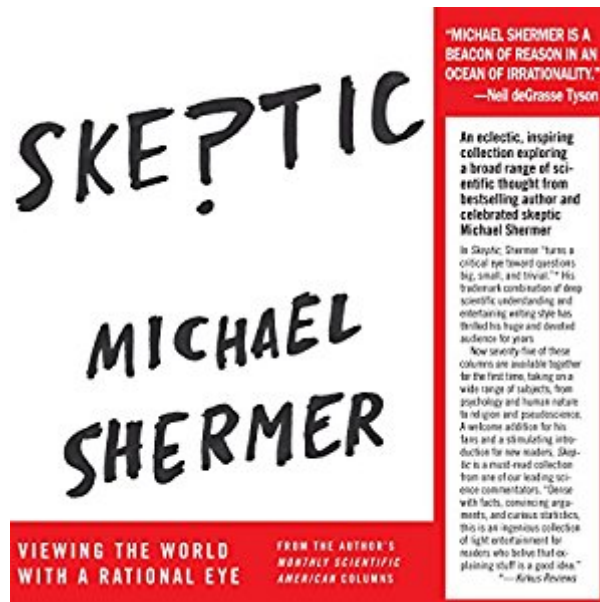


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Skeptic: Viewing The World With A Rational Eye



Synopsis

From the author's monthly Scientific American columns. An eclectic, inspiring collection exploring a broad range of scientific thought from best-selling author and celebrated skeptic Michael Shermer. In *Skeptic*, Shermer "turns a critical eye toward questions big, small, and trivial" (Kirkus). His trademark combination of deep scientific understanding and entertaining writing style has thrilled his huge and devoted audience for years. Now, 75 of these columns are available together for the first time, taking on a wide range of subjects, from psychology and human nature to religion and pseudoscience. A welcome addition for his fans and a stimulating introduction for new listeners. *Skeptic* is a must-listen collection from one of our leading science commentators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Shermer is an odd duck. Not Jewish, but so bright that he attracted Stephen Jay Gould and Carl Sagan as mentors. Dogged enough to complete the grueling bicycle Race Across America five times. A CalTech academic, but finding expression as a popular writer. This collection of columns he wrote over the years for Scientific American is well suited to people with that level of intellect. The third, and one of the best pieces in the book, is entitled "I was wrong." Humility is a rare and admirable quality in human beings in general, and especially among scientists. I credit this book with changing my opinions on a couple of important subjects, covered later in this review. Shermer is especially obsessed with fraud, quackery, junk science and religion. His articles on epistemology – "how we know what we know" – and scientific method are worth memorizing. We all come across people who simply do not believe in vaccines, or swear by their bottled water, or homeopathic medicines, or magnets and similar quackery. In the (unfortunately rare) case that you are dealing

with somebody who will listen to reason, and might even be somewhat numerate, Shermer's treatises are succinct and powerful. Reflecting modern society itself, many of the themes he touches on are politically charged. A man who dwells in the snake pit of academia cannot afford to step on every serpent, but Shermer does pretty well. Let's look at a few. On global warming, Shermer switched from being a skeptic to something of a believer. He cites the rise in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Even climate-change skeptics agree that it has risen from 180 to 350 parts per billion, and is headed higher.

Let's start with the prose. Shermer writes a delightful line. He eschews the mundane and celebrates the poetic. He likes the word that stands out, that surprises, e.g., "hoaxed" (as a verb), "phlogiston", "flummery" (works well with "flapdoodle"), "homiletics", "watchphrase" to note a few. Here's some (perhaps overwrought) alliteration: (On magnets increasing blood flow) "This is fantastic flapdoodle and a financial flimflam." (p. 76) (An observation on hosting a workshop at Esalen) "the paranormal piffle proffered by the prajna peddlers" (p. 120) And here are some chapter titles alliterated: "Mesmerized by Magnetism", "Cures and Cons", "Codified Claptrap", "The Myth Is the Message", "Rupert's Resonance", "Quantum Quackery", etc. I especially liked the way he worked some fancy poets and bit of their poetry into the narratives, including Dylan Thomas, W.B. Yeats, Alexander Pope, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. And it was fun to read again Arthur C. Clarke's three laws. First Law: "When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong." Indeed. And the Third: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." I would add, as Shermer himself observes elsewhere in the book, any really advanced beings will be to us as gods. And it felt like a return to my youth to recall Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics from his novel *I, Robot*: "A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law."

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