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BOOKSHELF

'Useful Delusions' Review: The Liar in the Mirror

We might not like the idea that we lie to ourselves every day. But our penchant for self-deception may have hidden benefits.

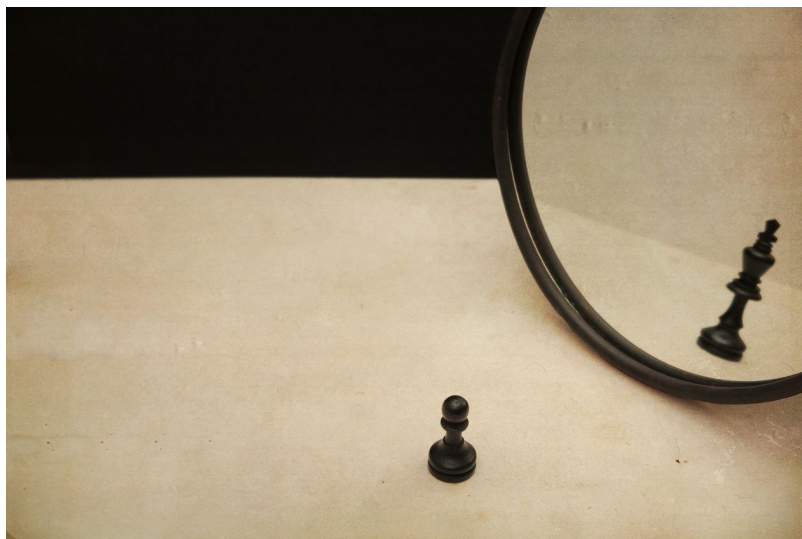


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By Matthew Hutson

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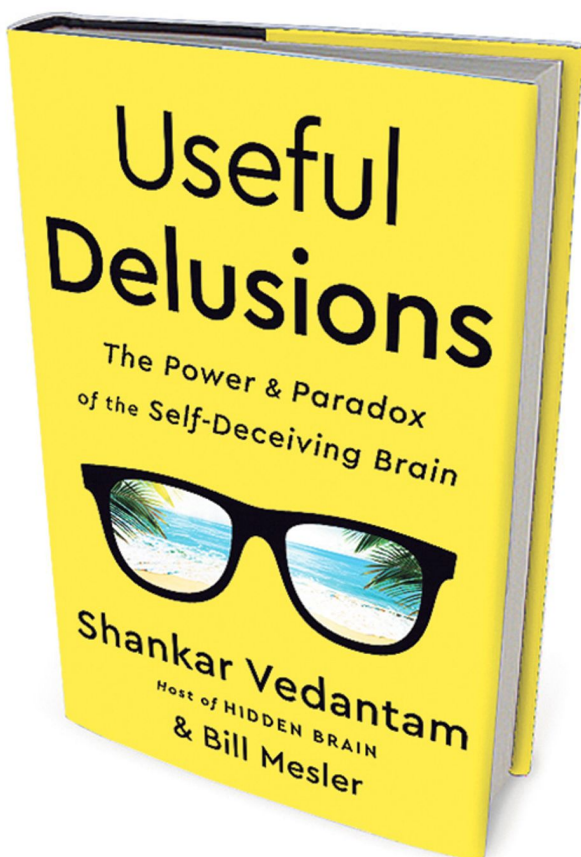


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Last December, PolitiFact called coronavirus denial the “lie of the year.” Arguably, it’s a lie many people told themselves—out of fear, convenience, ideology, economic interest or group loyalty. Such self-deception has cost many lives. And it sets a contrastive backdrop for “Useful Delusions,” a lively and digestible book from Shankar Vedantam, host of NPR’s “The Hidden Brain,” and science writer Bill Mesler on the benefits of lying to yourself.

Conventional wisdom has accepted the ubiquity of self-deception at least since Freud popularized the notion of repression. Cognitive psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman and Dan Ariely have probed the phenomenon in bestselling books. Some scholars believe our biases and delusions are mere side effects of helpful heuristics, nuisance fines for mental expediency. But what if they have value in themselves?



USEFUL DELUSIONS

By Shankar Vedantam and Bill Mesler
(Norton, 264 pages, \$27.95)

In a single sentence tucked away in the foreword to Richard Dawkins's 1976 book "The Selfish Gene," the evolutionary theorist Robert Trivers offered a powerful idea: We've evolved to fool ourselves the better to keep "the subtle signs of self knowledge" from undermining our tall tales with tells. Messrs. Vedantam and Mesler mention the idea but don't dwell on evolutionary mechanisms (while insisting that they're there), focusing instead on effects.

Self-deception presents itself benignly in our casual interactions. We lie several times per day, or hour, depending on who's counting. Little lies, about how interested we are in what you just said about your knitting. Do recipients question them? No, they let that oil drip

into the fearsome gears of conversation. We gladly take politeness at face value, for our own good. One study found that receiving rude remarks decreased participants' creativity and generosity. The book cites Barack Obama's "Anger Translator," played by the comedian Keegan-Michael Key, who frankly articulated Mr. Obama's subtext. It's not that we can't handle the truth. We'd just rather not.

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PREVIEW



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Overconfidence, an evasion of reality distributed unequally among us, can lead to hubristic mistakes, but it can also do good. In one study, AIDS patients with unmoored optimism about their prognoses survived longer. Spells that supposedly imbue bulletproof protection have helped scrappy battalions stand up to larger armies.

Our willingness to participate in fictions makes storytelling a particularly powerful force. Messrs. Vedantam and Mesler suggest novels require a bit of belief to keep us enthralled, and advertising turns on our buying into brand narratives. Golfers performed better when told they had Nike clubs. More important, group cohesion flows from investment in origin stories, a belief that something unseen ties us together. Ceremonies and other rituals can make these tales visceral, and groups from college fraternities to nations—motley populations otherwise defined by little more than lines on a map—rely on fake-it-till-you-make-it solidarity to do things like land on the moon. Religions trade in the power of stories too: Evidence suggests fear of angry gods bootstrapped altruism toward strangers until we could put the modern state in place. Such suspensions of skepticism, the authors write, “are responsible for creating some of the crowning glories of human civilization.”

And what about love? What Messrs. Vedantam and Mesler mean when they talk about love is, you guessed it, self-deception. Don't blame science writers for this romantic dose of realism; word is long out. Take it from Fleetwood Mac: “Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies.” (Or George Bernard Shaw, with a quote the authors would appreciate: “Love is a

gross exaggeration of the difference between one person and everybody else.”) One study found that the more participants valued a given trait, the more they overestimated its quantity in their partners—and in turn the happier they were.

The book's centerpiece describes the Church of Love, the concoction of a conman named Donald Lowry, who from 1965 to 1987 mailed love letters from made-up women to thousands of men and extracted millions of dollars from them. Remarkably, in Lowry's trial, many marks came to his defense. His attorney likened him to Santa Claus, a fiction children happily entertain. Rather than scorning the gullibility of the men, the authors offer compassion. “Advocating fearless rationality—an end to myth-making and myth-believing—is not just about being smart,” they write. “It is a matter of privilege.” Sometimes a story's all you've got.

At Lowry's trial, some victims said they still believed in their epistolary escorts, against all evidence. Others claimed they'd known of the ruse from day one. That both behaviors plausibly count as self-deception testifies to the slipperiness of the concept. When adhering to a superstition or falling for a placebo, who is fooling whom? I would love to have seen Messrs. Vedantam and Mesler attend to the mystery.

The last words of the last chapter constitute a question: “When should we fight self-deception, and when—and how much—should we embrace it?” Seems like something worth addressing earlier. When does believing service workers' smiles make us overlook the worker? When does forgetting lovers' flaws trap us in cycles of abuse? When do narratives sell harmful products and foster mob mentalities? Another question worth asking: If self-deception is (sometimes) so good—and the authors make a convincing case—where can I get some? (Rituals might be one answer.) In the end, the book's merits lie not in the depth of its analysis but in its breadth of synthesis and quotable lucidity.

Perhaps the book's most important point advises how to combat destructive delusions. We should ask, “What underlying needs does it address? Are there other ways to address those needs?” Research elsewhere reports that ostracism doesn't fight conspiracy theories, but enhances them. So your friends who seem to believe that vaccines contain microchips? Maybe they just need a hug.

Mr. Hutson is the author of “The 7 Laws of Magical Thinking: How Irrational Beliefs Keep Us Happy, Healthy, and Sane.”

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