

Conspiracy: Why the Rational Believe the Irrational

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Conspiracy is a fascinating, timely psychological study of those who believe conspiracy theories and of the elusive truths behind those beliefs.

Citing an astonishing range of examples, the book defines a conspiracy as two or more people acting in secret to gain an advantage or to harm others. Some conspiracy theories are true. In the 1950s, a Tuskegee University “study” really did withhold syphilis treatments from 600 Black men. Politicians sometimes conspire and conceal, as in the Watergate scandal. Corporations sometimes knowingly promote harmful products, as did the tobacco industry. But many other conspiracy theories are false, including recent right-wing assertions questioning the 2020 election and fears about “replacement theory.”

With astute descriptions of psychological biases, the book suggests that people believe theories that reinforce their values and worldviews, regardless of logical proof: “Our brains connect ... dots into meaningful patterns, even when those patterns are illusory.” Liberals and conservatives alike are susceptible, especially those who feel disempowered or who have extreme views, although their targets often differ. For example, people on the far left may attribute the 2009 recession to corrupt bankers and politicians, while those on the far right blame government agents.

Prominent conspiracy theories are dissected to help audiences distinguish truth from fiction, including the “mother of all conspiracy theories,” around the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The book contends that proof of a government or mafia conspiracy is scarce, and that the conspiracy theory appeals, in part, because of cognitive dissonance. The event seems too significant to be the random work of an unhinged individual, but that’s what happened. Final chapters offer a “conspiracy detection kit,” a discussion of the amplifying effect of social media, and suggestions for rebuilding trust in the truth.

Interweaving history, science, and psychology, *Conspiracy* is an enlightening, useful guide to navigating the polarizing, often contradictory stories told in today’s politics and media.

KRISTEN RABE (November / December 2022)

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