

VINTAGE HUXLEY

**THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION**



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# About the Book

WITH A FOREWORD BY J.G. BALLARD

One spring morning in 1953, Aldous Huxley took four-tenths of a gramme of mescaline, sat down and waited to see what would happen. When he opened his eyes he found everything, from the flowers in a vase to the creases in his trousers, was completely transformed. He describes his experience with breathtaking immediacy in *The Doors of Perception*. In its sequel, *Heaven and Hell*, he goes on to explore the history and nature of mysticism. Still bristling with a sense of excitement and discovery, these illuminating and influential writings remain the most fascinating accounts of the visionary experience ever written.

## About the Author

Aldous Huxley was born on 26 July 1894 near Godalming, Surrey. He began writing poetry and short stories in his early twenties, but it was his first novel, *Crome Yellow* (1921), which established his literary reputation. This was swiftly followed by *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928) - bright, brilliant satires of contemporary society. For most of the 1920s Huxley lived in Italy but in the 1930s he moved to Sanary, near Toulon.

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Huxley's work took on a more sombre tone in response to the confusion of a society which he felt to be spinning dangerously out of control. His great novels of ideas, including his most famous work *Brave New World* (published in 1932 this warned against the dehumanising aspects of scientific and material 'progress') and the pacifist novel *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) were accompanied by a series of wise and brilliant essays, collected in volume form under such titles as *Music at Night* (1931) and *Ends and Means* (1937).

In 1937, at the height of his fame, Huxley left Europe to live in California, working for a time as a screenwriter in Hollywood. As the West braced itself for war, Huxley came increasingly to believe that the key to solving the world's problems lay in changing the individual through mystical enlightenment. The exploration of the inner life through mysticism and hallucinogenic drugs was to dominate his work for the rest of his life. His beliefs found expression in

both fiction (*Time Must Have a Stop*, 1944 and *Island*, 1962) and non-fiction (*The Perennial Philosophy*, 1945, *Grey Eminence*, 1941 and the famous account of his first mescaline experience, *The Doors of Perception*, 1954).

Huxley died in California on 22 November 1963.

ALSO BY ALDOUS HUXLEY

Novels

*Crome Yellow*

*Antic Hay*

*Those Barren Leaves*

*Point Counter Point*

*Brave New World*

*Eyeless in Gaza*

*After Many a Summer*

*Time Must Have a Stop*

*Ape and Essence*

*The Genius and the Goddess*

*Island*

Short Stories

*Limbo*

*Mortal Coils*

*Little Mexican*

*Two or Three Graces*

*Brief Candles*

*The Gioconda Smile*

(Collected Short Stories)

Biography

*Grey Eminence*

*The Devils of Loudun*

Travel

*Along the Road*  
*Jesting Pilate*  
*Beyond the Mexique Bay*

Poetry and Drama

*The Burning Wheel*  
*Jonah*  
*The Defeat of Youth*  
*Leda*

*Verses and a Comedy*  
*The Gioconda Smile*

Essays and Belles Lettres

*On the Margin*  
*Proper Studies*  
*Do What You Will*  
*Music at Night*  
*Texts and Pretexts*  
*The Olive Tree*  
*Ends and Means*  
*The Art of Seeing*  
*The Perennial Philosophy*  
*Science, Liberty and Peace*  
*Themes and Variations*  
*Adonis and the Alphabet*  
*Brave New World Revisited*  
*Literature and Science*  
*The Human Situation*  
*Moksha*

For Children

*The Crows of Pearblossom*



For M.

ALDOUS HUXLEY

The Doors of  
Perception

AND

Heaven and Hell

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
J.G. Ballard

AND A BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION BY  
David Bradshaw

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## FOREWORD BY J.G. BALLARD

IF *BRAVE NEW WORLD* is Aldous Huxley's greatest novel, then *The Doors of Perception* is his most important work of non-fiction, and I suspect that together they will outlast everything else written by him during his long and restless life. *Brave New World's* unsettling picture of a scientifically engineered utopia, with its recreational drugs and test-tube babies, its 'feelie' cinemas that anticipate virtual reality, now seems a shrewder guess at the future than George Orwell's vision of Stalinist terror in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Yet *The Doors of Perception* may prove to be even more prophetic than *Brave New World*. All his life Huxley was driven by a need to understand the mystery of human consciousness, a quest that led him from Christian mysticism to the religions of the Far East and the pseudo-religions of California. Unusually for a literary intellectual, of his day or ours, Huxley was intensely interested in science, and much of his original work lies in the border zone between religion, art and science.

*The Doors of Perception* sits in the centre of this magnetic ground. Huxley was fascinated by early research in the neuro-sciences, and in particular by the role of neurotransmitters in our brains and the way in which these chemical messengers control our view of ourselves and the world around us. Despite the wonders of human consciousness, Huxley believed that our brains have been trained during the evolutionary millennia to screen out all those perceptions that do not directly aid us in our day to day struggle for existence. We have gained security and

survival, but in the process have sacrificed our sense of wonder.

The dismantling of these screens and the revelation of the richer world beyond them has long been the task of art and religious mysticism, but Huxley suspected that modern pharmacology possessed even stronger weapons in its armoury of psycho-active drugs. In *The Doors of Perception* he describes an afternoon in Los Angeles in 1953 when he first ingested mescaline, the active principle of the sacred cactus known to the Mexicans as peyotl, and saw the gates of a new world open before him.

From the start he realised that his insights were not into himself and his modest personal history, but into the universe around him. Over the years there have been endless accounts of mescaline and LSD trips, but none can match Huxley's description of the hallucinatory realm that expanded before his eyes. The shutters around his mind at last fell away, revealing the wonders of existence to his self-centred and earthbound mind.

In *The Doors of Perception* and its sequel, *Heaven and Hell*, Huxley speculates that human beings will always need some sort of chemical aid to free themselves from the inherited limitations of their own nervous systems. Fifty years after his mescaline trip beside a Hollywood garden, when we have flown to the moon and girdled our planet with an entertainment culture more suffocating than anything visualised in *Brave New World*, we may be right to think that the expedition Huxley undertook into his own brain is the last journey waiting for all of us, whether by chemical means or through some less hazardous door, the inward passage to our truer and richer selves.

## ALDOUS HUXLEY (1894-1963)

ON 26 JULY 1894, near Godalming in Surrey, Aldous Leonard Huxley was born into a family which had only recently become synonymous with the intellectual aristocracy. Huxley's grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, had earned notoriety as 'Darwin's bulldog' and fame as a populariser of science, just as his own probing and controversial works were destined to outrage and exhilarate readers and non-readers alike in the following century. Aldous Huxley's mother was a niece of the poet and essayist Matthew Arnold, and he was a nephew of the redoubtable Mrs Humphry Ward, doyenne of late-Victorian novelists. This inheritance, combining the scientific and the literary in a blend which was to become characteristic of his vision as a writer, was both a source of great pride and a burden to Huxley in his formative years. Much was expected of him.

Three traumatic events left their mark on the young Huxley. In 1908 his mother died of cancer, and this led to the effective break-up of the family home. Two years later, while a schoolboy at Eton, Huxley contracted an eye infection which made him almost completely blind for a time and severely impaired his vision for the rest of his life. The suicide of his brother Trevenen in August 1914 robbed Huxley of the person to whom he felt closest. Over twenty years later, in *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936), Huxley's treatment of the death of the main character's mother and his embodiment of 'Trev' in the novel as the vulnerable Brian Foxe give some indication of the indelible pain which these tragic occurrences left in their wake. To a considerable



degree, they account for the darkness, pungency and cynicism which feature so prominently in Huxley's work throughout the inter-war period.

Within months of achieving a First in English Language and Literature at Balliol College, Oxford in 1916, Huxley published *The Burning Wheel*. Huxley's first collection of verse, and the three which followed it, *Jonah* (1917), *The Defeat of Youth* (1918) and *Leda* (1920), reveal his indebtedness to French symbolism and *fin de siècle* aestheticism. Also discernible, however, beneath the poetry's triste and ironic patina, is a concern with the inward world of the spirit which anticipates Huxley's later absorption in mysticism. These volumes of poetry were the first of over fifty separate works of fiction, drama, verse, criticism, biography, travel and speculative writing which Huxley was to produce during the course of his life.

Unfit for military service, Huxley worked as a farm labourer at Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington Manor after he left Oxford. Here he met not only D.H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, Clive Bell, Mark Gertler and other Bloomsbury figures, but also a Belgian refugee, Maria Nys, whom he married in 1919. By then Huxley was working for the *Athenaeum* magazine under the adroit editorship of Middleton Murry. Soon after he became the first British editor of *House and Garden*, worked for *Vogue* and contributed musical criticism to the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* in the early 1920s.

*Limbo* (1920), a collection of short stories, preceded the appearance of *Crome Yellow* in 1921, the novel with which Huxley first made his name as a writer. Inspired by, among others, Thomas Love Peacock, Norman Douglas and Anatole France, Huxley's first novel incorporated many incidents from his sojourn at Garsington as well as mischevious portraits of its chatelaine and his fellow guests. More blatantly still, *Crome Yellow* is an iconoclastic tilt at the Victorian and Edwardian mores which had