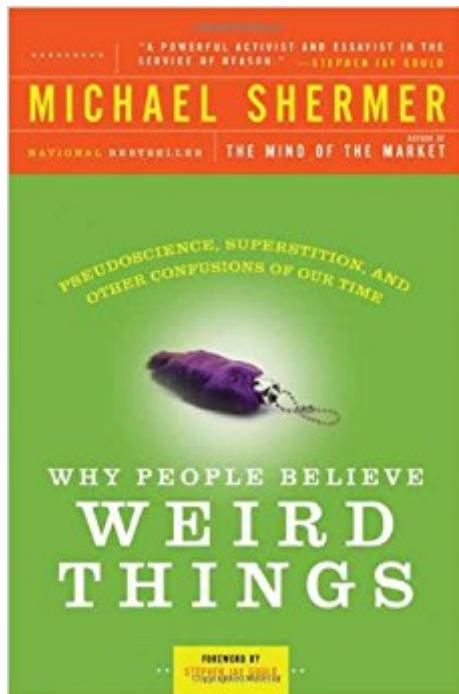


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Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, And Other Confusions Of Our Time



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

My first impression upon finishing this book is that the title is wrong. Though Dr. Shermer addresses some issues about why people believe weird things, for the most part this book is more about the weird things people believe, and not so much about the reasons they believe them. For a better discussion about why people believe weird things, I suggest Thomas Gilovich's book "How we know what isn't so." Shermer devotes all of chapter one to expanding on the definition and characteristics of a skeptic, and all of chapter two to describing science. This lays the bedrock for his future

discussions about pseudosciences such as creationism, and helps to make clear the reasons these pseudosciences and superstitions fail to meet the demanding requirements of science. He explains that a skeptic is not synonymous with a cynic. Instead, a skeptic is someone who questions the validity of a particular claim by calling for evidence to prove or disprove it. As such, skepticism is an essential part of the scientific method. Chapter 3 is a jewel. It describes 25 ways in which thinking goes wrong. Reading this chapter left me wondering if these rules for fallacious reasoning are not encoded somewhere as the rules for participation in some of the more notorious Internet newsgroups devoted to various mythologies. The second part of the book examines claims of the paranormal, near-death experiences, alien abductions, witch crazes, and cults. Although these stories make interesting reading, they are same examples of debunking we have seen for years. I, for one, would appreciate a fresher skeptical approach that is not so (apparently) reluctant to challenge the claims of institutionalized religions.

While I agree with others who've noted that the book is deceptively titled (Shermer spends only the last four pages speculating about the "why" of his topic), this volume remains a useful and entertaining introduction refuting a random assortment of anti-scientific claims, ranging from the silly to the scary. The first part, "Science and Skepticism," is by far the best: Shermer explains the meaning of skepticism and offers guidelines for detecting doubtful scientific and historical pronouncements. The remainder of the book--a series of case studies--is somewhat ill-assorted, in large part because the chapters are, for the most part, revised versions of previously published articles and little attempt was made to weave everything into a coherent unit. Readers looking for detail on any particular subject should look elsewhere. There are, of course, far better books debunking Holocaust denial, creationism, IQ measurement, UFOs, etc. (One odd error by Shermer: his chapter on "medieval witch crazes" actually discusses the epidemics that swept Shakespearean England and colonial America--long after anyone's definition of the medieval period.) Nevertheless, as an overview, however, this volume succeeds nicely. The weakest chapter, it must be said, is the one attacking Frank Tipler and his eschatological philosophy-physics. Much of Tipler's over-the-top nonsense is certainly deserving of refutation, but Shermer spends several pages inexplicably discussing the fact that Tipler was an oldest child and presenting the assertion that the eldest sibling is more likely to hold conservative views. This presentation certainly doesn't refute Tipler's theories, and it fails even as a scientifically-based psychological underpinning.

After reading most of the reviews here, I came to wonder what people were expecting from this

book. People seem have expected either 1) an in depth scientific or sociological explication of "why" people believe certain phenomenon; or 2) an academic paper, complete with multiple sources, extensive discussions of methodology, hundreds of footnotes or lengthy citations, and that thick and dense prose one can only find in a PhD thesis. Ladies and Gentlemen, you cannot do either of the above in 300 pages. But fear not. Shermer does you all one better: he reasons, presents, charts out, explains, and does so *without* that condescending thick and dense prose one can only find in a PhD thesis. In *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Michael Shermer takes us through a well reasoned, insightful analysis of many of the social phenomena -- superstition, UFOs, Cult, Holocaust Denial -- which perplex and at times plague contemporary western society. But he does so in a way that is neither blatant nor condescending. He does not argue that people who deny Evolution, see UFOS, or propagate pseudo-science are suffering from neuropathological condition (as some people seem to have expected Shermer to argue in this book). He also argues that "rationalist" philosophers are always subject to their own errors in reasoning (see the chapter on Ayn Rand and her "cult"). Hence, Shermer attributes such beliefs to problems in people's reasoning and way of seeing the world -- eg., their "baloney detection kits" -- which can be understood in lieu of various flawed assumptions, logical errors and methods of argumentation. (See Chapter 3's "25 Fallacies"). Shermer is thorough, but clear in his style and presentation, as seen in his illustration of Creationist arguments and their proper responses.

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