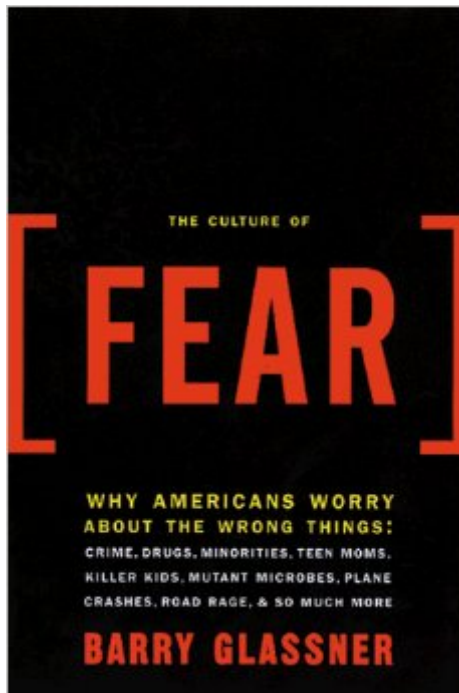


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The Culture Of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid Of The Wrong Things



Synopsis

There has never been another era in modern history, even during wartime or the Great Depression, when so many people have feared so much. Three out of four Americans say they feel more fearful today than they did twenty years ago. *The Culture of Fear* describes the high costs of living in a fear-ridden environment where realism has become rarer than doors without deadbolts. Why do we have so many fears these days? Are we living in exceptionally dangerous times? To watch the news, you'd certainly think so, but Glassner demonstrates that it is our perception of danger that has increased, not the actual level of risk. *The Culture of Fear* is an expose of the people and organizations that manipulate our perceptions and profit from our fears: politicians who win elections by heightening concerns about crime and drug use even as rates for both are declining; advocacy groups that raise money by exaggerating the prevalence of particular diseases; TV newsmagazines that monger a new scare every week to garner ratings. Glassner spells out the prices we pay for social panics: the huge sums of money that go to waste on unnecessary programs and products as well as time and energy spent worrying about our fears.

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Customer Reviews

In the course of reading Barry Glassner's "The Culture of Fear," I was surprised that Glassner took a more balanced view than I had at first expected. After being featured in left-wing muckraker, Michael Moore's latest film, "Bowling for Columbine," I had assumed Glassner, too, had produced a one-sided liberal rant about the corporate-controlled media interests. I was wrong. While some of Glassner's conclusions may be questionable, like his statements without clear evidence that the

availability of guns are almost entirely to blame for the nation's violence, much of his book is filled with example-after-example of familiar media-propagated scares of the 1990s along with well-researched statistics to debunk the myths. After reading the book, the pattern became clear of how the media spins its stories to make them deliberately misleading in order to sell fear and keep viewers and readers plugged in. I believe this educational experience has made me a more savvy and skeptical consumer of the news. While Glassner's primary target in "The Culture of Fear" is the media, other groups are also shamed along the way (and they aren't all conservatives, either!) For instance, he spends a fair amount of time accusing feminists of propagating the silicone breast implant scares for symbolic gains even as study-after-study, some very large, involving tens of thousands of women showed no increased evidence of medical problems due to the implants. One trend that I found amusing in many of the scares is that genuine experts are often ignored in the propagation of the fears. When genuine experts are consulted and disagree with the media's spin, their rational hard-facts explanations are often dismissed with a brush of the hand from the interviewer and followed by a, "but what about all the children?"

"We have the resources to feed, house, educate, insure, and disarm our communities if we resolve to do so.... We can choose to redirect some... funds to combat serious dangers that threaten large numbers of people. At election time, we can choose candidates that proffer programs rather than scares." (p. 210) With these concluding words, sociologist Barry Glassner underscores the basic premise of his book---Americans live in a culture in which extreme irrational fears are stoked while more serious (but less sexy) concerns are downplayed or ignored. Over the course of nine chapters, each focusing on a different "genre" of fear-mongering, Glassner dissects the most widely discussed terrors du jour (e.g., moral panics, violent crime, terrorism, infectious diseases like SARS, airplane crashes, etc.) and asks why it is that we tend to ignore serious, chronic, systemic problems like homelessness and malnutrition among American children in favor of flashy "threats" like West Nile Virus and school shootings. His answer, such as it is, is that this culture of fear results from the intersection of political ideology, mass media pandering, and monomaniacal advocacy. So, for example, the obvious denominator common to all gun crimes, the relative ease with which guns can be acquired, is ignored or written-off in favor of moral or psychological explanations. That most child abuse, kidnapping, and murder occurs within the family unit gets less press than "don't talk to strangers," perhaps because we collectively fear what the examination of the "family" recommended by this data would reveal.

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