BOOK REVIEW


Which self-respecting neurologist and scientist would write a book citing William Burroughs, a notorious drug-addict with frequently expressed antimedical opinions, as a source of inspiration for an entire career? Who would admit to self-experimentation with untested pharmacological agents and Amazonian hallucinogenics? ‘Mentored by a Madman’ by Andrew John Lees, one of the most respected voices in neurology of this era, is not a typical neurological textbook. Its compact size, its pictureless cover and its occasional illustration within the text are more reminiscent of a personal confessional diary than of an orthodox scientific publication. The discursive, entertaining style of Lees fosters this feeling of intimacy with the reader. However, this is not a cosy memoir, despite the abundance of personality demonstrated within. In fact, one of the most difficult aspects of reviewing this book is attempting to define what type of book this is. Of course, this is exactly what Lees has aimed for, with the cover quoting Burroughs: ‘the time has come for the line between literature and science, a purely arbitrary line, to be erased’.

‘Mentored by a Madman’ plots the pioneering work of Professor Lees, one of the world’s leading researchers in the field of neurology and Parkinson’s disease, in his search for meaningful remedies that can improve his patients’ lives. In doing so, Lees describes a variety of influences on his character and professional life, ranging from the eminent Queen Square neurologists Drs Goody and Stern, to the fictional Sherlock Holmes, to the even less likely William Burroughs. The opening chapters colourfully depict Lees’ early medical training in The Royal London Hospital, his first experiences of seeing people with Parkinson’s disease and the potential benefits of levodopa. Even within these earliest experiences, Lees becomes aware of how the conformity of medicine can potentially extinguish the humanity from a would-be caring physician. In his interview for entry to the Royal London, the author felt he had to ‘falsely reassure the interview panel that he was unlikely to be a deviant or subversive’. However, this innate rebellious streak was later a vital ingredient in many of his greatest clinical and research achievements, and it is apparent that he has been part mentored by and part goaded by Burroughs’ writings. The risk of becoming another Dr Benway from Burroughs’ famous ‘Naked Lunch’, whom Lees describes as ‘medicine’s arch enemy, a villain without a first name, addicted to mind control surgery’ is used to drive himself (and his readers) to do better.

There is plenty of ‘proper neurology’ in this book too, and the fascinating story of the role Andrew played in the development of several key treatments in Parkinson’s disease will enthrall readers. It is a testament to the author’s humility that he deflects any praise onto Burroughs for inspiring the hypotheses and even methodology of some of the experiments, in addition to aiding his understanding of dopamine abuse. Lees’ seminal work with bromocriptine among patients with post-encephalitic parkinsonian helped establish the importance of dopamine agonists in Parkinson’s disease treatment, and also highlighted the importance of the qualitative element in research. In particular, the anecdotes of patients developing impulsive or compulsive behaviours on bromocriptine could easily be overlooked in a modern drug-trial, obsessed only with p values. One can easily imagine that a modern researcher, who had not been schooled in the ways of Sherlock Holmes as Lees had, would only ‘see, but not observe’ the clues presented to him or her and fail to grasp the importance of the potentially devastating but rare side-effects hidden beneath the statistics. The dopamine dysregulation syndrome, now known among many in the field as ‘Lees syndrome’ could still be a dark secret, suppressed by vested interests, were it not for the ‘healthy disrespect for authority’ that the author describes as a vital attribute of a medical scientist. Modesty prevents Lees from actually naming his eponymous syndrome in this book though!

The useful deviant streak of Lees is again evident in his description of when he essentially smuggled in l-deprenil (selegiline) into the UK and proceeded to self-experiment with this new compound. This work overlaps with Lees’ and Burroughs’ interests in the hallucinogenic yagé or ayahuasca, used by indigenous Amazonian peoples for spiritual and medical ceremonies, whose principal active ingredient is a reversible monoamine inhibitor. The author’s own experiences with yagé are later vividly depicted in a style that would not be out of place in ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’, by Lees’ fellow Merseyside mentors or an essay from Burroughs himself. The science/literature overlap continues with a gripping account of the early days of apomorphine research—from the self-experimentation of Lees, inspired by Burroughs’ praises of his ‘junk vaccine’, to the more orthodox work in PD.

This book concludes with an impassioned warning of the perils of a totalitarian healthcare system, a fear shared by Lees and Burroughs. Lees argues that the dangers of an overcontrolling research bureaucracy, stifling young researchers and original thought, need to be resisted. The importance of observation and serendipity in science must not be ignored, as the author argues that ‘science needs to be much more intuitive and magical, and magic more factual and analytical’. In the modern era of clinical neurology with its ever-increasing bureaucratic metrics which value patient volume/throughput as the only goal worthy of calculation by our payers, we sometimes forget that there is something a bit magical about our speciality. This book is highly recommended to anyone who wants to reimagine the magic of neurology, science, life, the universe and everything.

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Disclosure The reviewer is a former Fellow and mentee of Andrew Lees. While he does not think he has been mentored by a madman, if this is what madmen are like, then he will gladly stick with Lees’ tribe.

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