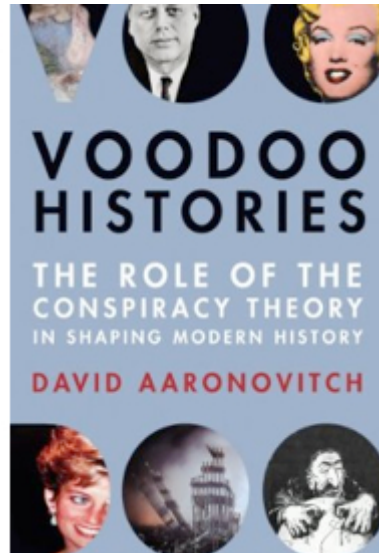




No, Sir, That Ain't History: A Review of David Aaronovitch's "Voodoo Histories."

David Aaronovitch has not written a "whodunit;" he has not written a "who really dunit;" he has written a "why only idiots and simpletons think that someone other than who is supposed to have dun it actually dun it."

In his new book, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*, David Aaronovitch sets out to first, distinguish conspiracy theory from conspiracy (the first is nonsense and the second is common, says the author); second, to arm his "millions" of readers with the information they need to refute the theories foisted on them by crackpots; third, to probe the psychological reasons for the persistent predilection for believing in conspiracy theories; and fourth, to convince the reader that belief in conspiracy theories is "harmful in itself" and if left unchecked and unquestioned, leads to "disastrous decisions."



Admittedly, this may or may not be so. There are those determined to question the truth of everything regardless of contradictory testimony. These people are no more deluded or dangerous than those on the other end of the spectrum that are devoted to rock-ribbed support of the canned chronicles of history.

For Aaronovitch the scalpel most useful in excising the cancer of conspiracy theory is Occam's Razor. Occam's Razor, *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*, is translated as "plurality should not be posited without necessity." In other words, the simplest explanation is usually the best one. This principle, also known as the Law of Parsimony, is attributed to William of Ockham, a 14th-century English logician and theologian. Ockham reckoned that when choosing from among various hypotheses, the most logically sound choice is the one requiring the fewest assumptions. Aaronovitch, as with other "debunkers," assumes himself that anyone questioning the official version of history's catalytic events is illogically introducing assumptions into the deliberation and thus following a faulty line of reasoning.

Unfortunately, Aaronovitch doesn't admit this imbalance in his ostensibly scholarly exposition on the whats and whys of conspiracy theories and their lame-brained adherents. One reason for this omission may be found in the curriculum vitae of the author. David Aaronovitch is a regular contributor to the *Times* of London and is a past recipient of the Orwell Prize for political journalism (an award whose nominees are judged by, among others, Orwell's son). A reporter for the *Times* of London discrediting



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the opinions of those questioning the establishment's published version of events is like reading a description of the finely designed and expertly woven robes of the emperor, written by the tailor himself!

Why, then, given his irrefutable biases and unforgivable omission thereof, does Aaronovitch believe himself not only qualified but called to write a book such as *Voodoo Histories*? Because, he states in not so many words, he knows history better than the rest of us. "Those who understand history," he records, "develop an intuitive sense of likelihood and unlikelihood." In other words, he has a gift for knowing what really happened and what didn't, and he has deigned to use that endowment for the blessing of his fellowman, particularly those wayward souls whose eyes have been clouded by confusing and kooky conspiracy theories.

The French philosopher, Charles Pinot Duclos, stated this hypothesis in another, less condescending way, "We see on the theater of the world a certain number of scenes which succeed each other in endless repetition: where we see the same faults followed regularly by the same misfortunes, we may reasonably think that if we could have known the first we might have avoided the others. The past should enlighten us on the future: knowledge of history is no more than an anticipated experience." While Aaronovitch assumes that his knowledge of history sharpens his vision and enables him thus to distinguish fact from fancy, Duclos rightly asserts that one's familiarity of history should train one to recognize patterns, one of the most persistent patterns — apparently invisible to Aaronovitch — is that the great republics and empires of history have nearly all been brought to ruin by the hidden machinations of conspiring men, powerful men clothed in the unassailable robes of populists.

In explaining that the popular conspiracy theories violate his innate sense of true and false, Aaronovitch displays another blind spot. That is, when we are taught in school to catalog the information we receive, are we not being trained from that tender and impressionable age to use the cataloging system that most benefits the establishment? Whence comes the catalog system? Who invented it? From what sources is the information we are collating gathered? And, is the information truly "gathered" or is our exposure to history and its causes more passive? Aaronovitch asks none of these crucial questions. This could be because, of course, that such an investigation would be an admission contrary to interest as his paycheck is signed by one of the establishment's oldest and most reliable organ's, the venerable *Times* of London.

The bulk of this book is comprised of Aaronovitch throwing sharp darts at several bubbles of conspiracy. Few contemporary events and their corresponding conspiracy theories are left out of Aaronovitch's survey. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (a text that describes a reputed plan by Jews to dominate the world); FDR's foreknowledge of the attack on Pearl Harbor; the assassination of JFK; and the Bush administration's complicity in the bombings of September 11 are included, accompanied by all the presumed and preposterous details appurtenant to these catastrophic historic events. After providing a barebones summation of the incidents, the popular corresponding conspiracies are all explained and then explained away by Aaronovitch.



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To his discredit, Aaronovitch doesn't mention the most recent coverup (none dare call it conspiracy) in modern times — the war in Iraq. Despite reams of self-incriminating testimony of those whose feet were on the pedal accelerating the United States and the United Kingdom into war against Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of 9/11, not one line of *Voodoo Histories* is written about this undeniable conspiracy, an oversight particularly noticeable in light of the recentness of the event and the irrefutable effect it has had on the policies and politics of both the United States and its Anglophone ally, the United Kingdom.

There may be a simple explanation (thank you, Sir William) for why Aaronovitch doesn't list the Iraq War among his roster of influential historical events — he supported it. Aaronovitch supported and “fell for” one of the most well documented, universally maligned, and expensive (in life and fortune) stitch-ups in contemporary history. It would be an embarrassing admission against interest were Aaronovitch to confess to his having been duped. Regrettably this defensive disregard saps the vitality of an otherwise entertaining (though hardly historical) read.

Also, something must be said about Aaronovitch's fascination with the "Jewish question" and the role it played in the creation story of some (largely lunatic) conspiracy theories. There is certainly a segment of the conspiracy spectrum populated by those who point to Judaism as the root of every poisonous tree. However, despite being roundly refuted by *almost everyone*, this narrow band of theories and the perpetrators thereof receives imbalanced coverage in Aaronovitch's book. Somehow, it seems, Aaronovitch believes that by rehearsing the steps of the *Protocols* hoax and then literarily throwing his head back in raucous laughter at the ridiculousness of it, the reliability and credibility of all other alternate explanations of history will be discredited.

In fact, there is a swift undercurrent in Aaronovitch's book asserting that, in spite of denials and comments to the contrary, most luggage carried by conspiracy theorists contains a false bottom and hidden underneath is a copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Or, in other words, if one of the believers in this or that conspiracy were cornered and asked if he believed the Jews were really behind the vast conspiracy to rule the world, he would answer “no,” but he'd have his fingers crossed behind his back.

One last aspect of Aaronovitch's book must be addressed in a similar vein. Those who are truly steeped in the historical record of the rise and fall of the grand republics and empires of history realize that the powerful conspiracies contrived to enslave mankind are not concocted in advertised meetings attended by secretaries transcribing the minutes. Those confabs and the plots hatched therein are more secretive, surreptitious, and ultimately Satanic than any of the fantastical fiction ever produced by the penny press.

There is harm in believing conspiracy theories — for people like Aaronovitch who work for establishment media. The most pernicious danger is that perhaps one will come to question the pre-packaged answers and the party-line press releases and discover for himself a more harmful purpose (other than accident) in the fulcrums upon which the axes of history turn.



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