

A Controversial yet Fascinating Read

Book Review of *Opening Skinner's Box* by Lauren Slater, Norton Publishers, 2003.

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What's a psychology aficionado to read in their spare time? Something about psychology of course!

Opening Skinner's Box has been out on the book market for about two years now and has been at the center of many controversies, as well as the subject of much praise. In this book Lauren Slater, a psychologist who has experienced mental illness firsthand (and has written extensively about it), investigates 10 of the most influential psychological experiments of our time and the stories behind them. The book begins with, and bases its title on, an examination of B.F. Skinner's experiments and the rumours surrounding his own fathering skills. It has been alleged that Skinner kept his daughter in a human-sized operant box in order to control her development. The trauma of this ordeal allegedly led his daughter to commit suicide as a young adult. However, the infamous "baby in the box", Deborah Skinner, is in fact alive today, and Slater attempts to get to the root of this story by tracking down Ms. Skinner and learning what this "box" was really like. Slater presents stories such as this one with interesting anecdotes and testimonials about her meetings with many of these famous figures in psychology.

One of the weaknesses of this book is Slater's writing style. She is not overly factual in her approach (she seems to gloss over some essential details), and actually misspells some researchers' names. Many of the individuals quoted and interviewed for the book wrote scathing critiques and criticisms regarding her research for this book, claiming that they were misquoted and misrepresented. In fact, towards the end of her book I took some of her assertions with a grain of salt, as they seemed to be a tad embellished. That being said, if one focuses on the stories and themes of the book rather than the specific details, it is a captivating and thought provoking read. Any person with an interest in psychology could easily digest this book; no specific knowledge of the field is needed in order to grasp Slater's main points.

I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the history of psychology from a unique perspective not found in many standard textbooks. I enjoyed how it was written in a more narrative format than most science books, as this helped make it an easy, quick, and enjoyable read.