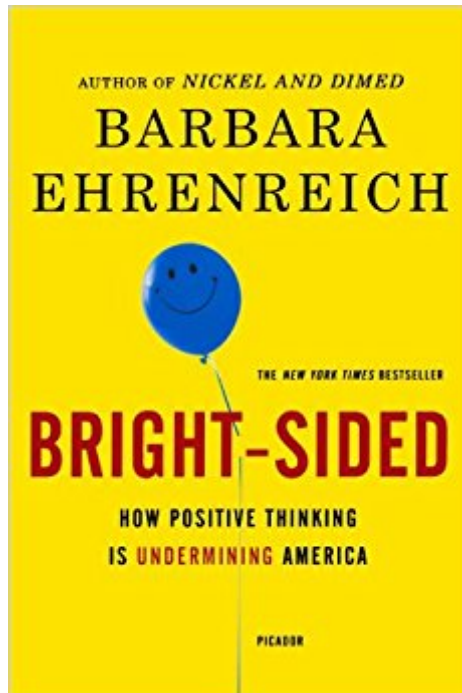


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Bright-sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America



Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER Americans are a "positive" people -- cheerful, optimistic, and upbeat: This is our reputation as well as our self-image. But more than a temperament, being positive is the key to getting success and prosperity. Or so we are told. In this utterly original debunking, Barbara Ehrenreich confronts the false promises of positive thinking and shows its reach into every corner of American life, from Evangelical megachurches to the medical establishment, and, worst of all, to the business community, where the refusal to consider negative outcomes--like mortgage defaults--contributed directly to the current economic disaster. With the myth-busting powers for which she is acclaimed, Ehrenreich exposes the downside of positive thinking: personal self-blame and national denial. This is Ehrenreich at her provocative best--poking holes in conventional wisdom and faux science and ending with a call for existential clarity and courage.

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Customer Reviews

Barbara Ehrenreich is not the kind of person you're likely to find brandishing a sign reading "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade"; you're more likely to find her picketing the vendors, demanding a more varied and tasty supply of fruit. If you're thinking of picking up any of her books, be prepared for Ehrenreich's typical trenchant and skeptical (but never cynical attitude to be applied to whatever topic she's tackling. In this case, that is the whole universe of the phenomenon known as positive thinking, which she debunks with gusto and flair. In the past, Ehrenreich has sometimes gone out to encounter her stories; in this case, the subject for her book came to her, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and found herself uncomfortably sharing her new world with people

so eager to put a positive spin on a horrible phenomena that even women facing a terminal diagnosis were bullied into labeling themselves breast cancer "survivors", since 'victim' was simply too negative a word to be used. Dissenting from this perspective is a kind of treason, she writes, and apt to provoke the professionally-sunny tempered to suggest that she somehow earned the cancer by not being upbeat enough. More important than her personal observations and experiences, however, are the broader conclusions she draws from this experience. "The effect of all this positive thinking is to transform breast cancer into a rite of passage," she writes, "not an injustice or a tragedy to rail against but a normal marker in the life cycle, like menopause or grandmotherhood." That's the important message of this book -- that by being relentlessly upbeat (to the point of becoming self-delusional) we miss out on what is authentic.

With "Bright-Sided" Barbara Ehrenreich delivers the same sharp assessments she delivered in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* and *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, in this case a trenchant look into America's obsession with presenting a "positive" image at all times and at all costs. Spurred by her own reaction to a bout of breast cancer Ehrenreich came face-to-face with the near obsessive culture of positivity, which led to her questioning not only what purpose it serves, but how it came to exist. While Americans like to project a "positive" cheerful, optimistic and upbeat image we seldom reflect on why our culture insists upon this particular norm. Ehrenreich traces the origins of this "cult of optimism" from its origins in 19th Century American life up to the present prevalence of the "gospel of prosperity" in churches, "positive psychology" and the "science of happiness" in academia and in literature. Ehrenreich points out it is most pervasively rooted in business culture where the refusal to deal with negativity (potential and real) has resulted in a rash of negative outcomes, from the S&L crisis of the 1980s/1990s to the current mortgage led economic downturn. As with "Nickel and Dimed" Ehrenreich revels in not just mythbusting but in exploring corners of society seldom plumbed or contemplated.

A lot of folks either are so invested in their own personal universe where they get all the ice cream and cake they want or they heard what the book was about, read the dust-jacket and decided they knew what was in the book. This is an important book, along the same lines and for much the same reasons as Susan Jacoby's "The Age of American Unreason", Charles Pierce's "Idiot America" or Wendy Kaminer's "Sleeping with Extra-terrestrials". What I found so wonderful about the book is the way she calls out the purveyor's of various misunderstood bastardizations of quantum theory for

missing the whole point and for the hypocritical way they use and discard science as it is rhetorically convenient. What's more, she is spot on that this is a worldview that, no matter how fuzzy, soft, kind and gentle it tries to make itself out to be is ultimately selfish, harsh and, dare I say, callous. I say this as someone who was a practitioner, in the 80's and very early 90's, of just this kind of thinking. I read Shakti Gawain and Starhawk. I clutched my crystals and thought to 'attract to myself' all the things that I thought I deserved or wanted. What made the difference, however, was not wishing the Universe to deliver but going out and *doing* something about my life. Ultimately, that deep encounter with reality made me a more compassionate person. What's more, although my introduction to QM was through New Age books, the more I read, the more intrigued I became and then when I actually started to read some *actual* material written by people who *actually* spent their adult lifetimes studying QM I found a theory that was, in reality, far more elegant and beautiful than the people who invoke it to give their fantasies a patina of scientific legitimacy.

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