Review of *The Skeptic’s Dictionary: A Collection of Strange Beliefs, Amusing Deceptions, & Dangerous Delusions*, by Robert Todd Carroll Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 446 pages.

Robert Todd Carroll’s enjoyable new book is a concise dictionary of pseudo-sciences and other nonsensical belief systems, and the people who promulgate them. Carroll, who is Chairman of the Philosophy Department at Sacramento City College, is well versed in critical thinking and logic, having published a critical thinking text (*Becoming a Critical Thinker: A Guide for the New Millennium).* And he has written about pseudo-science for years on the internet, maintaining a website, [www.skepdic.com](http://www.skepdic.com).

In his book, Carroll takes on of course the trendy tabloid pseudo-sciences and cults. We meet recent absurdities, such as hollow Earth theory, alien abduction, creation science, falun gong, the Indigo Children, SRA (satanic ritual abuse), biorhythms, holistic medicine, transcendental meditation, Uri Geller, and reverse speech. And he includes many of our favorite oldies, such as palmistry, Nostradamus, the Loch Ness monster, astrology, numerology, Gurdjieff, haunted houses, bigfoot, miracles, the illuminati, reincarnation, Noah’s Ark, fairies, vampires, zombies, phrenology, the shroud of Turin, mesmerism, and parapsychology—not to mention Roswell (we all know what happened there!). Well represented too are the various bogus pop therapies, such as est, dianetics, New Age psychotherapies, NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), and orgone energy, which never acquired scientific respectability, along with some that have gotten mainstream support, such the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (used to classify personalities), the Rorschach inkblot test, RMT (repressed memory therapy), and TFT (thought field therapy). There are nearly 400 entries, a veritable grab-back of the inane, the insane, the asinine and the delusional.

Truth be told, if all Carroll’s book did was debunk the usual suspects, his book would not be much superior to other similar books, such as James Randi’s nice primer *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural.* But Carroll covers some more recent and interesting specimens of intellectual dreck. He includes the rather nasty phenomenon of Holocaust denial, for instance. He also discusses the much hyped use of subliminal messaging as well as mind control (brainwashing—as in the frightful movie *The Manchurian Candidate*), both of which research has found to be ineffective, despite popular fears to the contrary.

Even more valuable, however, are his nice, short, accessible but very accurate essays on matters in logic and scientific method, such as the nature of pseudo-science as well as logical fallacies (such as begging the question). For example, he succinctly and accurately discusses the Forer effect (also called the Barnum effect), which is the use of such vague language (in psychological surveys, or predictions by astrologers) that it describes everyone. His discussion of entrenchment, or what he calls “the sunk-cost fallacy,” is a delight—we keep flying the Concorde not because it makes a profit, but because we don’t want to admit to ourselves our initial investment was wasted. He discusses, cleanly and crisply, confirmation bias (the tendency to seek only evidence which you know will support your theory), ad hoc hypotheses, positive-outcome bias (the tendency to more readily publish results that show positive outcomes rather than negative outcomes), the post hoc fallacy, control group experiments, memory (false and veridical), the placebo effect, pseudo-history, pseudo-science and Occam’s razor. All these make the book a good reference book for a critical thinking class.

My admiration for his book is lessened by its omissions, omissions that in my view are all too characteristic of contemporary academic skeptics. There are dozens of books like Carroll’s lampooning the usual suspects such as astrology and parapsychology, but these books (including Carroll’s) never mention, say, Marx or communism. Now, don’t get me wrong—astrology and parapsychology are nonsense, of course. But so is Marxism, yet while the devotees of astrology haven’t killed anyone, Marxism has been responsible for as many as 100 million deaths in the 20th Century. I’ve been in philosophy departments where astrology is ridiculed, (“Oh, the stupidity of the plebs is *so* hard to endure!”) but where Marx is held in high esteem, indeed (“A soaring genius!”). Again, while Carroll’s book has entrees on such obscure figures as Edward Bach (a British physician who devised a therapy using flowers) and Frederic Lenz (a Zen entrepreneur who calls himself “Rama”), you don’t see an entry on Margaret Mead, who pseudo-scientific anthropological research (based upon a hoax by her key source) helped persuade people that all gender differences are culturally constructed. Nor is there any entry in Carroll’s book on Alfred Kinsey, the hyper-sexed poster boy for bias in sampling. Again, one searches in vain for any mention of *Black Athena* (or its author Martin Bernal), which propounded the theory that the Greeks (the ultimate in dead white males) stole philosophy, math, art and science from Africa. Again, I surely commend Carroll for discussing the oft-forgotten Lysenko affair, in which a rank pseudo-scientist was able to exploit political ideology to destroy genuine biological science in the Soviet Union, but what about the current attempt by feminists to stamp out research on gender differences in cognitive psychology?

My suspicion is that skeptical academics are more apt to debunk the belief systems of the *hoi polloi* than deal with the absurdities so prevalent in contemporary academia, for a number of reasons. First, although the average man is usually very modest about his intellectual abilities, academics are usually less modest, if not positively hubristic. Second, the degree of vapidity of belief is often greater with academics. Or, as Orwell succinctly observed, there are some ideas so stupid that only intellectuals can believe them. Suppose someone tells me he believes in reincarnation. While I think the view silly, I confess that nothing in my experience directly refutes it, so my mind simply rolls along. But to hear someone—with a Ph.D., no less—argue that paying everyone equally will maximize production, or that there simply are no innate differences between men and women, or that criminals don’t freely choose to commit heinous crimes, but do so out of ignorance, so profoundly offends my daily experience that my mind boggles. Third, there is simple pusillanimity. Tell believers in astrology that they are fools, and nothing happens. Tell feminists or diversity scholars that some elements of their world views are bogus, and they will demonstrate outside your office, or torment feckless administrators until you are unceremoniously sacked. Finally, there is sympathy. As Solzhenitsyn observed long ago, if you’re a liberal, you have to have a sneaking sympathy for socialists, so in turn for communists. If you believe social justice requires confiscating most of what a productive person earns, why not all? The vast majority of academics are politically and socially liberal, as well as secular minded, and this informs even their skepticism.

Carroll’s book is delightful, but not very revolutionary.

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