



# The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics

By Richard Davenport-Hines

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**The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics** By Richard Davenport-Hines

A startling account of the history of drug abuse, this book forces us to reconsider many of our views on a controversial issue.

Spanning five centuries and several continents in a sweeping portrait of addiction, *The Pursuit of Oblivion* traces the history of the use and abuse of narcotics, revealing their subtle transformation from untested medicines to sources of idle pleasure and, relatively recently, to illegal substances. Richard Davenport-Hines, an eminent, prize-winning historian, uncovers the centrality of drug abuse in our modern industrial society, from the drug habits of Charles Dickens and John F. Kennedy to today's \$400 billion annual worldwide trade in illicit drugs (the same volume as the oil industry). A vivid portrayal of the people and events that have shaped the history of narcotics, *The Pursuit of Oblivion* reveals that, contrary to the assumption underlying current drug policies, our need to escape reality and our body's need for physical pleasure are both ineradicable aspects of our humanity, unchangeable by government initiative. 16 pages of b/w illustrations.

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## **The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics By Richard Davenport-Hines Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

Davenport-Hines offers a sharply opinionated history of drugs structured around three major premises: Human beings use drugs; for many that choice will be debilitating, sometimes fatal; and government prohibition of drugs, as opposed to regulation, is counterproductive and doomed to vainglorious failure. Davenport-Hines, a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and author of a well-received work on W.H. Auden, builds his case with a body of evidence encyclopedic in scope and varied in perspective. He explores the effects of drugs on families and private lives, for example, by sampling diaries of ordinary citizens, the writings of literary figures as diverse as Balzac and Ken Kesey, the theories of notorious cult-leader Timothy Leary, and the reports of a host of journalists. He is equally focused on exposing the high public costs that, he argues, have resulted from governments' treatment of drugs (both in American and elsewhere) as a criminal rather than medical problem a choice that, the author says, is a product of political demagoguery rather than honest conviction. To give credence to his charges, he quotes the inflammatory words of presidents, drug czars, and moralists such as William Bennett. U.S. policymakers exported this punitive approach to Europe and Latin America, which he deems a form of cultural imperialism. Davenport-Hines also finds hypocrisy in government support for pharmaceutical companies, whose advertising and marketing contribute to the cultural acceptance of drugs. He takes care to provide readers with useful information about the effects of both legal and illegal drugs, and to carefully discriminate among the relative dangers of different classes of drugs. The effort adds credibility to his strong writing, and his well-documented positions will be difficult to dismiss.

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From Library Journal

Prominent British historian/journalist Davenport-Hines here offers a thorough and exhaustive history of addictive drugs and their abuse, spanning the globe and covering all eras for which there exists documented evidence of such activity, primarily from the 18th century forward. The author's approach is that of a historian at work, carefully detailing all known verifiable references to the insidious development of, trade in, and use/abuse of narcotics and other addictive substances. In addition to a thorough discourse on the manufacture and abuse of derivative drugs such as cocaine and heroin, Davenport-Hines also goes into great detail about naturally occurring herbs and weeds that have been abused over the centuries. He pays considerable attention to attempts by governments and world bodies to come to grips with the social, economic, and political ramifications of the drug trade and its side effects, such as organized crime, loss of government revenue, decreased productivity, and strains on healthcare infrastructures. The reluctance or inability of several powerful Western nations to suppress the popular appetite for drugs (only recently considered inappropriate) is cited as perhaps the greatest impediment to reform. Society's attempts over the years to treat and rehabilitate the victims of drug abuse are also documented. This comprehensive study is replete with references to primary and secondary sources. Highly recommended for academic and public libraries. Philip Y. Blue, New York State Supreme Court Criminal Branch Law Lib., First Judicial District, New York

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From [Booklist](#)

The need for altered states, the release from the tyranny of the quotidian and one's self, is, as British historian Davenport-Hines so cogently observes, intrinsic to human nature. Drugs have always played a role in spiritual and healing practices, art, and human interactions both personal and social. As he did in *Gothic*

(1999), Davenport-Hines draws from a great sea of materials, deftly connecting intriguing insights into the drug use of artists, doctors, world leaders, criminals, and common folk with concise summations of related aesthetic and political shifts, scientific discoveries, and the change in attitudes toward certain drugs that led to their criminalization and the rise of an illegal international drug trade that generates \$400 billion a year. Davenport-Hines documents the complex cultures of opium, coca, hemp drugs, and beyond, and explains why prohibition has, paradoxically, increased drug use and made it more dangerous. Empathic in his portrayal of individuals and perceptions into the connection between narcotics and sensuality, societal anxiety, war, and issues related to gender, race, and class, he is ruthless in his rigorous critique of the covert participation of governments in the lucrative trade they've so vehemently outlawed. The war on drugs, he concludes, is a war on ourselves. *Donna Seaman*  
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#### **Laurence Terry:**

This The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics is great publication for you because the content which can be full of information for you who also always deal with world and have to make decision every minute. This kind of book reveal it facts accurately using great organize word or we can say no rambling sentences in it. So if you are read it hurriedly you can have whole details in it. Doesn't mean it only will give you straight forward sentences but difficult core information with wonderful delivering sentences. Having The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics in your hand like keeping the world in your arm, facts in it is not ridiculous a single. We can say that no publication that offer you world in ten or fifteen moment right but this reserve already do that. So , this can be good reading book. Hey there Mr. and Mrs. active do you still doubt in which?

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