

Skeptic: Viewing the World with a Rational Eye

Michael Shermer

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Collected essays from bestselling author Michael Shermer's celebrated columns in *Scientific American*

For fifteen years, bestselling author Michael Shermer has written a column in *Scientific American* magazine that synthesizes scientific concepts and theory for a general audience. His trademark combination of deep scientific understanding and entertaining writing style has thrilled his huge and devoted audience for years. Now, in *Skeptic*, seventy-five of these columns are available together for the first time; a welcome addition for his fans and a stimulating introduction for new readers.

Skeptic: Viewing the World with a Rational Eye Details


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From Reader Review Skeptic: Viewing the World with a Rational Eye for online ebook

Miri says

Three and a half stars. An excellent collection of essays from Shermer's *Scientific American* column. I especially liked Turn Me On, Dead Man, which I think is just a really good summary of why skepticism is necessary.

What we have here is a signal/noise problem. Humans evolved brains that are pattern-recognition machines, designed to detect signals that enhance or threaten survival amid a very noisy world. Also known as association learning (associating A and B as causally connected), we are very good at it, or at least good enough to have survived and passed on the genes for the capacity of association learning. Unfortunately, the system has flaws. Superstitions are false associations—A appears to be connected to B, but it is not (the baseball player who doesn't shave and hits a home run). Las Vegas was built on false association learning . . .

Anecdotes fuel pattern-seeking thought. Aunt Mildred's cancer went into remission after she imbibed extract of seaweed—maybe it works. But there is only one surefire method of proper pattern-recognition, and that is science. Only when a group of cancer patients taking seaweed extract is compared to a control group can we draw a valid conclusion . . .

The problem is that although true pattern-recognition helps us survive, false pattern-recognition does not necessarily get us killed, and so the overall phenomenon endured the winnowing process of natural selection. The Darwin Awards (honoring those who remove themselves from the gene pool "in really stupid ways"), like this essay, will never want for examples. Anecdotal thinking comes naturally; science requires training.

Adam Ashton says

I liked getting a taste of a different method of thinking; rigorous way of filtering through new ideas and seemingly bizarre claims. Each section was about 3 pages, which was enough to get a tiny taste of the topic and HOW to think about it (more so than WHAT to think)

John says

I saw this recently released book on the shelf in the library and grabbed it immediately. I am a big proponent of critical thinking and skepticism so I was very excited to read this book. I was hoping he would tackle many of the pressing issues of the day from a skeptic's perspective. Not quite.

What I didn't realize was that this book is a compilation of previously published short essays written by

Shermer for magazines such as Scientific American going back up to 15 years. Some are great but some feel dated. The topics jump around and the book feels like exactly what it is, a bunch of stand alone essays. Still enjoyable for the most part but doesn't break any new ground. I didn't really feel I took anything new away from reading this book.

I agree with most of Shermer's views but one essay entitled "Eat, Drink, and Be Merry" really pissed me off. He asserts that what we eat has very little affect on our overall health. As a physician who has a personal interest and has read extensively the scientific literature on this topic I can say that this assertion is dead wrong. He seems to base his entire argument on a single book written by Barry Glassner. He just regurgitates Glassner's writing (which is likely an example of cashing in on confirmation bias to sell books to people who don't want to eat healthy food). He entirely ignores the mountain of scientific evidence that our diet is by far the most important factor influencing our health and that the modern western diet is the root cause of the epidemic of chronic diseases and obesity plaguing our society. Come on Shermer aren't you supposed to be one of our foremost sceptics and critical thinkers. This one essay ruined the whole book for me. Shame!

I still gave it 3 stars because I can't slam a skeptic too hard. They are my peeps afterall.

Rob says

I am always excited when one of my favorite authors releases a new book. However, this is not new material, rather it's a compilation of monthly columns Shermer wrote for Scientific American. As such, these are short snippets of thought, meant to arouse interest rather than satisfy curiosity. I imagine many if not most of these brief essays are freely available online, but it is nice to have them in one binding. I wouldn't recommend this over Shermer's other books, despite the fact that these are largely rudimentary or at least introductory subjects. It would be better to dive directly into *The Believing Brain* or something because Shermer is capable of elucidating complex ideas in captivating and entertaining ways over an entire book.

Meghan says

Well, now I feel squishkly.

There's a lot I can get behind in the skeptics movement; I'm a (former) scientist so of course I love science. I think more needs to be done to educate non-scientists about how science works. I think homeopathy works as well as drinking a glass of water (because that's all you're getting with homeopathy) and I'm a pretty big booster of vaccinations (unless, for documented, scientific, medical reasons, such as a suppressed immune system, one cannot safely be vaccinated). But I don't think being an arrogant dickhead about being a skeptic, as Shermer comes off in these seventy short essays, is a way to go about convincing anyone of anything. Plus the squishkliness.

Skeptics aren't big on faith. That's fine. You don't have to believe what you don't believe in. But I really don't see the harm if someone also accepts, say, evolution, and believes in God, as long as they recognize that the scientific method isn't applicable to a belief in God. But I can't see Shermer being fine with that. I can see Shermer, if the tone in this book is anything like how he is in person, berating someone for believing in God, even if that person's belief has no impact on their acceptance of science. Shermer is like Christopher Hitchens or any of them: not going to convince anyone who doesn't already agree with them. Is the goal of

the skeptic movement to illuminate the non-scientific about science, or is it to be a pretentious ass about being "smarter" than those with religious or magical or pseudo-scientific convictions? My money is on the second.

Plus, the essays here aren't even that convincing. They can't be. They are all short, seven hundred to one thousand word tidbits, which is not enough space to expound on much of anything. I don't really see the point of putting them together in a book since all-in-all, the flippancy of their length make the whole book almost pointless. Scientists will already know this stuff. Anti-scientists are unlikely to keep reading after Shermer essentially calls them morons. So who's the audience? Skeptical sycophants? I thought sycophants were exactly what skeptics want to avoid.

And I'm going to go back to the squishklyness. I recognize my squishklyness is unfair. The book should be judged on its own merits, which, in my opinion, is a bunch of slight, antagonistic essays that will be lauded by people who already agree with everything Shermer stands for, in a scientific sense. Even I agree with his science stuff. I just don't agree with his tone, style, and alleged behaviour. Or his dismissal of the Humanities' concern about science being a white, male, cabal (especially since the majority of scientists he mentions in his essays are white and male).

I got very little out of this experience.

Skeptic by Michael Shermer went on sale January 12, 2016.

I received a copy free from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Ash says

Was looking forward to my interest being peaked by Shermer's introductions (short columns) to potential new avenues of exploration - only added ONE book to my to read list, lame. Out of 75 entries, only 12 were worthwhile: The Enchanted Glass: Francis Bacon and experimental psychologists show why the facts in science never just speak for themselves; Smart People Believe Weird Things: Rarely does anyone weigh facts before deciding what to believe; Death by Theory: Attachment therapy is based on a pseudoscientific theory that, when put into practice, can be deadly; Demon-Haunted Brain: If the brain mediates all experience, then paranormal phenomena are nothing more than neuronal events; The Myth Is the Message: Yet another discovery of the lost continent of Atlantis shows why science and myth make uneasy bedfellows; Shermer's Last Law: Any sufficiently advanced extraterrestrial intelligence is indistinguishable from God; Why ET Has Not Phoned In: The lifetime of civilizations in the Drake equation for estimating extraterrestrial intelligences is greatly exaggerated; Bottled Twaddle: Is bottled water tapped out?; Airborne Baloney: The latest fad in cold remedies is full of hot air; The Ignoble Savage: Science reveals humanity's heart of darkness; The Domesticated Savage: Science reveals a way to rise above our natures; Bowling for God: Is religion good for society? Science's definitive answer: it depends.

John Matthew says

Great collection of columns from Scientific American. Fun to read but also makes you think and learn. Highly recommended.

p. 29: The Science Network

p. 55: Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science by Martin Gardner

p. 83: "The choice is not between scientific medicine that doesn't work and alternative medicine that might work. Instead, there is only scientific medicine that has been tested and everything else ("alternative" and "complementary" medicine) that has not been tested."

p. 90: "I believe it is better to tell the truth than to lie And I believe that it is better to know than to be ignorant." -- H.L. Mencken

p. 102: Data and theory. Evidence and mechanism. These are the twin pillars of sound science.

p. 112: Antiquity Journal (<https://antiquity.ac.uk/>)

p. 125: Arthur C. Clarke's Laws: 1) When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

2) The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.

3) Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

p. 154: Nutritional science says that we get virtually all of the vitamins and minerals we need through a balanced diet, and that more is not better (see www.nutriwatch.org).

p. 158: The effects of being poked by needles, however cannot be ignored. Understanding the psychology and neuropsychology of acupuncture and pain will lead to a better theory.

p. 160: <http://whohastimeforthis.blogspot.com/>

p. 165: "Although we would all like to believe that changes in diet or lifestyle can greatly improve our health, the likelihood is that, with few exceptions such as smoking cessation, many if not most changes will produce only small effects. And the effects not be consistent. A diet that is harmful to one person may be consumed with impunity by another." -- Marcia Angell

p. 195: The Principle of Freedom: All people are free to think, believe, and act as they choose, as long as they do not infringe on the equal freedom of others.

p. 201: Yanamamo: The Fierce People by Napoleon Chagnon, the best-selling anthropological book of all-time

p. 256: Debunked! by Georges Charpak and Henri Broch.

Josh Balascak says

Bunch of editorials from his Scientific American pieces debunking popular anti-science fads and myths. Health supplements are junk, ESP is prolly not real, and other pseudoscience.

Julie says

The essays are good, but too short to really make much of an impact. There can't be much depth in a collection of very short pieces on science and skepticism, so I didn't really feel engaged.

Of course, I'm a person who hates short stories because they lack elbow room, so it's unsurprising I would be unenthralled by these pieces in book form.

Jakub Ferencik says

I just finished reading this essay in preparation for my presentation on Shermer's paper, "Science & Pseudoscience: The Difference in Practice & the Difference It Makes."

Skeptic is a wonderful collection of essays from Shermer's magazine titled, "Skeptic" after the Skeptics Society of which he is a founder.

Shermer addresses every issue related to pseudoscience imaginable. Not only that, he distinguishes between normal science, borderlands science, & Pseudoscience. The demarcation question has been on the mind of historians of science, philosophers, and scientists for the past 100 years ever since Karl Popper's "Falsifiability" & the resulting formation of Logical Positivists. Most of the discussion, however, is highly theoretical. That is why I find Shermer's approach rather refreshing.

Telepathy, Fortune Telling, Hypnosis, Big Foot sightings, Ufology, 9/11, witches, Creationism/ Intelligent Design, the Resurrection, Holocaust-revisionism, etc. etc. Shermer provides a great resource to provide counter-evidence to most claims made by superstitious men & women. He is doing monumental work.

Michael says

I've complained about Michael Shermer in a previous review. I like Michael, I enjoy his videos and he is clearly trying hard to do things I value. I also agree with virtually everything he writes. Yet his writing annoys me. He names things "it's what I call blah-blah". He makes numbered lists "Here are 18 reasons Holocaust deniers are wrong".

This book is a collection of Shermer's essays from Scientific American. They are pretty good, but the length restriction prevents him from getting into anything in depth. I call this The Shermer Short Problem.

Dennis Littrell says

Informed, beautifully composed, sharp, witty and fun to read

Let's start with the prose. Shermer writes a delightful line. He eschews the mundane and celebrates the poetic. He likes the word that stands out, that surprises, e.g., "hoaxed" (as a verb), "phlogiston", "flummery" (works well with "flapdoodle"), "homiletics," "watchphrase," to note a few.

Here's some (perhaps overwrought) alliteration:

(On magnets increasing blood flow) "This is fantastic flapdoodle and a financial flimflam." (p. 76)

(An observation on hosting a workshop at Esalen) "...the paranormal piffle proffered by the prajna peddlers..." (p. 120)

And here are some chapter titles alliterated: "Mesmerized by Magnetism," "Cures and Cons," "Codified Claptrap," "The Myth Is the Message," "Rupert's Resonance," "Quantum Quackery," etc.

I especially liked the way he worked some fancy poets and bit of their poetry into the narratives, including Dylan Thomas, W.B. Yeats, Alexander Pope, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. And it was fun to read again Arthur C. Clarke's three laws. First Law: "When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong." Indeed. And the Third: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." I would add, as Shermer himself observes elsewhere in the book, any really advanced beings will be to us as gods. And it felt like a return to my youth to recall Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics from his novel "I, Robot":

A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

But what really makes this book stand out (and others by the very articulate Dr. Shermer : see my review of his "Science Friction: Where the Known Meets the Unknown") is just how incisive he is in revealing, exposing, satirizing, demeaning and being amused by the oceans of BS that surrounds us. Here are a couple of examples of his perceptive, penetrating, perspicacious and piercing prose:

"...[T]ruth in science is not determined democratically. It does not matter whether 99 percent or only 1 percent of the public believes a theory. It must stand or fall on the evidence, and there are few theories in science that are more robust than the theory of evolution. The preponderance of evidence from numerous converging lines of inquiry (geology, paleontology, zoology, botany, comparative anatomy, genetics, biogeography, etc.) all independently point to the same conclusion: evolution happened." He calls this a "convergence of evidence" and adds, "Whatever you call it, it is how historical events are proven." (p. 224)

Writing about rising above our nature, Shermer avers, "Limited resources led to the selection for within-group cooperation and between-group competition in humans, resulting in within-group amity and between-group enmity." (Call it tribalism.) "This evolutionary scenario bodes well for our species if we can continue to expand the circle of whom we consider to be members of our in-group." Shermer adds that he believes that the trend is for including more people, women and minorities into the in-group deserving human rights. (p. 209) Call it the trek from bands to tribes to nation states to internationalism.

I also liked this little comeuppance for "the end is nigh" people: "I'm skeptical whenever people argue that the Big Thing is going to happen in THEIR lifetime. Evangelicals never claim that the Second Coming is going to happen in the NEXT generation...Likewise, secular doomsayers typically predict the demise of civilization within their allotted time (but that they will be part of the small surviving enclave." (p. 155)

Naturally I have a few differences with Shermer, but only a few. Here's one. In the chapter "Why ET Has Not Phoned In" he believes that the lifetime of communicating civilizations ("L" in the famous Drake equation for estimating the number of technological civilizations in our galaxy) is rather short. He gives $L = 420.56$ years based on the lifetime of civilizations historically on earth. I believe this is in error since the rise and fall of Rome and some Chinese dynasties, etc. which Shermer has averaged do not connote planet civilizations capable of communicating over vast distances of interstellar space. Those civilizations, if only based on the fact that they have the technology to communicate, clearly must be longer-lived. What he is suggesting is that civilizations such as Rome, Egypt, etc. typically don't last long enough to become technologically capable of interstellar communication. What he is apparently not noticing is that these very same civilizations haven't really disappeared from the earth, but have evolved into the civilizations now present, which is what one might expect on other planets in the galaxy.

Unlike most people Shermer is positive about the prospect for cloning human beings. He comes up with “The Three Laws of Cloning” in the chapter “I, Clone” and argues that we have nothing to fear. I agree, but with this understanding: we already have too many people on the planet, cloned or otherwise.

And here’s a small difference of experience. I write a lot of essays very similar to Shermer’s (although perhaps not as eloquently) and I have found that being forced into a tight window of expression actually improved my prose. Shermer feels that something is sometimes lost when he has to trim his essays. Typically he was restricted to about 700 words for these essays which are from his column in the Scientific American magazine, although augmented and in some cases corrected for this volume.

One last thing: on page 223 Shermer’s title subhead reads “The advance of science, not the demotion of religion, will best counter the influence of creationism.” I agree, but I could not help but read “The advance of science, not the DEMON of religion, will best counter the influence of creationism.”

--Dennis Littrell, author of “The World Is Not as We Think It Is”

Deanna says

From Michael Shermer's Skeptic Magazine, comes several essays from all sorts of subjects concerning religions, conspiracy theories, etc. Leaves you thinking.

Jeff Harris says

This is a nice collection on various topics by Michael Shermer. As with most essay collections like this, many of the topics discussed are repeated in his various books but it is nice to hear them in the form of what seemed to be his first time writing on it. Shermer narrates the audiobook as well which I enjoy since these topics are tough to narrate if you are not interested in the content.

If you haven't read one of his books yet, this is a good starting point to get a taste of his style and content.

Trevyn Hubbs says

Shermer's collection of essays has style and breadth, but not much depth.

I appreciated the brevity, witty quotes, breadth of topics, and his wry style of writing. I suspect an ebook version would be the best way to read--Shermer includes hyperlinks to sources occasionally, and generally makes many brief references that would be nice to be able to cross reference if one is inclined. If you disagree with Shermer's points, you may understandably find his arguments lacking depth.

For my part, I enjoyed comparing his semantic style across dozens of two to three page essays. Often he starts with a historical quote or anecdote before flatly laying his thesis and expanding through a few examples or related arguments. The hardest thing in a short essay is to get a coherent point across and then tie it together neatly with a compelling ending, and I found myself trying to anticipate how Shermer would

pull off this feat. His style entertains and engages, all the while provoking thought.
