

SUMMARY

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

ROB BROTHERTON



Summary of “Suspicious Minds” by Rob Brotherton

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Unpack the psychology behind conspiracy theories.

Introduction

5

Conspiracy Theories Are a Natural Reaction to Unnatural Circumstances

6

The Origins of Conspiracy Theories

8

Conspiracy Theories Can Kill

10

The Dangerous Logic of Conspiracy Theories

12

Final Summary

14



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Introduction

Jack the Ripper and H.H. Holmes were two of the most frightening serial killers of the nineteenth century. But were they the same person? Some conspiracy theorists posit that they were. Likewise, many people contend that Princess Diana was murdered or that we will never know the truth about what happened to the Titanic or John F. Kennedy. Still others argue that our phones are listening to everything we say, that pigeons are actually government drones, and more. With conspiracy theories lurking around every corner, it's easy to become paranoid in a hurry. And it's hard to know what to believe. But why do conspiracy theories have such a powerful hold on our minds? Are we crazy to believe in them? Or do they make more sense than we'd like to admit? Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the author's answers to these questions.



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Conspiracy Theories Are a Natural Reaction to Unnatural Circumstances

When you were a child, did you ever make up alternative answers to explain hard things away? For example, if your beloved pet dog was run over, did you imagine instead that he had run away and was enjoying a new life with another family? Similarly, if you came from a broken home or felt the loss of an absent parent, you might have made up stories about them to comfort yourself. If you never met your father, for example, and struggled to answer questions like, “Where’s your dad?” or “What does your dad do?” you might have told your classmates that he was an astronaut or a spy. You might have used this explanation to argue that you never saw him because of his top secret lifestyle.

Whether you truly believed these answers or not, they might have been easier than facing the truth: that you didn’t know where your dad was or why he left. It would be easier than admitting that you might never know the answers. In fact, kids make up stories to explain painful circumstances all the time. And when they do, we don’t accuse them of deliberately or maliciously twisting the truth. Neither do we call them conspiracy theorists. Why? Because upon examining the totality of their circumstances, we understand that their minds are simply struggling to come to grips with their experiences. We understand that the human brain tries to fill in gaps to make sense of what it cannot understand.

You’ve probably experienced this firsthand if you’ve ever read a misspelled text message or looked at one of those visual challenges with missing letters. The words may be misspelled-- and some letters may be absent altogether-- but your brain still looks at “its oky” and translates it into, “It’s okay,” often without you even noticing. The same is true of certain psychological experiences. When we’re faced with things that we don’t understand or questions that we can’t hope to answer, our brains naturally try to fill in the blanks. They suggest possibility after possibility in the hopes of giving us some closure. So, that’s why, if an Elvis superfan

experiences significant distress upon hearing of his death, they might try to concoct an alternative explanation to ease away that pain. It's preferable to believe that that news isn't true, so you say that Elvis is really alive, well, and performing somewhere out there.

And if that sounds a little crazy to you at first, just think about all the times you've believed something simply because you wanted it to be true! Or about the times when you brainstorm theories to explain a weird occurrence. It's easy to dismiss conspiracy theories and mentally relegate them to the category of weirdos wearing tin foil, but the truth is, we all do it sometimes. We may not be full blown conspiracy theorists or we may only harbor theories about a few personal things, but the inclination to hunt for answers isn't crazy, it's just human.



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The Origins of Conspiracy Theories

If you're reading this in 2020, amidst the raging COVID-19 pandemic, then no one has to tell you that conspiracy theories are everywhere. Undoubtedly, you've heard the virus being referred to as the "plandemic." You've heard that Bill Gates wants to put tracking chips in everyone and that a mandatory vaccine is a convenient cover for world domination. Or perhaps you've heard that there is no need to wear a mask to prevent the spread of germs. Maybe you've even encountered the conspiracy theory which posits that the government is forcing us all to wear masks as a test to see how much they can control us. Given that this list is only the tip of the iceberg, one thing is certain: there is no shortage of conspiracy theories, especially when it comes to the coronavirus! But would it surprise you to learn that conspiracy theories are not a modern invention?

If you're familiar with any of the theories listed above, you probably found out about them via the internet. Maybe you read a news article online or a friend showed you a Facebook post. Maybe you subscribe to an online mailing list that sends news updates to your email. These are the most common ways we receive information today because the internet has made information extremely accessible. Today, in a matter of seconds, we can be connected to people all around the world; global news updates are right at our fingertips whenever we want. So, if you assumed that conspiracy theories evolved with the advent of the internet, it would be an understandable assumption. After all, a lot of wacky-- and sometimes downright devious!-- things take place on the internet. But although they might have received some modern updates in the digital age, research shows that conspiracy theories are actually as old as time!

And if we consider this in light of the previous chapter's information, then that makes a lot of sense. That's because conspiracy theories, at their core, are a natural human reaction to being faced with confusing circumstances. And because human nature is both unchanging and universal, it stands to reason that humans would follow the same patterns of behavior for

centuries. And indeed, just as people have fallen in love or told jokes throughout human history, so people have made up conspiracy theories. In fact, the author's research affirms that conspiracy theories were thriving even in ancient Rome! So, the belief that we need to cover our heads in tinfoil might be a modern invention, but our relationship with conspiracy theories is not!



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Conspiracy Theories Can Kill

Fear is one of the core ingredients of any conspiracy theory. Whether we're worried about the outcome of a big event or the actions of an authority figure, conspiracy theories are steeped in fear. And if you've ever seen a movie like *Frankenstein*, you know that fear can make people deadly. Sometimes they gather as a mob to attack anything they don't understand. And sometimes they spread pernicious lies that lead to someone else's death. In fact, the author's research indicates that conspiracy theories are largely responsible for prejudice against certain people groups. For example, conspiracy theories in Germany whipped up hatred against the Jewish people and encouraged public support for the Holocaust. Similarly, conspiracy theories are responsible for encouraging Islamophobia and prejudice against refugees.

Conspiracy theories can even harm animals as well! We've all heard the old superstitions about black cats being bad luck, but most people are evolved enough to know that they are just that: mindless superstitions. However, many people continue to cling to these outdated stereotypes and go out of their way to shoot, hurt, or run over black cats if they see them on the road! In fact, this cruelty is so rampant that many shelters refuse to let people adopt black cats through the month of October for fear of them being used as sacrifices during Halloween.

From these examples, it's pretty easy to see how superstitions and conspiracy theories directly harm black cats in the present. But historically, prejudice against black cats has also resulted in severe consequences for people. Black cats were first associated with evil in the Middle Ages when people assumed that black cats were symbols of witchcraft. It was thought that only witches kept black cats as pets. People thought that their black color meant that they were "in league with the devil" and worried that black cats had magical powers. Many people also spread the theory that witches transformed into black cats and vice versa. This could arguably fall under the "conspiracy theory" category because the Middle Ages was a time of

great fear and uncertainty. People were constantly seeking explanations for the strange circumstances that beset them and they often found comfort in religion. It was easier to attribute unexplained circumstances to the hand of God or the Devil, so people relied on these religious figures to make sense of their lives.

But of course, this often led to a variety of misguided notions, including the prejudice against black cats. Because people were so desperate to rid their towns of witchcraft and evil, they often burned black cats alive, along with their owners who were suspected witches. And when black cats weren't being burned to death, they were also being drowned, hunted, or chased out of town. But then the Black Plague came along. The Black Plague, as we all know, was spread by an infestation of infected rats. If European towns had allowed the cat population to thrive, they would have had a better line of defense against these pests! As cats caught and ate the rats, preventing them from breeding, the plague would have died out sooner and many lives might have been saved! So, while conspiracy theories are not inherently evil and not intentionally designed to cause harm, these examples prove that fear can be a powerful and dangerous motivator. And if we allow ourselves to get caught up in our fear and anger, we can hurt people (and animals!)



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The Dangerous Logic of Conspiracy Theories

When something unexpected happens, what do you do? Your instinct is probably to try and find an explanation for the event. The event in question doesn't have to be a big deal or even something traumatic in nature. In fact, it can be something as simple as your wife sounding hoarse when she tells you, "Good morning." Because your wife's voice isn't always hoarse, you've noticed that something is different, so your first instinct is to ask her about it. You might say something like, "Are you okay? Do you have a sore throat?" to find out what's going on. Similarly, if you run into a friend during a time when they're normally at work, you would notice that this is unusual for them. As a result, you might ask if their work schedule has changed or if they're on a break.

These are innocent examples of seeking explanations; they happen all the time and they don't hurt anyone. In fact, they're usually welcome indications that you care about people enough to notice when things seem out of the ordinary. But these examples are only innocent because they're free of bias. When you ask these questions, you're probably not expecting the worst possible outcome as an answer; you're simply seeking information. And that's the key difference that separates these questions from conspiracy theories. Although both cases have a common denominator-- seeking information about an unexpected event-- as we mentioned in the first chapter, fear is the core characteristic of conspiracy theories. And when we brainstorm wild theories to explain bizarre circumstances, it's usually because we're upset or seeking an answer as wacky as the question.

For example, let's take the case of the missing Malaysian Airlines Flight 370. We all know that planes don't just disappear. They can experience catastrophic crashes, of course, but in those cases, we have tangible evidence that explains what happened where and why. But planes carrying 239 passengers don't just disappear into thin air. So, when something so astounding happens, it's natural for us to try and come up with

explanations that help us make sense of the tragedy. But it enters dangerous conspiracy theory territory when we begin to invent explanations that are as bizarre as the events themselves. For example, when it comes to Flight 370, we don't know what happened. There's a strong possibility that we never will. And unfortunately, we don't really have the option of blaming it on something simple like a faulty piece of equipment or a pilot's error. But that doesn't mean that the answer is automatically something preposterous like aliens!

However, as shocking as it seems, more than 10% of Americans genuinely believe that aliens are responsible for the mysterious disappearance of Flight 370 and its passengers. And those who believe such theories stick to them with dogmatic confidence! It might sound crazy-- and maybe believing in aliens is a little kooky-- but the logic behind it is pretty understandable. People are understandably confused by such a baffling disappearance and when conventional explanations don't help them, they turn to something else. They continue to cling to these theories for the same reasons that many of us hold to our political or religious beliefs: they're ours and they comfort us.



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Final Summary

When we think about conspiracy theories, we typically think of paranoid wackos wearing tinfoil on their heads. We think of people who are suspicious of everything and believe the government is always spying on us. Consequently, we tend to assume that people who espouse conspiracy theories exist on the fringes of society or that they are awkward loners. But the author's research reveals that the truth is very different indeed! While awkward, paranoid conspiracy theorists certainly exist, the truth hits much closer to home than we might like to admit. In fact, most of us cling to some pet conspiracy theories-- or at least enjoy reading about them-- whether we'd like to admit it or not!

That's because conspiracy theories aren't inherently crazy at all. Instead, they're a natural psychological process that we engage in when we need to make sense of the inexplicable. But that doesn't mean they're always harmless or innocent. It's okay to brainstorm theories or try to imagine how something happened, but we have to be careful about the power we give these theories. Because it's also human nature to cling to our beliefs and refuse to change our minds. And if we get too caught up in believing something wrong, our fears and prejudices can prove harmful for ourselves and others.



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