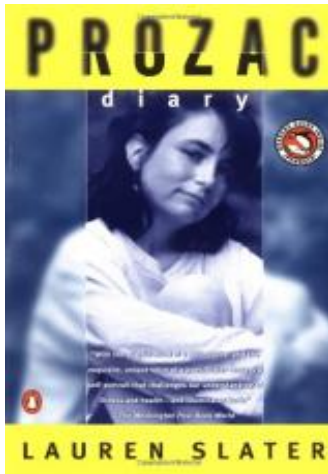


Prozac Diary

by Lauren Slater



About the Book

Lauren Slater wakes up one morning to find "the world as I had known it my whole life did not seem to exist." The commonplace things in her scruffy, barely furnished basement apartment and the familiar scene outside her kitchen window have been transformed, smoothed out, slowed down. The "nattering need to touch, count, check, and tap, over and over again"—a manifestation of the obsessive-compulsive disorder that has controlled her life—has disappeared. For Slater, each transformation represents a small miracle. At the age of twenty-six, after five incarcerations in mental hospitals "pursuing and pursued by one illness after another," she is experiencing the world from a healthy perspective for the first time in years. A pioneer patient in an era of cutting-edge psychopharmacology, Slater owes her miraculous awakening to Prozac. Released on the market by Eli Lilly in 1988, Prozac promised to revolutionize the treatment of everything from chronic depression to anorexia to OCD. As Slater's doctor proudly put it, it "was a drug with the precision of a Scud missile, launched miles away from its target only to land, with a proud flare, right on the enemy's roof."

In *Prozac Diary*, a rich and beautifully written memoir, Slater describes what it is like to experience the heady high of Prozac's bright flare, to spend most of your life feeling crazy and then to find yourself in the strange state of feeling well. Interweaving the chronicle of her cure with glimpses of the events and emotional turmoil that led her to embrace comforts of "being ill" even as a young girl, she recounts the difficulty and compromise that accompany her return to health, the grief she feels for the passing of the symptoms that once defined her and for the final silencing of the eight inner voices which had been her constant companions for as long as she could remember. She re-creates in vivid detail the terrors of "Prozac poop-out," when, without warning, the medication fails and symptoms of OCD return, and the small but vital victory she wrests during her frightening relapse with the emergence of "bits of self that manage to rise above the chemicals of illness, the chemicals of cure, and . . . for a moment take in the world."

Slater's first packet of Prozac works its wonders in only five days, less time than even her doctor, a staunch advocate of its powers, predicted. Liberated from the debilitating anxiety and pain that had circumscribed her life, Slater ventures

into the world with the innocence and enthusiasm of a child. She wanders joyfully through Boston's Faneuil Hall, captivated by its irresistible array of foods, its extraordinary street performers, and the crowds of ordinary people pursuing ordinary pleasures. She allows herself the luxury of sleeping late for the first time in her life, attends her first rock concert, spends long, languid afternoons drinking lattes at outdoor cafés with newly acquired friends. Her body confirms the transformation: "I was the picture of health, as though I had finally come into the body meant for me." Armed with new found confidence, she sends out her résumé ("to date, one of my finest pieces of fiction") and gets her first real job, as a teacher in a literacy center. After almost a year on Prozac, she is accepted at Harvard, where as a student in psychology she eventually earns a doctorate in record time. She falls in love with Bennett, a chemist who is willing to accept her simultaneous "love affair" with Prozac.

Like all love affairs, however, Slater's infatuation with the small green-and-cream pills demands sacrifices. There are practical repercussions: her creativity ebbs, her sex drive dwindles, and she learns that Prozac is an inconstant lover when she suddenly experiences a horrifying descent into "crazy," obsessive behavior. The emotional toll is at once more elusive and more profound. In the early months of her treatment, Slater is torn between her enthusiasm for the rewards and possibilities of health and a deep-seated fear of abandoning her "illness identity." "There was no more depression, which had felt like the stifling yet oddly comforting weight of a woolen blanket, or anxiety, which lent a certain fluorescence to things, or voices, which had always been there, sometimes louder, sometimes softer, some North Star of sound in the night." As time passes, she adjusts to Prozac's cool and calming effects and to the sporadic imperfections in its chemistry that allow odd bits of illness to break through. Now, after a decade on Prozac, she is resigned to her dependency on Eli Lilly and at the same time determined to exercise her freedom to reenvision the past and the present, to choose who she is and wants to be. "Prozac is not my lover any longer," she writes, "but over the long haul has become a close friend, a slightly anemic, well-meaning buddy whose presence can considerably ease pain but cannot erase it."

Today, Prozac has become the legal drug of choice of a whole generation, used by millions of people all over the world. It's been hailed as a wonder drug and condemned as a drug that triggers violence. While 40 to 50 percent of patients on Prozac experience sexual dysfunction, a group of Prozac-taking British women reported a rather more stimulating side effect: whenever they sneeze, they have orgasms. As one of the first people to take the drug and among the few who have stayed on it for ten years, and as a psychologist who has also been a psychiatric patient, Lauren Slater is in a unique position to shed light on both Prozac's immediate impact and its long-term effects. Her book supports neither the generally positive position found in Dr. Peter Kramer's widely acclaimed *Listening to Prozac* nor the backlash against it expressed in Peter Breggin's *Talking Back to Prozac*. Her territory lies outside and beyond the noisy controversy. With elegance and humor, she takes us directly inside the strange new world Prozac has created, and using the language and images of poetry, reveals its gifts and its burdens.

Discussion Guide

1. For much of the book, Slater calls her doctor the "Prozac Doctor," rather than by name. How does this reflect her feelings about and her experience with the medical profession? Does the doctor's attitude justify this depersonalization, or does she expect too much of him? What does she mean when she says, "The Prozac Doctor was biblical to me"?

2. Slater writes about her mother, "Nothing was ever enough, for there was no plug to stopper the hole in her soul, no pill." From the evidence in the book, do you think that Slater's mother had serious emotional problems? In what ways are Slater's symptoms a reaction against her mother's "manic intensity" and in what ways do they echo the very things she

objects to about her mother? How much do Slater's own problems affect her descriptions of her mother, and how do they change in the course of the book?

3. What purpose do the sections called "Letter to My Doctor" serve in the narrative? Why do you think Slater decided to juxtapose the cold clinical facts about her illness and her hauntingly poetic reminiscences about childhood?

4. Why did Slater wait four or five days before taking her first pill, despite the fact that she was clearly upset about her obsessive-compulsive disorder? Why did her dream about the Prozac Doctor make it possible for her to begin her medication?

5. Slater questions the assumption that health is "natural" and "good." Do you think the Judeo-Christian tradition and the medical profession accept this point of view too readily? Can illness offer insights that a "healthy" person might never discover?

6. Slater writes about the eight people she pictures living inside her: "three men who taunted me, three nine-year-olds, a girl trapped in a glass cage, and a blue baby, sometimes dead, sometimes dying." Based on what you know about Slater's life, what do you think these figures represent?

7. How did Slater's job at the literacy center help with her own healing process? In what ways is her passage from an illness identity to one of health similar to the transition her immigrant students are facing?

8. Slater compares Prozac to the drugs used in primitive cultures as a means of accessing the gods. Do you think this is a valid comparison? Does Prozac make Slater more spiritually aware or does it undermine her spirituality?

9. Why does Slater switch from a first-person narrative to a third-person narrative when she describes the actual events of her childhood and the early signs of her illness?

10. How does Slater's diminished sexuality affect her sense of self? Is her ability to love more fully a fair "trade-off" for her lack of physical pleasure?

11. Slater cites literature from Eli Lilly and other researchers that claim that the success of serotonin-specific chemicals like Prozac show that "the patient's past, the story of self, is no longer relevant. We do not need to explain mental illness in the context of history. We can place it, and its cures, firmly in the context of chemicals." Does Slater's own story support this conclusion?

12. Some research suggests that Prozac actually improves one's personality rather than just eliminating symptoms of illness. Is it unethical or deceitful or even dangerous to use a drug in this way? Despite her acknowledgment that Prozac has changed her life, Slater reports that she feels both shame and guilt about her dependence on it. Do you sympathize with her feelings?

Author Bio

Lauren Slater is a Harvard-trained psychologist who is also the director of AfterCare Services, a mental health clinic. In addition, she has taught creative nonfiction writing for Goucher College's M.F.A. program. Her work was included in **The Best American Essays** of 1994 and 1997. The author of **Welcome to My Country** (1996), she lives with her husband in Boston.

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