σημα?νει ?τι δε μοι?ζει με το?βλο σαν το συνηθισμ?νο πολτ?. Το χαρτ? ε?ναι πολ? καλ?ς ποι?τητας και κ?τι μικρ?ς λεπτομ?ρειες - ?πως πχ δ?πλα στην αρ?θμηση των σελ?δων κ?τι μικρ? ρομβ?κια (? τριγων?κια, το ?χω ?δη δανε?σει και δεν το ?χω μπροστ? μου να σας πω) δ?νουν συν στην αισθητικ? του. Η εικ?να του εξωφ?λλου υπ?ρχει και στην ?ναρξη κ?θε κεφαλα?ου - ακ?μα ?να συν.

?μως, ρε πα?δες εσε?ς εκε? των ΟΕΥ, λ?γο σεβασμ? στον αναγν?στη και στην τελικ? στη δουλει? σας την ?δια. Το βιβλ?ο ε?ναι τ?γκα στα λ?θη απροσεξ?ας, υπ?ρχουν λ?ξεις που τους λε?πει ?να γρ?μμα, πολλ? mistypes, λ?θη ακ?μα και στον τρ?πο που κ?βεται μια λ?ξη και συνεχ?ζει στην επ?μενη γραμμ? (πχ παιδι-ο?).

Εν? εκπροσωπο?ν στη χ?ρα μας π?ρα πολ? καλ? βιβλ?α, χρει?ζονται πολλ? δουλει?.

Η μετ?φραση νομ?ζω πως ε?ναι καλ?, δεν ?χω ανο?ξει το πρωτ?τυπο να συγκρ?νω και να πω την αλ?θεια φοβ?μαι να το κ?νω μη σιφιλιαστ?. Αυτ? που εισ?πραξα στην αν?γνωση ε?ναι πως η συγγραφ?ας ?χει ντεμ? αφηγηματικ?ς ικαν?τητες και οκ, δεν το ?χουν ?λοι. Το Narrative NonFiction ε?ναι ιδια?τερη κατηγορ?α - και γι αυτ? π?ρα το ?να αστ?ρι που ?σως να ?ταν μισ?. Το υπ?λοιπο λ?γω του εκδ?τη.

Δεν ?θελα να το πω αλλ? θα το πω: Το να χ?νει ?να βιβλ?ο εξαιτ?ας του εκδ?τη που το εκπροσωπε? σε μια ?λλη χ?ρα - ?που στην τελικ? ο συγγραφ?ας και ο εκδ?της ΤΟΥ δεν μπορε? να γνωρ?ζουν πραγματικ? το π?σο καλ? δουλει? ε?ναι ικανο? να κ?νουν αυτο? που το αγορ?ζουν αφο? δε μιλο?ν και δε διαβ?ζουν τη γλ?σσα, ε?ναι πολ? πολ? σοβαρ?.

Αυτ? το λ?ω γενικε?οντας γιατ? ?χω δει μεταφρασμ?να βιβλ?α να τα πετ?ς στον το?χο.

Παρ?λα αυτ?, ε?ναι ?να βιβλ?ο που αξ?ζει να ?χει κανε?ς (και η τιμ? του ε?ναι καλ? σε σχ?ση με ?λλα Non fiction απλησ?αστα που καραδοκ? να τα πετ?χω σε προσφορ?).

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## **James says**

This book is so bad in so many ways, where do I start?

p49 she interviews "Joshua Chaffin", in the endnotes I see this is a pseudonym to protect his privacy, Please, he was proud of what he did, he didn't want privacy, that's why he responded, that is, if he really exists.  
My opinion, 90% chance the interview is 100% fiction.

Chapter 3, she claims to go to 9 emergency rooms claiming she heard voices.  
She says she gave a fake name,  
Please..... Everyone in the medical world wants photo ID  
to make sure you're not ripping off an insurance company or something else.

My Opinion, 100% chance she's lying.

Through out the book the writing is turgid with clumsy stupid metaphors.  
And she often jumps from an idea to a silly comparison/conclusion.

p 102 after relating an experiment where someone has a fake seizure,  
"So, if you are on a plane when it is hijacked,  
and you do not act within the first 180 seconds,  
you are unlikely to act at all."  
My opinion: Stupid conclusion.

p 177 she claims to take some of her husbands hydromorphone tablets.

This is one of the most popular of the opiates with drug abusers,  
most doctors refuse to write prescriptions for it,  
I think it unlikely her husband had them,  
and if he did, he wouldn't want her playing with them.  
My opinion: More lies.

consider these examples of her writing:

p225 "Little is know of his mother or the circumstances of his birth,  
but we can imagine he came out head first,  
the midwife placing her hands on either side of his still-soft skull  
and pulling him like a rooted vegetable from the red earth."



p232 "Afterward, several scarred and barren places on the brain,  
like land looks as it is seen from an airplane following a forest fire."

p 245 "The cingulate gyrus looms large and grainy as a planet beamed back to Earth"

What crap!!!

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## **Kanra says**

I see that the reviews on this book are very mixed, so I will add my own input to help any potential readers.

This book is written in 10 chapters, one per experiment. Slater's writing doesn't follow a single pattern and seems almost whimsical, with most chapters having different formats. This may annoy the structured reader, but to me it just kept things more interesting, as I would have gotten bored otherwise.

As for her prose, it can get a bit cheesy sometimes, as she makes some rather questionable artistic choices, so to speak. But it's not all dubious, you can spot the occasional good metaphor. One element I quite disliked, however, was her conclusions. Mainly the ones to each chapter, sometimes those to individual paragraphs too, they could get downright awful at times. However, since it's only the last sentence(s), it wasn't unbearable.

Slater sometimes diverts from the explanations on the studies to herself, but this was to be expected since the blurb claims to give a personal and social context to these experiments. When executed properly, these contexts were actually welcome, but they did get a little old by the end of the book.

What I think matters most is the choice of experiments and how they are explained. Slater gives information on the societal context of each study, on the researcher(s) responsible for each study, on the execution of the studies themselves, on their effect on the field of psychology, on what the studies entail, and on the opposing views and findings (so we don't only see one side of the coin). This, in my opinion, was all done very well, which explains my fondness for the book.

Some might find it odd of me to overlook her personal additions as much as I do, but my natural focus on scientific content made me value the parts about psychology much more, enough to enjoy this collection despite its weaker points.

However, I do understand why this might bother some, and, consequently, why this book isn't for everyone.

Note: Some people might bring into question Slater's fictionalisation of some of what she reports. This is a valid concern in certain chapters, mostly the third one, where she claims to have attempted to reproduce the results of Rosenhan's experiment, and some details scattered throughout.

However, some might try to bring up the fact that Skinner's daughter Deborah has written a rebuttal of this book in which she criticises Slater for perpetuating the rumours surrounding her relationship with her father. In reality, Slater explicitly states that the stories floating around Deborah Skinner are only rumours and that none of them are true (second pages of the first chapter, page 7 in my edition). She even goes on later in the chapter describing Deborah's actual treatment from her father, which aligns perfectly with Deborah's "rebuttal". Upon some basic research, it seems that The Observer published an article which misquoted Slater, and Deborah took it for fact and wrote her rebuttal in consequence.

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## Patty says

Opening Skinner's Box

*"The experiments described in this book, and many others, deserve to be not only reported on as research but also celebrated as story, which is what I have here tried to do."* p. 3

I found this to be an interesting read. I had read an essay by Slater in **The Best American Essays 2008** and decided I wanted to read more of her writing.

I had a slight infatuation with B. F. Skinner when I was in high school. His novel, **Walden Two** seemed to hold the answers to many of my questions. In the intervening forty years, I have realized that life is never so easy. Humans are messy creatures that do not fit into neat little boxes.

However, I was glad to meet Skinner again and to make the acquaintance of other psychologists. I now understand more about Harlow's monkeys, false memories and several other famous experiments. I believe that Slater did what she set out to do – tell fascinating stories about research that has impacted the way we see ourselves.

If you like essays, if you are interesting in scientists as well as their research or you just like learning new things, I recommend this book. Slater combines her life and her own research in ways that make a compelling story.

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## Sonia Belviso says

I can understand why this book gets such mixed reviews. I need to say I got hooked on it from the first page. This is how popularization of science should look like. I, for example, would not want to know all the details of the experiments, because most of them are quite disturbing. But I appreciated the insight into the experimenters' background and the historical context. I consider Slater a great storyteller and combined with facts, this book gave me some crazy dreams!

And it provided plenty of references to authors and resource material, which I want to look at later.

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## Aj Sterkel says

**Likes:** I took a psychology class in high school and absolutely hated it. The lectures were mostly tedious, and the teacher was arrogant. However, the class did make me curious about psychological experiments. It led me to Leon Festinger's *When Prophecy Fails* and all of the follow-up studies that say Festinger's conclusions are crap. I also read about Stanley Milgram and a few other well-known psychology pioneers. I guess my high school teacher inadvertently caused me to read the book I'm reviewing now. I blame him for everything I'm about to say.

If you don't have a background in science, psychology experiments can be difficult to understand. I remember doing a lot of Googling while I read *When Prophecy Fails* and the follow-ups. *Opening Skinner's Box* does a brilliant job of making the experiments accessible to non-doctors. The author describes the

experiments, interprets the results, and explains why they're important. The science in these essays is (usually) easy to understand. No Googling is required. I very much appreciated that.

**Dislikes:** I struggled with the writing style. When the author writes about science, this book is really good. I liked learning about the experiments, the scientists, and how they're relevant to the modern world. Unfortunately, between the experiments, we're forced to take turgid, overwritten excursions to the author's imagination. She tells us how she "imagines" people and places look. She makes (mean) judgments about people's thoughts and motivations. The flowery writing style was a constant distraction for me. I was cringing at over-the-top metaphors instead of paying attention to the author's message.

Too much of the book is about the author. She gives her biased opinions on everything. She gets off-topic at times and talks about apple picking with her daughter or whatever. I eventually started skimming the author's self-centered tangents.

**The Bottom Line:** The experiments are fascinating, but the purple prose and authorial intrusions distract readers from the science.

Do you like opinions, giveaways, and bookish nonsense? I have a blog for that.

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