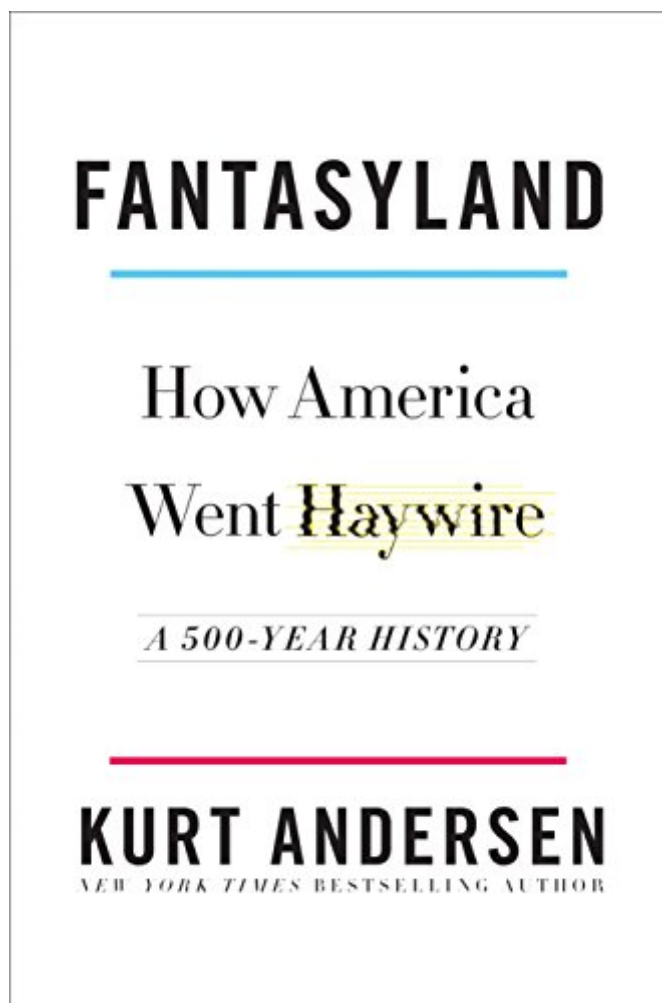


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Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History



Synopsis

A razor-sharp thinker offers a new understanding of our post-truth world and explains the American instinct to believe in make-believe, from the Pilgrims to P. T. Barnum to Disneyland to zealots of every stripe . . . to Donald Trump. In this sweeping, eloquent history of America, Kurt Andersen demonstrates that what's happening in our country today—this strange, post-factual, “fake news” moment we're all living through—is not something entirely new, but rather the ultimate expression of our national character and path. America was founded by wishful dreamers, magical thinkers, and true believers, by impresarios and their audiences, by hucksters and their suckers. Believe-whatever-you-want fantasy is deeply embedded in our DNA. Over the course of five centuries—from the Salem witch trials to Scientology to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, from P. T. Barnum to Hollywood and the anything-goes, wild-and-crazy sixties, from conspiracy theories to our fetish for guns and obsession with extraterrestrials—our peculiar love of the fantastic has made America exceptional in a way that we've never fully acknowledged. With the gleeful erudition and tell-it-like-it-is ferocity of a Christopher Hitchens, Andersen explores whether the great American experiment in liberty has gone off the rails. From the start, our ultra-individualism was attached to epic dreams and epic fantasies—every citizen was free to believe absolutely anything, or to pretend to be absolutely anybody. Little by little, and then more quickly in the last several decades, the American invent-your-own-reality legacy of the Enlightenment superseded its more sober, rational, and empirical parts. We gave ourselves over to all manner of crackpot ideas and make-believe lifestyles designed to console or thrill or terrify us. In *Fantasyland*, Andersen brilliantly connects the dots that define this condition, portrays its scale and scope, and offers a fresh, bracing explanation of how our American journey has deposited us here. *Fantasyland* could not appear at a more perfect moment. If you want to understand the politics and culture of twenty-first-century America, if you want to know how the lines between reality and illusion have become dangerously blurred, you must read this book. “This is an important book—the indispensable book—for understanding America in the age of Trump. It's an eye-opening history filled with brilliant insights, a saga of how we were always susceptible to fantasy, from the Puritan fanatics to the talk-radio and Internet wackos who mix show business, hucksterism, and conspiracy theories.”—Walter Isaacson

Book Information

File Size: 1172 KB

Print Length: 481 pages

Publisher: Random House (September 5, 2017)

Publication Date: September 5, 2017

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B004J4WNJE

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #17,272 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #8

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Business & Money > Economics > Economic History #10

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Customer Reviews

Whoa! What a romp through American history this book is. The author begins in 1517 with Martin Luther's 95 theses and brings the reader through to the Trump era, persuasively arguing that Americans have a unique susceptibility to the fanciful and the false. In that vein, he dubs the United States "Fantasyland." Our early settlers were both looking for elusive but alluring gold and riches, and for the freedom to believe in religious doctrines that could seem fantastical myths. "The first English-speaking Americans tended to be the more wide-eyed and desperately wishful," he writes. And from that state of being, he says, springs our national character as true believers in the false, bizarre and fanciful. Seemingly every wacky episode in American history is included in Mr. Andersen's book. You'll find the the Salem witch hunts of old, and the modern witch hunts accusing day care workers of ritual Satanic child abuse. Explorers looking for gold, and modern investors falling for get-rich schemes are in here. Gun rights advocates who fantasize about everyday citizens blowing criminals and terrorists to kingdom-come get a chapter. The beliefs of religious systems are a constant underlying theme of the book, and politicians and their antics are fully examined under the author's microscope. "Squishies, cynics and believers," the author calls us. For the most part, the

author takes a neutral tone as he examines his fellow Americans (although his disdain for people of faith becomes tiresome). But toward the end of the book, he starts to insert himself into the narrative. Bringing up Jodi Dean, a political scientist and professor at Hobart and William Smith, he calls out her "enthusiasm for untruths and her contempt for reason." "Dean celebrates practically every attitude and approach that appalls me," he writes. From then on, I noticed more of a judgmental attitude on the part of Mr. Andersen. I'm fine with him getting all judgy; it's just something I noticed. And I fully agree with his observation -- by examining the adult population that is besotted by Disney World -- that American adults have become increasingly infantilized, with their penchant for Halloween dress-up and their preference for created worlds rather than the real thing. (My spouse and I once took family members to England, and as we walked the streets of Castle Combe, surrounded on all sides by ancient, thatched-roof cottages, half-timbered houses and pretty English gardens, they exclaimed, "It's just like Epcot!" Sigh.) In structure, the book is like 46 condensed theses strung together into book form. That's not a bad thing. It makes it easy to read and to consider the thoughts of each brief chapter. And, fortunately, the author is a much breezier writer than your standard issue academic. His prose is direct and easy to read, and he quotes other writers, philosophers, theologians and politicians extensively, which brings a breadth to his narrative that I appreciated. So, my fellow Americans, dig in and enjoy your whirlwind tour through Fantasyland!

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed reading a book as much as this one. I learned something new on almost every page, and the book is full of brief references to things that sent me off to do a bit more research (did you know that Harvard has a program in placebo studies? headed by a director with a B.A. degree). Anderson starts with the earliest American colonists and takes us up to the present day. We hear about the goofy religions (he's not afraid to name names, and some devotees of these probably won't be happy), and centuries of fads and fallacies. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is showing how the same impulse ("find your own truth, don't trust anybody else") applied not just to the hippies but ended up giving rise to post-modern academic relativism of the "truth doesn't matter" school. And eventually to the deniers of climate change and evolution. Why is it that a third of Americans are absolutely sure that the earth is only 6000 years old, a view that is pretty much dead in all other developed countries? The author's explanation makes a lot of sense. And the book describes how we ended up today living in a combination of Disneyland and professional wrestling. An important book that goes a long way to explaining what's going on in America today.

“Why are we so peculiar?” is the question Andersen tackles in this occasionally (though righteously) intemperate but always lively (and well researched) book on American exceptionalism and the perilous path it has now led us to. Fantasyland is an appropriate title for the book, which is about how we have lost whatever hold on factuality we ever had. The book is a running argument against the growing resistance to factuality and moderation in our nation of supposedly sane and reasonable human beings. Andersen doesn’t think this is new to us. He argues that our five-hundred-year history points in one direction: time after time, enthusiasm and hope win out over facticity and reason. A good place to begin is the footnotes. Often humorous, always trenchant, they can be found scattered across the bottoms of the pages, not in a separate, thus seldom read section in the back of the book. They’re a kick. Some are factual – he cites surveys, authors. The others form a running commentary around and alongside the themes discussed in the text. Here’s one, at the bottom of page 283, in a chapter headed “America Versus the Godless World: Why Are We So Exceptional?” In its entirety, the footnote reads:

“Marx famously called religion the opium of the people, and when Lenin founded the Soviet Union, he agreed, saying it was used for the stupefaction of the working class. But neither man had ever been to the United States, to see that for Americans it was as much or more a stimulant and hallucinogen than a stupefying opiate. Here’s a second footnote, which I find particularly chilling:

“Hitler is a fool,” Spengler said in 1932, then voted for him for president anyway, because he thought that only strong leaders on the model of the Caesars might save the West from further decline. Nuff said. This is not a book meant to bash one party or the other. (Andersen is disenchanted with both.) But for obvious reasons, Andersen is harsh on Republicans, whom he sees as less likely to let facts cloud their already arrived at judgments. What do we make of the fact that in a 2013 Public Policy Polling survey 34% of the respondents who voted Republican believed that “a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government”? Or where only eight of the 278 Republicans serving in Congress in 2014 were willing to acknowledge that global warming is real? (By contrast, only 17% of Americans who don’t call themselves Republicans believed that global warming was a myth.)

“The problem,” says political analyst Josh Barro, “is that Republicans have purposefully torn down the validating institutions. They

have convinced voters that the media cannot be trusted; they have gotten them to ignore inconvenient facts about policy, and they have abolished standards of discourse. When smoking came under attack in the 60s, the tobacco companies used doubt of opinion and sentiment over fact as their most effective defense against doing something. Andersen argues things still work that way in the corridors of power and most Americans have been convinced there's nothing wrong. But as Andersen points out, there is a problem in thinking like that. It's delusional. The problems we face today don't go away. They just grow. A book like this, no matter how good it is, and this one is quite good, will only appeal to readers with a prior leaning toward rationality. Those who could most benefit from reading it either won't, or if they do read it, they'll attack. Well, why shouldn't they? If there's anything we've learned from recent, it's that facts don't count for much in our present policy environment. Only opinions count. Feelings rule.

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