

Everyday tales of ordinary madness

Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of our Time

by Michael Shermer

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Michael Shermer is the California-based publisher of *Skeptical* magazine and director of the Skeptics Society. He is, according to the foreword by Stephen Jay Gould, “an important figure in American life”, defending science against modern irrationalism and pouring justified scorn on those who take advantage of the gullible.

But before we say (a resolutely secular) amen to Shermer’s book, it may be pertinent to cast a sceptical eye on the sceptics. There are many different reasons why people believe weird things and indeed many different weird things that they believe. Shermer rounds up the usual suspects: the paranormal, near-death experiences, alien abduction, Satanism and the ‘recovered memory’ movement, Ayn Rand, and creationism. And what a mixed bag they are.

Shermer seems to have spent a very bad day at Edgar Cayce’s Association for Research and Enlightenment. Cayce (a deceased Kentucky psychic) has already been worked over by Martin Gardner and James Randi. All Shermer adds is that Cayce’s followers seem quite remarkably incompetent at designing and statistically analysing experiments on extrasensory perception (ESP). Would it not have been more revealing to look at some of the many eminently respectable scientists who are conducting kosher research on guessing those little symbols on Zener cards?

On near-death experiences, Shermer cannot, of course, deny that people report leaving their bodies, passing through a tunnel towards the light, and there seeing their loved ones. But the strangely dichotomous question that Shermer then poses — is it more likely that these experiences are “an as-yet-to-be-explained phenomenon of the brain” or evidence of immortality? — is irrelevant to any genuinely scientific issue. Could not both be true?

An acquaintance of mine, an atheist neuroscientist with no belief in (or desire for) immortality, found his near-death experience spiritually rewarding. Perhaps the real question should be: How can arcane brain states be transcendently fulfilling?

Certainly the number of currently unexplained brain states is more than enough to keep neuroscientists busy for some time yet. For example, when friends tell me that they have been abducted by aliens, taken off to UFOs and there experimented upon, I am



Unconventional behaviour: alien costume contest at a meeting held earlier this year to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the “Roswell incident”, the alleged crash-landing of a UFO and its unearthly passengers in New Mexico.

happy to explain that their experiences arise from subclinical temporal lobe epilepsy. But when they ask *how* such overactivity produces those specific experiences, my ums and ers cause them to shake their heads sadly at my credulity.

On satanic abuse, in the Middle Ages it took the rack and the thumbscrew to make people confess that their father drank babies’ blood. Now, a couple of sessions in an air-conditioned psychotherapist’s office seems to suffice. What needs explaining here is how we have become such wimps.

Above all, and despite the title of his book, Shermer refuses to engage deeply with why beliefs are held (or indeed what beliefs, as opposed to scientific hypotheses, actually are). Creationists, I would divine, are lamenting the loss of a monolithic religious culture that never existed. If so, no amount of lecturing from Michael Shermer and Richard Dawkins could reconcile them to their fate, and the latter’s attempts to present science as if it were a religion will only make things worse, on both sides of the divide.

Shermer, at least, appreciates well enough the conjectural nature of science “aimed at building a testable body of knowledge constantly open to rejection or confirmation”. Yet he seems puzzled by the existence of such common beliefs as Holocaust denial and racism. Surely it is only too depressingly obvious why some people need to believe that the Holocaust never happened, or that people with darker skins than their own are intrinsically stupid?

Similarly, he describes objectivism as “the unlikeliest cult in history” when one would have thought it tailor-made for its time and place. Alisa Rosenbaum (aka Ayn Rand) emigrated from post-revolutionary Leninograd to New York. There she wrote a best-seller, *The Fountainhead*, that preached the ethics of self-interest and the politics of unbridled capitalism. She gathered around herself a coterie of handsome young men who somewhat assuaged her vociferous appetites, and were also called on to spread her fame as “the greatest human being who ever lived”. I cannot imagine what Shermer finds “weird” about this everyday story of lust, money and power.

By contrast, in the very university in which I work, there are people who claim that an occult force linking the Earth and the Moon provokes the tides to ebb and flow, and that minute creatures too small for the naked eye to see are capable of causing disease. Only this week, I heard that pink worms are dining on solid methane at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. And that if you send one member of a pair of simultaneously created photons to Bellevue and the other to Bernex (two villages near Geneva), each one knows what the other is doing and itself does likewise.

To believe in ESP and little green men seems fairly tame in comparison. □

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