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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

### It's a Plot! No, It's Not: A Debunking

By [MICHIKO KAKUTANI](#)

The principle of Occam's razor suggests that the simplest hypothesis is usually the correct one — or as the character Gil Grissom in "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" succinctly puts it, if you hear hoofbeats, "think horses, not zebras."

#### VOODOO HISTORIES

##### The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History

By David Aaronovitch

388 pages. Riverhead Books. \$26.95.

In his lively new book, "Voodoo Histories," the journalist David Aaronovitch uses Occam's razor to eviscerate the many conspiracy theories that have percolated through politics and popular culture over the last century, from those that assert that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were actually a United States government plot to those that claim that [Diana, Princess of Wales](#), was murdered at the direction of the royal family or British intelligence.

In most cases, Mr. Aaronovitch notes, conspiracy theorists would rather tie themselves into complicated knots and postulate all sorts of improbable secret connections than accept a simple, more obvious explanation.

Of those who claim that the Pentagon was not hit on 9/11 by a terrorist-piloted [American Airlines](#) Flight 77, Mr. Aaronovitch sarcastically observes: "But there is always the possibility, however extraordinarily remote, that DNA might have been planted to the exact specifications of the missing passengers, crew and employees, that wreckage might somehow have been placed at the scene within minutes of the crash, and that the real occupants of the missing Flight 77 might have been spirited away to some unknown place, there to be butchered or to live in the world's weirdest witness protection program."

Although this book owes a huge debt to the classic study on this subject — Richard Hofstadter's "Paranoid Style in American Politics" — Mr. Aaronovitch, who is a columnist for The Times of London, deconstructs a dizzying array of conspiracy theories in these pages with unsparing logic, common sense and at times exasperated wit.

Some of the theories he examines are infamous for their malignity and horrific consequences, like the "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion": fabricated documents used to justify anti-Semitism in Russia, Nazi Germany and more recently in places like Iran and Gaza.

Some are theories of political conspiracies intended to shape America's foreign policy, like charges that President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) allowed Pearl Harbor to happen — or worse, that he had procured just such a Japanese attack — to bring the United States into World War II.

Other conspiracy theories are just plain loony efforts to connect the dots between assorted scandals and dead celebrities, like the allegations of a writer named Matthew Smith. In “The Kennedys: The Conspiracy to Destroy a Dynasty” (2005), Mr. Aaronovitch writes, “Smith constructs an overarching theory that connects the deaths of Marilyn, J. F. K., R. F. K. and Mary Jo Kopechne, the girl who died in [Edward Kennedy](#)’s car at Chappaquiddick in 1969. It was all — all of it — the work of elements within the [C.I.A.](#) They saw J. F. K. as being too left-wing and bumped Marilyn off to discredit the Kennedys, both of whom were having affairs with the star at her bugged bungalow in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, that didn’t work, so they killed J. F. K. the next year, and then, for some reason, waited another five years before getting rid of Bobby. The next year they arranged for Ted to drive his car, complete with a young woman, off a bridge, thus destroying his chances of the presidency.”

So why do conspiracy theories flourish? Though some of the conspiracy-mongers described here appear to be simple crackpots or people out to make a fast buck with one of those laughably titled books that aspire to clutter up the best-seller lists (“[Henry Kissinger](#): Soviet Agent,” “Diana: The Killing of a Princess,” “Rule by Secrecy: The Hidden History That Connects the Trilateral Commission, the Freemasons and the Great Pyramid”), Mr. Aaronovitch tries to provide the reader with a carefully reasoned anatomy of the phenomenon in these pages.

He not only notes the appeal of narrative and causality in a frighteningly random world — something readers of [Thomas Pynchon](#)’s novels well know — but also argues that overarching theories tend to be “formulated by the politically defeated and taken up by the socially defeated.”

These losers “left behind by modernity,” he writes, “can be identified in the beached remnants of vanished European empires; the doomed bureaucrats, the White Russians and the patriotic German petit bourgeois. They are the America firsters, who got the war they didn’t want; the Midwest populists watching their small farmers go out of business; the opponents of the New Deal; the McGovern liberals in the era of [Richard Nixon](#); British socialists and pacifists in the decade of [Margaret Thatcher](#); the irreconcilable American right during the Clinton administration; the shattered American left in the time of the second Bush.

“If it can be proved that there has been a conspiracy, which has transformed politics and society, then their defeat is not the product of their own inherent weakness or unpopularity, let alone their mistakes; it is due to the almost demonic ruthlessness of their enemy.”

It’s not surprising, then, that conspiracy theories thrive in times of change, uncertainty and economic stress, and that the designated villains often conform to enemies in “American populist folklore.” Of the era of McCarthyism and the venom aimed at supposed Communist sympathizers, Mr. Aaronovitch writes: “They were East Coasters or Hollywooders; they were educated; they were city dwellers; they liked art and fancy music; they were separate from — and unsympathetic to — the daily travails of the American little man.”

These days a similar sort of antipathy is directed at [President Obama](#), the [Democratic Party](#) and the mainstream news media by the [Tea Party movement](#) and by so-called birthers, who question whether Mr. Obama was born in the United States.

In the case of the birthers, Mr. Aaronovitch says, many of the individuals and organizations involved are the same ones who tried to torpedo [Bill Clinton](#)’s presidency, denouncing Mr. Clinton as morally corrupt, even criminal: “It is as though,” he writes, “they had been on vacation through the eight years of the [George W. Bush presidency](#), only to rediscover, on arriving home, that there was yet another slippery liar in the White House.”

Does the Internet, with its increased democratization of information, help spread conspiracy theories or

help expose them? Mr. Aaronovitch says that it was obvious that “sites endorsing 9/11 conspiracy theories and those subscribing to them in passing far outnumbered sites devoted to debunking or refuting such theories.”

He writes that the Internet has enabled the “release of a mass of undifferentiated information, some of it authoritative, some speculative, some absurd,” and that “cyberspace communities of semi-anonymous and occasionally self-invented individuals have grown up, some of them permitting contact between people who in previous times might have thought each other’s interests impossibly exotic and even mad.”

Polls cited in this book suggest that an alarming number of people now subscribe to forms of 9/11 revisionism. “In August 2004 a poll conducted by the Zogby opinion research company found nearly two-thirds of New Yorkers under 30 agreeing with the proposition that the administration ‘knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around Sept. 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act,’ ” Mr. Aaronovitch writes.

He adds that a Scripps Howard poll in July 2006 “had 36 percent of respondents suspecting government participation of some kind in the attacks, with just over one in six believing that explosives had been used to bring down the twin towers.”

The same poll, he notes, “measured belief in a Kennedy conspiracy at 40 percent.”

It’s enough to make characters from “The X-Files” and [Dan Brown](#) novels feel completely at home.

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