This latest in a lengthy collection of books on psychedelic research, altered states of consciousness, death and dying, and holotropic breathwork is a true testament to Stan Grof’s depth of knowledge and wide-ranging scholarship. The category classification on the cover lists psychology, spirituality and psychedelics, and Grof certainly draws on a wealth of knowledge about those subjects. In addition he writes on other far-ranging topics, such as shamanism, the posthumous journey of the soul, karma and reincarnation and psychedelic therapy with the dying. These were studies he undertook with Walter Pahnke at the Spring Grove State Mental Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland beginning in 1965. LSD was not a controlled, Schedule 1 drug at the time, and in early studies it held great promise of palliative relief for cancer patients. Needless to say, psychedelics provided considerable more insight and expanded consciousness than any of these early researchers were anticipating.

About two thirds of the material covered in this book serves a kind of “review of the literature,” a literature on death and consciousness that Stan Grof has had a substantive hand in creating. The final third of the book, and to me, the most compelling, is a collection of detailed case studies - psychedelic case histories - of seven cancer patients that Grof treated in the Spring Grove Program. Each of these seven patients died shortly after their psychedelic experiences, all of them fearlessly, with virtually no pain whatsoever. As I read each of the accounts, I had the impression that LSD was somehow managing to alter neural structures in such a way that actually managed to resolve and integrate long retained embodied and neurally encapsulated traumatic memories. Freed of such personal histories, patients were subsequently enabled to die in peace.

There is much to appreciate about this book, and only a few things that I found to be a little troublesome. Writing Rule No. 1 is to write with your readers in mind. I don’t know who Grof thinks his readers might be, but they clearly do not get their information from short RSS (Real Simple Syndication) abstract feeds of current research from the leading scientific, peer-reviewed journals. Nor do they regularly review science blogs or Internet discussion forums where knowledgeable exchanges based upon research findings often made as recently as yesterday are going on. And finally, the “Figural Book type for the Macintosh” is set in 8 or 10 point with minimal line spacing, making the large blocks of type on the page physically very difficult for aging eyes like mine to easily read. This type size selection was apparently a tradeoff, for otherwise the book would have counted out at 500 pages or more. Given the denial and anxiety the general population experiences in relation to the subject matter, brevity, I think, would be more digestible food for the dying soul.
The Author

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The Reviewer

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