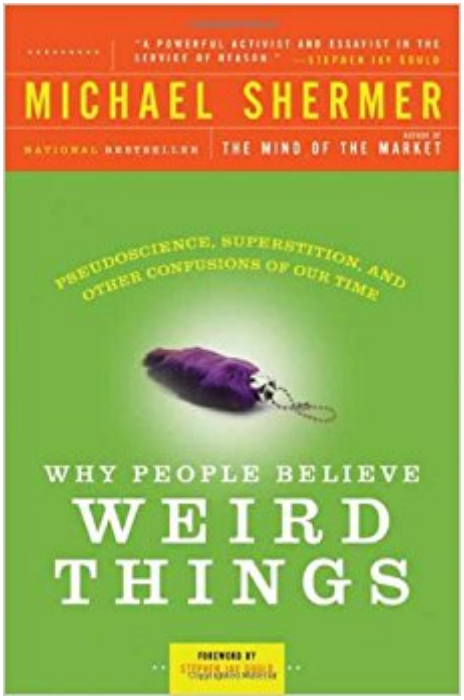
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Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, And Other Confusions Of Our Time



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Synopsis

Revised and Expanded Edition.In this age of supposed scientific enlightenment, many people still believe in mind reading, past-life regression theory, New Age hokum, and alien abduction. A no-holds-barred assault on popular superstitions and prejudices, with more than 80,000 copies in print, Why People Believe Weird Things debunks these nonsensical claims and explores the very human reasons people find otherworldly phenomena, conspiracy theories, and cults so appealing. In an entirely new chapter, "Why Smart People Believe in Weird Things," Michael Shermer takes on science luminaries like physicist Frank Tippler and others, who hide their spiritual beliefs behind the trappings of science.Shermer, science historian and true crusader, also reveals the more dangerous side of such illogical thinking, including Holocaust denial, the recovered-memory movement, the satanic ritual abuse scare, and other modern crazes. Why People Believe Strange Things is an eye-opening resource for the most gullible among us and those who want to protect them.

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Customer Reviews

Few can talk with more personal authority about the range of human beliefs than Michael Shermer. At various times in the past, Shermer has believed in fundamentalist Christianity, alien abductions, Ayn Rand, megavitamin therapy, and deep-tissue massage. Now he believes in skepticism, and his motto is "Cognite tute--think for yourself." This updated edition of Why People Believe Weird Things covers Holocaust denial and creationism in considerable detail, and has chapters on abductions, Satanism, Afrocentrism, near-death experiences, Randian positivism, and psychics. Shermer has

five basic answers to the implied question in his title: for consolation, for immediate gratification, for simplicity, for moral meaning, and because hope springs eternal. He shows the kinds of errors in thinking that lead people to believe weird (that is, unsubstantiated) things, especially the built-in human need to see patterns, even where there is no pattern to be seen. Throughout, Shermer emphasizes that skepticism (in his sense) does not need to be cynicism: "Rationality tied to moral decency is the most powerful joint instrument for good that our planet has ever known." --Mary Ellen Curtin --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

YA?Dedicated to Carl Sagan, with a foreword by Stephen Jay Gould, this book by the publisher of Skeptic magazine and the Director of the Skeptics Lecture Series at California Institute of Technology, has the pedigree to be accepted as a work of scholarly value. Fortunately, it is also readable, interesting, and well indexed and provides an extensive bibliography. The author discusses such topics of current interest as alien abduction, near-death experiences, psychics, recovered memories, and denial of the Holocaust. Never patronizing to his opponents, Shermer explains why people may truly believe that they were held by aliens (he had a similar experience himself) or have recovered a memory of childhood satanic-ritual abuse. He clearly explains, often with pictures, tables, or graphs, the fallacy of such beliefs in terms of scientific reasoning. While teens may find the first section of the book about "Science and Skepticism" a bit too philosophical and ponderous, the rest of it will surely captivate them. Read cover to cover or by section, or used as a reference tool, this book is highly recommended for young adults.?Carol DeAngelo, Garcia Consulting Inc., EPA Headquarters, Washington, DCCopyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is an interesting book where Shermer explores why people believe weird things by which he means things that once considered seemed odd or strange. The book is divided into five parts. which dela with sciecne and skepticism, pseudoscience and superstition, evolution and creationism, history and pseudohistory, and hope springs eternal. Shermer deals with a number of topics. The book begins with some anecdotes and an attempt to define skepticism. By skeptic, Shermer tells readers he means, "one who questions the validity of a a particular claim by calling for evidence to prove or disprove it" (17) and emphasizes that this ought to be a self correcting approach to the positions one holds. Chapter 2 discusses some of the differences between science and pseudoscience and briefly explores the internalist v. externalist debate in the historiography of science. Shermer suggests that even though scientific principles only exist in people’s mind; the

actual phenomena they describe exist outside of us.; "all description is in the mind, but scientific laws describe repeating natural phenomena while pseudoscientific claims are idiosyncratic. Further, he contends, that science, at least on average, moves forward due its cumulative nature while recognize that "there is no question that science is heavily influenced by the culture in which it is embedded, and that scientists may al share a common bias that leads them to think a certain way about nature" (41). Chapter 3 discusses ways in which thinkers commonly make mistakes (theory influences observations, observer changes the observed, equipment constructs results, anecdotal thinking, the use of scientific language cab mislead, bold statements, heresy, rumors, where the burden of proof lies, after the fact reasoning, coincidence, etc). Part II begins begins with a Chapter on Deviations where Shermer briefly explores how deviations from the mean will statistically occur when experiments are run. Chapter 5 is about near death experiences and explores the phenomena concluding that it is likely the result of chemical interactions in the brain when people are close to dying. Chapter 6 is about alien abductions; here Shermer explores, recovered (read implanted) memories. He further wonders why aliens never actually give important information. Lastly, Shermer points out that these fantasies which human experience are culturally affected: "humans are experiencing fantasies and interpreting them in the social context of their age and culture" (98). Chapter 7 is about epidemics of accusations - where he discusses witch crazes, crazes about satanic abuse cults, and so forth. In chapter 7 he describes how individuals can 'acquire' memories and come to belief that they did things they did not do. Chapter 8 is about the cult of Ayn Rand, which Shermer (who once considered himself an Objectivist), calls "the unlikeliest cult" (114). This chapter offers a brief history of Rand and her work. Rand's philosophy is supposedly based on reason and argues that an objective reality exists which can be understood by reason, thus one must be self-interested and support capitalism.Strangely, and unlike, science, Objectivism is not self-correcting, once something is established it is taken as truth. Shermer claims that the "great flaw in her philosophy is that morals can be held to some absolute standard or criteria" (123). Part III begins with chapter 9 on the question of origins. Chapter 10 is about confronting creationists. Chapter 11 is about a supreme court case about creationism and evolution. Part 4 is about history and pseudohistory. This part deals mostly with holocaust denialism. Chapter 15 looks at race, variation and the like. Part 5, begins with Chapter 15 and attempts by scientists to find evidence to support some of their metaphysical conveptions (Tipler and christianity). Chapter 17 is why people belief weird things - because of immediate gratification, simplicity and morality/meaning Shermer suggests. In Chapt 18 Shermer explores why smart people belief weird things (they are better at rationalizing beliefs they reached without evidence)

I’ve always been curious why humans have such faulty logic, and this books goes into great pains to explain some of the more natural reasons that humans are prone to believe weird things. The author describes not just scenarios he’s dealt with, but scenarios that have occurred in history and some of the arguments made. All in all, it’s an interesting read if you’ve ever had a close encounter with a New Age website detailing its pricing catalog for remote psychic activation of ethereal DNA. However, if you really want to study more on this topic, I strongly recommend "Mistake Were Made (But Not By Me)" which details actual studies done on various human ... thinking errors.

We are all guilty. Each of us holds some aspect of the irrational dear to our hearts. A belief that if we just root the right way for our home team, they will triumph. The thought that stepping on a crack will break our mother’s back. It is human nature. Michael Shermer addresses some of the larger issues of irrationality and their impact on society at large and humanity in specific. He digs deeply into some very tricky topics and presents a comprehensive and readable treatise on thoguht and behavior.I found his objective analysis of Holocaust deniers and their beliefs to be sound and free from the emotional rantings of those who simply devolve into ad hominem attacks. What was most interesting was Shermer’s posing of a model for odd beliefs. Using the witch trials of the middle ages and a more recent event in rural America (the mad gasser of Mattoon, Illinois to be precise!), Shermer demonstrates how odd beliefs rise and fall in society. Given the speed and nature of the world wide web, one might expect odd beliefs to rise and fall with even more frequency and speed.Pick up this book in order to refresh your critical thinking skills. As he points out in his Skeptic’s Manifesto chapter, the role of the skeptic is not to perpetually doubt, but to maintain an open mind - just not so open one’s brains fall out.

A very well written book. Mr. Shermer attempts to show both sides of the issues discussed. He keeps an open mind, while at the same time utilizing the power scientific skepticism. He brings in scores of quotations from outside resources to support his information. My only negative criticism is in regard to the part on Holocaust Deniers. While well written and interesting, that portion of the book tends to drag on.

A Good Book aith a lot of interesting details on creationists, cult and UFO believers and generally anyone that never learned how to think critically.There is in my opinion some interesting tidbits that you normally do not run into in this kind of book --- the section on the disease of holocaust denial

and Ayn Rand believers (certainly not a disease, but a little disturbing nonetheless) are of particular note.Shermer concentrates on the fallacies and crooked thinking inherent in the things that do not make the simple test of being empirical or subject to change given new data (the most basic requirements for any logical and scientific view of the world).Richard Dawkins does a far better job of debunking creationism. Sagan, the man who predicated his whole life on the study of the possibility of extraterrestial life, does a better job in disclaiming any assummed probability that we have any shred of evidence through the ages for any rational belief in UFOs of massive world conspiracy theories.The organisation of the book is also a little haphazard. In that sense it can still be highly entertaining by reading a chapter at a time and then returning to it from time to time.All in all a very good effort and one that should be lauded when everywhere the forces of irrationalism and intolerance are on the rise.

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