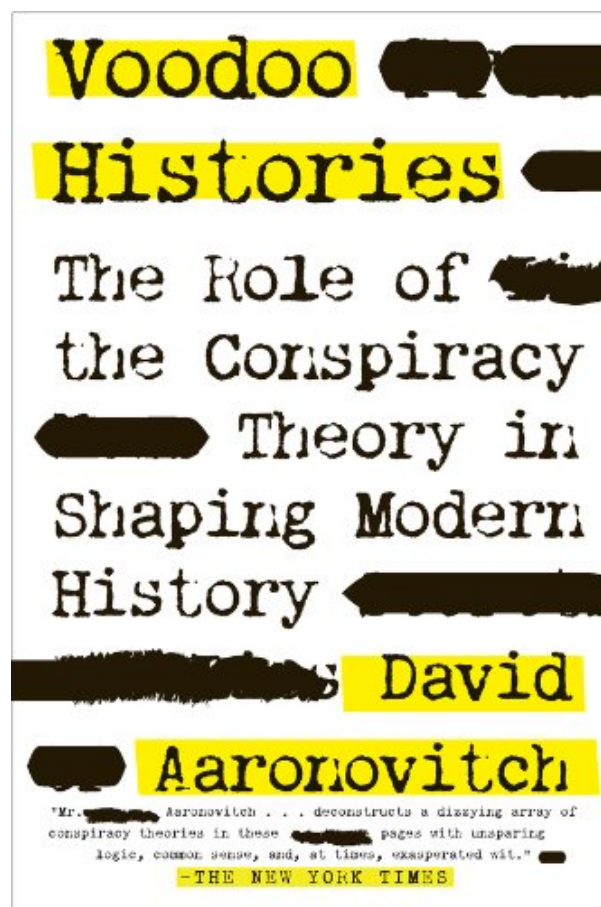


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**Histories**

The Role of  
the Conspiracy  
Theory in  
Shaping Modern  
History

**David**

**Aaronovitch**

"Mr. Aaronovitch . . . deconstructs a dizzying array of  
conspiracy theories in these pages with unsparring  
logic, common sense, and, at times, exasperated wit."

**-THE NEW YORK TIMES**

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From Booklist

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About the Author

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An absorbing, probing look at the conspiracy theories that operate on the sidelines of history and the reasons they continue to play such a seditious role, from an award-winning journalist.

Our age is obsessed by the idea of conspiracy. We see it everywhere- from Pearl Harbor to 9/11, from the assassination of Kennedy to the death of Diana. In this age of terrorism we live in, the role of conspiracy is a serious one, one that can fuel radical or fringe elements to violence.

For David Aaronovitch, there came a time when he started to see a pattern among these inflammatory theories. These theories used similarly murky methods with which to insinuate their claims: they linked themselves to the supposed conspiracies of the past (it happened then so it can happen now); they carefully manipulated their evidence to hide its holes; they relied on the authority of dubious academic sources. Most important, they elevated their believers to membership of an elite- a group of people able to see beyond lies to a higher reality. But why believe something that entails stretching the bounds of probability so far? Surely it is more likely that men did actually land on the moon in 1969 than that thousands of people were enlisted to fabricate an elaborate hoax.

In this entertaining and enlightening book -aimed at providing ammunition for those who have found themselves at the wrong end of a conversation about moon landings or the twin towers-Aaronovitch carefully probes and explodes a dozen of the major conspiracy theories. In doing so, he examines why people believe them, and makes an argument for a true skepticism: one based on a thorough knowledge of history and a strong dose of common sense.

- Sales Rank: #221461 in eBooks
- Published on: 2010-01-19
- Released on: 2010-02-04
- Format: Kindle eBook

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

194 of 204 people found the following review helpful.

What the book is, and what it is not

By Mr. Twisted

After reading several of the negative reviews, I thought a more pointed one was needed in response to clear a few things up for those who have not read the book.

First off, the book is very well written and in a fast-paced, easy to read styles. It's not boring (regardless of agreeing with the author or not), nor is it overly long.

That being said, it brings me to my main point: this is not a scholarly, historically exhaustive work of research; it is an investigative look into how conspiracies begin and the people who latch on to them. Does that mean that it's not researched? No, there is a fairly extensive bibliography, and he has clearly documented his sources. However, it is not done in the way a historical textbook would do so -- but there again, it's not written from that point of view.

The key to remember here -- and this is for those negative reviewers who so adamantly want to hold on to their theories -- is the theme of how these theories get started, and why they become popular. This is of special interest to me because it is clear that there has to be a motivation for believing in most conspiracy theories; one has to *want* them to be true at some level for them to get off the ground, otherwise they wouldn't due to the incredible lack of factual support.

But here we come to the famous rebuttal offered up (which I have seen in the reviews here): "We are just asking questions. That's why it's a 'theory' and it's not perfect. But you have to admit that \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ don't add up!" This statement -- or a similar form -- is offered up every time a conspiracy theorist is confronted with hard facts. And this book addresses that exact issue, rather than going down the road of saying "here's this reference, and this one, and this one, and this one..." The fact is, any story in history, if viewed long enough and from enough angles (if I stand on my head and close one eye) can be a questionable

occurrence that looks "suspicious." I think if one investigated hard enough, they could probably find evidence suggesting that the NFL is fixed, politicians are really aliens, the military is spying on cats, that Jews are actually Chinese and that your own Mom is not who she says she is.

For those of us who have actually held a security clearance and worked in government, however, this book is quite refreshing and right on the money -- as much as we would like everyone to believe that we can pull off some grand conspiracy and keep huge secrets, we're just not that capable. Really, I wish it were different.

And to answer the question of why I gave it four stars instead of five, well...it's not that it wasn't good, I just save the five-star rating for something that really sets my hair on fire. If I throw those things out with every book I like, it hurts the credibility of the rating system. That's how I roll.

20 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Makes its Point, but then Becomes a bit Tiresome

By CJA

The author, a journalist, recounts a number of leading conspiracy theories, rebuts them, and exposes their common themes. With respect to some conspiracies -- such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (the alleged Jewish conspiracy for world domination) -- he absolutely obliterates them with great panache. Others -- such as the Kennedy Assassination theories -- he rebuts in a more cursory fashion. What unites the conspiracy theories is part resentment of shadowy elites, part desire to explain the failure of one's own political movement to succeed, and part a desire to impose some rational explanation on random acts of evil or misfortune.

Conspiracy theories show staying power by defining some event as logically impossible -- for example the magic bullet that hit Kennedy and Connolly or the inability of Marilyn Monroe's body to absorb the amount of barbituates found in her or the lack of wreckage resembling an airplane by the Pentagon on 9/11. Such an impossible fact justifies conspiracy proponents to reject the conventional explanation and to propose all sorts of wild alternative theories. Such theories are resistant even to an attack on the core -- such as evidence showing that Oswald did not have to be a particularly great shot to hit Kennedy and that the path of the bullet does have a rational explanation. Such attacks involve too many details and complexities, thereby allowing the conspiracy proponent to refuse to see their truth.

This is interesting as far as it goes. But instead of exploring the reasons in human nature, politics, and history for such conspiracy theories, Aaronovitch just keeps jumping to new conspiracies and saying the same thing. Thus, the book does become a bit tiresome after a while.

143 of 193 people found the following review helpful.

Kryptonite for the gullible!

By Delighted, Tunbridge Wells

I bought this review primarily on the basis of the review by "H.Josson". No-one in their right mind could write a review along the lines of the book being "delusional [and] lazy" (it simply isn't). The reviewer's hysterical reaction to what is a well-written and thought-provoking (if very depressing) book simply doesn't stack up. Why would a reviewer buy an early copy of this book - write a review which is borderline out-of-control and put their rantings up on Amazon UK and US? Could it be that Mr Aaronovitch has written this review himself? It has all the hallmarks of what he himself describes: ignore facts and focus on specious rumour, "no-one understands the secret mysteries as I do because I have special insights", throw mud at objective analysis to distract attention from the reviewer's own fantasies and, of course, the throw-away line "as crooked as a banker". This resonates with the anti-semitism described in Chapter One of the book, where the Jews were blamed for all the evils of the world. (I'm not defending the bankers here, but "crooked as a banker" is just so tacky!) If H.Josson is David Aaronovitch, it makes a very good conspiracy - unfortunately



seen through rather quickly by the raft of comments on the review on Amazon UK.

The book is well-documented and the sources are of real writers, not, as in the case of the usual conspiracy-revealers, all referring to other "famous conspiracy experts".

My own view is that it is an extremely thoughtful explanation of why the gullible lock on to secret mysteries, conspiracies and insights and avoid any historical analysis, belying any familiarity with reality and current affairs or historical occurrences. The twelve selected conspiracies are all cogently explained and the psychological analysis of why the sad/gullible choose conspiracy over the most likely explanation (Ockham's razor) is depressingly rational. There are no shortage of people in the world who would rather believe fantasy over reality and, I suppose, for that reason alone I gave the book four stars. It presents a very sad, but convincing truth.

If you want to understand why people believe complete eyewash, this book is a very good place to start.

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