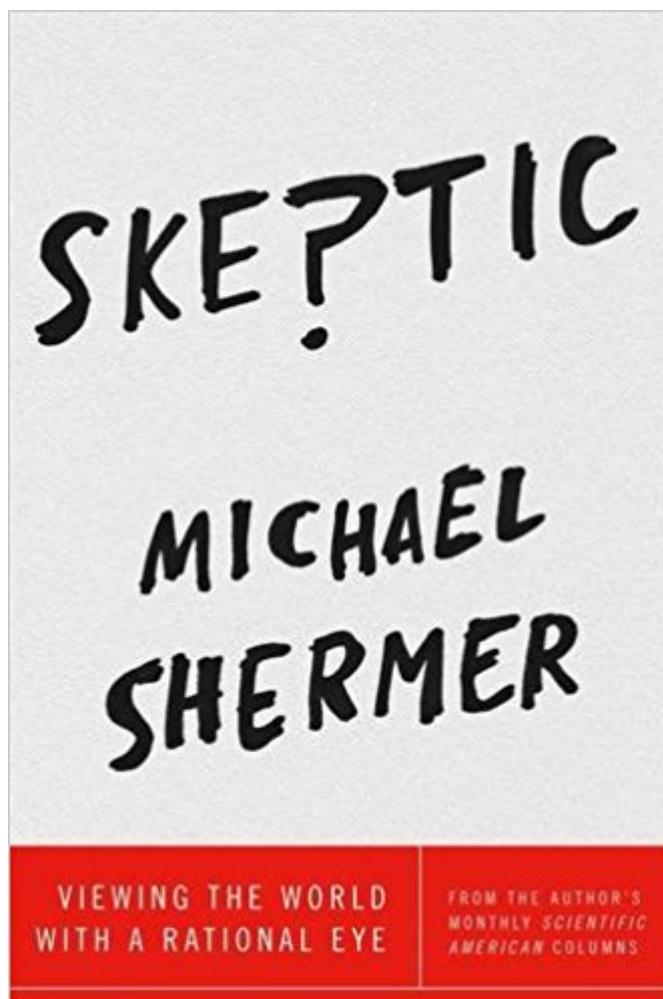


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# Skeptic: Viewing The World With A Rational Eye



## Synopsis

Collected essays from bestselling author Michael Shermer's celebrated columns in Scientific AmericanFor fifteen years, bestselling author Michael Shermer has written a column in Scientific American magazine that synthesizes scientific concepts and theory for a general audience. His trademark combination of deep scientific understanding and entertaining writing style has thrilled his huge and devoted audience for years. Now, in *Skeptic*, seventy-five of these columns are available together for the first time; a welcome addition for his fans and a stimulating introduction for new readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Praise for *The Moral Arc*: "Ambitious... Mr. Shermer is a buoyant culture warrior-and an eloquent one, who believes that our better angels will continue to soar. *The Moral Arc* presents an impressive account of how far we have come. But it also reminds us that reason, for all its muscle, will need a lot of help to make our moral progress continue."-The Wall Street Journal "Michael Shermer [claims that] science...has helped to lay the moral groundwork for modern society, pointing the way to a more just and moral world...Bravo, I say."-Michio Kaku, theoretical physicist, author of the best seller *The Future of the Mind*, and *Physics of the Future*

MICHAEL SHERMER is the author of *The Moral Arc*, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, *The Believing Brain*, and many other books on the evolution of human beliefs and behavior. He is the founding publisher of *Skeptic*magazine, the editor of *Skeptic.com*, a monthly columnist for *Scientific*

American, and Presidential Fellow at Chapman University. He lives in Southern California.

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 280 to 350 parts per billion, and is headed higher. The thesis of the 1990s was that these greenhouse gases would trap heat and suffocate us by today. It has not happened. I'll go with Shermer that, in my father's words, we "shouldn't muck with something we don't understand." A conservative should conserve the planet as it is, not knowingly make such dramatic changes and hope for the best. On the other hand, as a libertarian Shermer must also recognize that politicians are using global warming as a stalking horse to advance many other agendas. I read him with interest and an open mind. Shermer strongly supports Napoleon Chagnon's anthropology among the Yanomamo against politically-charged attacks. His writing predates "Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes -- the Yanomamo and the Anthropologists," but I am sure that Shermer relishes Chagnon's setting the record straight. Primitive men were and are often violent. Civilization has improved us. On the other hand, Shermer's mentor Stephen Jay Gould is bad odor among others whom he admires for his tenacious resistance to research on human evolution, evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology and thus human biodiversity. Although he writes favorably of Richard Dawkins and E. O. Wilson, Shermer generally avoids these topics, dismissing

them with a single-line throw-away. He simply does not write about the work of Arthur Jensen, Richard Lynn, Philippe Rushton, Kevin MacDonald, Barbara Oakley and many others in the sociobiology movement. Even a skeptic has to keep his horns pulled in upon occasion. Shermer's brief comment on the controversy raised by the (unnamed) book "Inventing the AIDS Virus" led me to amend my review of that book. As with the climate change advocates, the AIDS lobby's being highly political does not mean that it is not right in many particulars. Much as I may sympathize for the abuse that the author of this book suffered, ad hominem attacks and slurs rather than refutations of his science, it appears that the refutations of the science do exist and are substantial. If I have a criticism to offer it might be that Shermer should be more candid about the politics of the issues. A model in my mind is Steven Pinker's dealing with them in "The Blank Slate." Shermer goes at religion with the passion of the former evangelical that he is. He is especially tough on Intelligent Design. Yet, he has a compelling, moderately cast article entitled "Darwin on the Right" — Why Christians and conservatives should accept evolution." His thesis is that evolution fits with theology and it explains human nature. Shermer's online biography shows him marrying late in life and does not credit him with any children. I would add that religion provides a rationale for having children. Bearing children does not offer much of a reward in the modern world. They are a great expense to raise, society is structured such that one's employer and the government are on the hook for our care in old age, and modern American society almost goes out of its way to teach children to be ungrateful. But for the religious injunction to "be fruitful and multiply" we would die out — even faster than we are doing!"Dogged" is the theme of Shermer's piece on retracing Darwin's investigation of the Galapagos Islands and of Darwin's unrelenting quest to figure things out. It is the perfect word to describe Shermer himself. This is another excellent work. He strives to know, and relishes sharing what he has discovered.

You have all the Skeptic's Corner columns from Scientific American magazine from the 2001 inception to around 2007. Michael Shermer explains in his first chapter about the timespan of his ongoing writing for the magazine. It is implied he is continuing with a second book. By my estimate, there would still also need to be a third volume. The essays are organized by topic rather than chronological publication date, which I find helpful. To sum up, this book is wonderful for Shermer fans who want a nice hardcopy of the articles in book form; it is also great for science readers and skeptics in general to get brief overviews of all the important aspects in science and pseudoscience (included for discernment purposes). If you have never seen the Scientific American magazine, by seeing and browsing and reading this book, one will also wish to read the current monthly column,

"Skeptic's Corner."

addressed many of my questions and introduced new concepts for me. Took lots of notes for reflection. Very enjoyable and enlightening.

This is an excellent collection of Shermer's essays. Shermer's thinking on skepticism is clear, thoughtful, and entertaining as always. Since I had never really read his SciAm columns before, this served as a great introduction. I hope he does a second volume in the future.

love Micheal

good book

Shermer excels at skepticism. Great book.

Excellent book! Dr. Shermers sound logic and reasoning is easy to understand, apply, and guide the critical mind. I recommend this book to everyone especially to faculty teaching intro to university courses.

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