



Science Friction: Where the Known Meets the Unknown

Michael Shermer

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"Michael Shermer has given a lot of things a lot of thought. If your perceptions have ever rubbed you the wrong way, you'll find *Science Friction* fascinating." —Bill Nye, *The Science Guy*

A scientist pretends to be a psychic for a day—and fools everyone. An athlete discovers that good-luck rituals and getting into "the zone" may, or may not, improve his performance. A son explores the possibilities of alternative and experimental medicine for his cancer-ravaged mother. And a skeptic realizes that it is time to turn the skeptical lens onto science itself.

In each of the fourteen essays in *Science Friction*, bestselling author Michael Shermer explores the very personal barriers and biases that plague and propel science, especially when scientists push against the unknown. What do we know and what do we not know? How does science respond to controversy, attack, and uncertainty? When does theory become accepted fact? As always, Shermer delivers a thought-provoking, fascinating, and entertaining view of life in the scientific age.

"Meaty accounts [and] entertaining discussion . . . well worth having." —*The Washington Post Book World*

"[Shermer's] main obsession is the truth . . . Amateur skeptics will learn from his matter-of-fact dismissals of astrology and creationism." —*Psychology Today*

"Extremely entertaining." —*Science News*

Science Friction: Where the Known Meets the Unknown Details

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Vince Gotera says

In this collection of entertaining and thought-provoking essays, *Science Friction*, Michael Shermer turns a skeptical eye towards all sorts of science-related topics, including the so-called "anthropology wars"; Gene Roddenberry and Harlan Ellison's *Star Trek* tiff; the vicissitudes of evolution in contemporary life; the scholarly reputation of Stephen Jay Gould; and the current skeptic movement, among many fascinating subjects. A great read ... check it out.

On my blog, I recently wrote a post about the phrase science friction ... check that out too.

Mike says

Shermer's books are usually quite good. This particular volume is a bit of a catchall, incorporating a number of his essays into a single book but failing to find a single theme. There is a lengthy exposition and analysis of the writings of Stephen Jay Gould, a study of the Mutiny on the Bounty, a discussion of the Yanomamo controversy, a defense of the term "brights", a quick look into a week spent pretending to be psychic, and an unfocused description of the way both contingency and inevitability drive history. As usual, Shermer is at his best when he is defending Darwinian evolution against Intelligent Design, but the rest of the essays, while fascinating in their own myopic way and well-written, are often too small in scope to inspire. I would start reading Shermer with another volume.

Bruce Greene says

If you are not familiar with Dr. Shermer then this book is not the place to start. As a fan of Dr. Shermer and his work this book was not his best but it made sense to me having read most of his other works. I would have like to rate it 3.5 but I decided to round up. *Science Friction* is a collection of essays of not necessarily related topics so you won't find any continuity. His best work is the *Science of Good and Evil* and a good place to start if you are a skeptic.

Lucas says

Some interesting essays, but I put it down mid-way through and couldn't pick it back up before returning it to the library.

Eoin Flynn says

I love Michael Shermer's work in general; his debates, his articles in *Skeptic Magazine* and in *Scientific*

American, his books, etc. However, this book was a let down.

Shermer appears to have been very self indulgent in writing it - spending pages upon pages lost in nostalgia about his own life. This becomes tedious after a while. I did not wish to read a biography.

Another negative point is the fact that very little new material seems to have gone into this book at the time it was written. It is comprised, in significant part, of lengthy excerpts taken word for word from his other works. If you are familiar with Michael Shermer's oeuvre you will find yourself with a recurring sense of *deja vu* while reading this.

Finally, and most damning of all I think, is the fact that the book doesn't get down and dirty with the science it concerns itself with - something that Shermer manages quite ably usually - and this really left me feeling short changed.

A pity.

But if you read this review, don't let it deter you from reading his other work which is usually sterling!

Jennifer says

Many years ago, too far back to remember now, I was watching one of those shows they used to show around Halloween (and are now ubiquitous on cable) about ghosts and ghost hunting or something of that ilk. On that show they interviewed Michael Shermer about why people believe in mysterious ghosts and aliens and whatnot. He had just published *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time*, and I was totally entranced by what he had to say.

I ran out and got the book as soon as I can, and never read it.

My husband read it, and ended up getting very involved in the whole Skeptical movement as a result. I still have book: *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time* [89281] on my bookshelf, I've started it a few times, but found myself drifting off, unable to pay attention to it. One day, I might just grit my teeth and read the whole thing.

In many ways, this book was much the same. In it Shermer has gleamed some of his best essays and articles dealing with the concept of *who's skeptical of the skeptics?* They run from confronting the what to call atheists, skeptics, non-believers, Brights or whatever you want to call it, to questioning the scientific method, a particularly gripping article about Intelligent Design, and even an odd foray into what really happened on the *Bounty* and how our own prejudices affect our ability to view history and study cultures and peoples scientifically.

I did find myself engrossed in some of the articles from beginning to end, particularly, *Psychic for a Day*, *Heresies of Science*, *The New Creationism*, and *The Hero on the Edge of Forever*. Unfortunately though, there were several articles in the book, in particular *Spin-Doctoring Science* where I almost felt like Shermer was trying too hard to bludgeon his point home.

I know, it's sort of blasphemous to say bludgeoned by data and statistics when you're talking about science, but in several of the articles, Shermer goes off on tangents of data without really explaining how it relates to

the article's main point. In the end you just want to ask him to make it stop, you believe him, really, no more quotes, references, charts or other proof is really going to make a difference. In many ways these sections read more like a college textbook than a collection of essays.

That being said, it's only a small part of this book that falls into this overwhelmed by data problem. Most of the book is terribly readable, and enjoyable. If you are interested in finding out about Skepticism, this may be a good starting place. If you're interested in scientific philosophy this is also a very good book. If you are running for the door the minute anyone throws a chart, or a graph in front of you, perhaps you should pass this one up in favor of more personal and prosaic fare.

Patrick Ellard says

Science Friction, written by prominent scientist and skeptic Michael Shermer is more of a collection of 14 essays about various subjects than a typical popular science book. The essay topics themselves are extremely varied dealing with religion, sports psychology, psychics, the science of history and many others so whether or not you enjoy this book is almost entirely dependent on whether or not you have an interest in the subject being discussed.

There is no doubt that Shermer's writing ability and the amount of research he puts in and I enjoyed the majority of his essays. Unfortunately though there were a couple that didn't quite grab my attention and I found myself skipping over them.

By and large, Science Friction is a very well written and interesting book that's full of insights and interesting ideas but just be warned that you may not find every topic discussed to be as interesting as you would like.

Andrew says

A collection of articles written for various magazines, Michael Shermer shows off a surprising range of topics in this single volume. Shermer's essays are meticulously researched, and he always has an interesting point to make, whether posing as a psychic, explaining scientific causes of historical drama, or refuting creationism.

Shermer's range is so great that there is something to satisfy the interests of almost any reader. Therein lies the one major problem with this book: every reader is bound to come across one or two essays they have no interest in. This is a matter of taste, however. What interests one reader is bound to bore another, and each essay is well-written enough that skimming through any boring parts will not be a chore.

Quality reading for any scientific reader, Science Friction is well worth the effort.

David says

Some of the essays in this book are excellent, while others are just boring. For example, Shermer takes 19 pages to report on the "Bright" episode in his life. He coined the word "bright" to mean skeptics, or non-believers. Most people reacted critically to the name, and he eventually was forced to drop it. But Shermer organizes page-long lists and tabulations of statistics on the issue--this was a big yawn for me.

Another 22-page essay was about a controversy dealing with a few anthropologists who studied the Yanomamo people of the Amazon. Talk about making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Another big yawn.

Clearly, Shermer is a big fan of Stephen Jay Gould. There are many references to him scattered throughout the book, and an entire essay is devoted to Gould. I enjoy reading Gould's books, but Shermer's essay is weighed down by tabulations and statistics of Gould's literary output; just not very interesting.

On the other hand, I enjoyed the short essay about sports psychology. And, the chapter about "Mutiny on the Bounty" was absolutely fascinating. The story told in the movies is a complete falsehood. William Bligh was not a tyrannical monster, who unleashed punishments on his crew for little reason. Instead, Bligh was a relatively enlightened captain, who cared for the well-being of his crew. Shermer goes into some detail, trying to unravel the true reasons for the mutiny.

Shermer seems to be intrigued with the whole idea of "contingencies and counterfactuals: What Might have been and what had to be." In other words, if some key historical action or coincidence had never taken place, would history have developed any differently? For example, what would have happened if "Neanderthals won and we lost?" Or, "what if there had been no agricultural revolution?" What would have happened if General McClellan had not fortuitously gotten a hold of General Lee's battle plans during the Civil War, during the Battle of Antietam?

I thought that the best essay in the book is about the concept of intelligent design. Shermer puts forward ten of the arguments that believers in intelligent design use to rationalize their beliefs. Then, Shermer tears these arguments apart, and does not leave a shred of their arguments unturned.

Bill says

This is a collection of mostly previously-published essays and is a little uneven, like most anthologies. I found at least one essay, "The Big 'Bright' Brouhaha" (about re-branding atheism), to be pretty irrelevant, and there are portions of this book that I have seen in Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things*.

However, the third section, "Science and the (Re)Writing of History" is fascinating and challenging. Schermer's chaos theory of history is stunning, and his analysis of the causes of the *Bounty* mutiny from the perspective of evolutionary theory is testament to the theory's explanatory power.

Worth reading, but I suspect other of Shermer's books are better (such as *Weird Things*).

Jon Wilson says

Michael Shermer likes his statistics. Man, this book is full of lists and numbers and comparisons ad infinitum between lists and numbers (there is actually an entire chapter just discussing lists!).

I expected to like this much more than I did. Making it to the end was something of an endurance contest. For the most part, Shermer presents compelling arguments, but he engages in too much begging of questions (e.g., "we've evolved for monogamy") without even entertaining the possibility that there might be some dissent. And, hey, I just read another book ("Sex at Dawn"--highly recommended) that spends two hundred

pages debunking that assertion.

He also devotes a great deal of time in apologetics for Stephen Jay Gould and Napoleon Chagon (the latter of whom is also discussed in "Sex at Dawn"), which simply did not interest me. Yeah, science is a pretty political minefield like every other human endeavor--go figure--now get back to informing me about science...

My favorite parts were all at the beginning: Psychic for a day, the kerphlap over "Brights", and the Darwinian implications of the Mutiny on the Bounty. So, basically I can recommend the first hundred or so pages... After that, you're on your own.

Rachel says

Very good, but sometimes a bit confusing, subjects I am not all that familiar with, but overall informative. Good insights too.

Jesse Markus says

I was disappointed because I thought this book was going to be more about challenging scientific taboos. I wasn't looking for something that validated fringe science. But I expected it to tackle the divisive controversies of science. Instead, this is a collection of essays that Shermer has written over the years, on topics as diverse as Creationism, the Mutiny on the Bounty, and his mother's struggle with cancer. I give the book five stars because it was still an excellent fucking book, it just wasn't what I was expecting. Just don't read it thinking that this is a paradigm-shifting, trailblazing, hot-button-pressing, rabble-rousing read, despite the controversy and agitation that the title and cover imply. Shermer is no Dawkins, thankfully, and this book is quite polite.

Jim Razinha says

This is an excellent group of essays. As a psychologist and science historian, as well as founder and editor of Skeptic, Shermer thinks!

This book groups his thoughts into four sections: Science and the Virtue of Not Knowing; Science and the Meaning of Body, Mind and Spirit; Science and the (Re)Writing of History; and Science and the Cult of Visionaries

He begins with an amusing recount of how he played psychic for a day, using tarot, palms, astrology and mediumship to see how well he could fake the product. And apparently, he did quite well. Other essays in the group look at the movement to rebrand atheists as "Brights", why we should always be skeptical of what we always thought to be true, and the importance of skepticism as a way of life (and a way of thinking).

He discusses anthropology and one particular instance of infighting and how even science gets spin-doctored. An interesting essay looks at streaks and sports psychology and reveals some amazing results: streaks are no more unusual than statistical possibilities. He explains quite candidly the battle of his mother against cancer and the failed efforts of science to defeat it.

An amazing analysis of the Bounty mutiny (Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian) shows his take on the causes from both a scientific analysis (comparing flogging stats across the Navies at the time) and a psychological and evolutionary perspective. He looks at the hows and whys of history, why the QWERTY came about and why it still exists today in its incredibly inefficient arrangement. He looks at counterfactuals and the What Ifs of some histories.

My favorite essay treats with Intelligent Design and the ten most common arguments creationists throw out. One essay is devoted to lists and how arbitrary they are. He does offer his own list of the 100, 12 and single most influential event in the history of science and technology. And I agree with his #1 - The Origin of Species.

Finally, he talks about Gene Rodenberry and blurring the boundaries between science fiction and science, the ego of Gene and twisting of the most famous Star Trek episode from the author's (Harlan Ellison) original screenplay (The City on the Edge of Forever). And wraps with a tribute of sorts to Stephen Jay Gould.

All in all, a good and thought-provoking read. I'm looking for the rest of Michael Shermer's books now!

Susan Pearce says

Given how many other books are claiming my attention, I'm not sticking with this one. Hopefully it'll earn me some good credit at Arty Bees. I was seduced into buying it by his first excellent chapter on how he passed himself off as a psychic.

Before discovering science, Shermer studied to become an evangelical pastor, and I'd argue that the preaching / teaching -genes that led him to that point still dominate his work, although to a different end. I admire the breadth of his curiosity, his determination to find the best way to live and the vigour of his investigations, but got tired of his tone. He is always wanting to make pronouncements. His favourite phrase seems to be 'I conclude that...' and his fondness of finding the certain statement (ironic in a leading skeptic) prompt him to make obvious statements and even use the odd cliche, apparently without irony ('...denial is not just a river in Egypt').

Maybe I'm being too mean on him, but with all the other terrific writers on science around (Chown, Dawkins etc) plus all the fiction and poetry to be read, there's just not enough time for Shermer right now.

