

Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America's Growing Conspiracist Underground by Jonathan Kay. HarperCollins, 2011. xxiii + 340 pp. \$13, hardcover. ISBN 9780062004819.

Any book that seeks to assess the rights and wrongs of many controversial topics is likely to lack credibility on some of them. When those topics include matters of science, the author had better have a good understanding of how science works. Jonathan Kay unfortunately does not, and his treatment of several subjects is unwarrantedly brief and misleading—perhaps because he regards Wikipedia entries as reliable, comparable to Snopes (p. 241), “particularly those relating to controversial subjects” so long as Wikipedia’s “corps of dedicated editors” don’t relax their control (p. 247); but it is precisely on controversial matters that Wikipedia and its editors are quite unreliable. This book is a frustrating mixture of interesting material and wrong-headedness. Incredibly, quotation marks imply direct quotes in the absence of any source citations or bibliography, for instance from Shermer on pp. 26–27; or “one Protestant propagandist” on p. 35; or “one scholar’s analysis” (p. 69) showing that 40% of the *Protocols of Zion* was “lifted word for word” from Maurice Joly’s *Dialogues in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*. I would also have liked a citation for Kay’s assertion that “pluck” is synonymous with “chutzbah” (p. 189).

The “Truthers” are those who adduce a variety of circumstantial evidence to deny that it was an Al-Qaida operation that felled the Twin Towers; they include the group, Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice. Kay wanted to discover why “these people” had crossed the line from healthy concentration on a subject to conspiracist political philosophy or worldview (pp. 7–8). Throughout, it seems to me, Kay describes as conspiracism what CSICOPers call pseudoscience and promiscuous defenders of mainstream beliefs call denialism. Those who entertain the possibility of beliefs that Kay deems unfounded are thereby labeled not just wrong but fatally wrongheaded to a degree that verges on mental unbalance.

I found flawed logic and factual mistakes galore. For example, Kay refers to “Steven Jones, a famous Brigham Young University physicist renowned for his work with cold fusion” (p. xxii)—but Jones is neither famous nor renowned for that work, indeed his contribution to cold-fusion studies was weak and little.

Kay cites the well-known phenomenon of extremists moving from one side to the opposite, but insists that this reveals a “fundamentally conspiracist vision of society” (p. 31).

America has been more hospitable than Europe to “intellectual outsiders—oddballs, dissidents, heretics, fussy autodidacts, and skeptics—the sort of men whom we would now call ‘cranks’” (p. 32); “the American Enlightenment set

loose a million eccentrics to sweep away the dogmas inherited from Europe” (p. 190). I don’t believe the evidence for that is obvious. Kay’s exemplar is Ignatius Donnelly, and there have certainly not been anything like a million Americans of Donnelly’s ilk. At any rate, this hospitable-ness supposedly allowed emergence of

America’s unique brand of conspiracism . . . the imagining of a complex organizational chart linking all of America’s power centers, from media companies to drug makers to the CIA, to one central, all-controlling secular Antichrist. (p. 33)

At the same time, “anti-Semitism, a European pathology that formerly had been comparatively mild in America” became embedded in America in the populist movements of the late 19th century and remained “a fixture of American political life until the 1940s” (p. 37); one Europe-inherited dogma that apparently was *not* swept away.

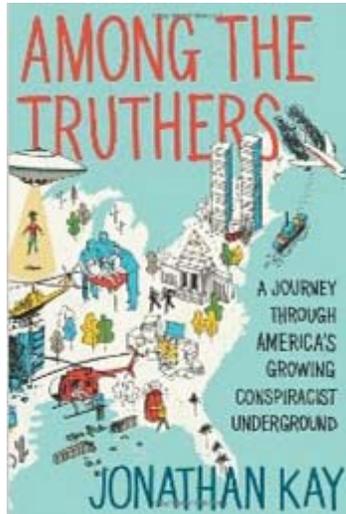
An encounter with one Truther gave Kay “obvious” reasons why there are no crank women, only men. But Martin Gardner (*Fad and Fallacies in the Name of Science*) named a couple of quite prominent female cranks — Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky—and some of the most prominent mediums have been women. Cranks are typically “math teacher, computer scientist, chess player, or investigative journalist” (p. 191)—after the book has just described a number of cranks who were none of those things.

The lack of evidence- or logic-based argument in this book is illustrated when it cites 16 questions Bertrand Russell asked about the Kennedy assassination (pp. 44–45) without bothering to explain what the proper answers are or why the questions might be ill-founded. The assertion that Kennedy was assassinated for failing to implement Operation Northwoods is cited scoffingly and without letting readers know what that Operation was; and since there is no index entry for it, I was left wondering for another 60 pages, until p. 106.

The fairly serious charge of plagiarism is made against Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Ayn Rand for appropriating the ideas of Yevgeny Zamyatin’s 1922 novel *We*. Another blithely thrown-out assertion is that in the 1960s aliens were reported as looking like fetuses because pregnant women were now seeing such images via ultrasound (p. 56). “One of the most famous AIDS conspiracy tracts” (p. 80) is one that I had never heard of despite reading about HIV/AIDS fairly intensively for years. “Many UFO conspiracists” believe AIDS is part of an alien agenda to clear humankind away (p. 81) and “Many UFO buffs” believe there are subterranean farms where aliens milk humans of vital fluids. I’ve known quite a number of ufologists and have read a reasonable amount in UFO books and periodicals without encountering those beliefs.

Conspiracists include not only UFO buffs and 9/11 Truthers but also Tea Partiers (Chapter 4) and many others. Kay overgeneralizes ad absurdum. “In

every society preceding the American Revolution . . . a man's life largely was governed by factors beyond his control," but now "life's losers have no one to blame but themselves" and so it's a relief to blame instead some dark conspiracy (p. 140). Although they are apparently all "losers"—and "Only a small minority . . . seemed out-and-out insane" (p. 181) including Ron Hubbard (p. 183)—conspiracists exist in eight subtypes, set out in Chapter 5, "A Psychological Field Guide": midlife crisis; failed historian; damaged survivor; cosmic voyager; clinical conspiracist; crank; evangelical doomsayer; firebrand.



Yet in the midst of questionable stuff and worse, Kay offers some useful insights, for instance of the degree to which the media shape public opinion, particularly in the postwar years of only three television networks with barely differing approaches (p. 94). That cranks are often people who have been frustrated in a career (p. 192) does have some evidentiary basis. I can agree with Kay also that political correctness seems able to foster conspiracy theorizing (p. 278); and, what might seem obvious, that "Not all conspiracy theorists are anti-Semitic" (p. 289). But then immediately comes the assertion that "all conspiracy movements—all of them—attract anti-Semites."

Kay's summarizing final chapter decries "AIDS denialism," and cites approvingly the good work of groups like the James Randi Educational Foundation and Michael Shermer's Skeptics Society. Like those and their ilk, Kay calls for "an anticonspiracist curriculum," evidently not understanding that education means helping individuals learn to think for themselves, whereas any "anti" or "pro" curriculum describes an intention to indoctrinate.

This book joins a large genre of "skeptical" works written by *pseudo*-skeptics, those who are skeptical only about the ideas that others have, never about their own.

HENRY H. BAUER

Professor Emeritus of Chemistry & Science Studies

Dean Emeritus of Arts & Sciences

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

hhbauer@vt.edu

www.henryhbauer.homestead.com