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The Panic Virus: A True Story Of Medicine, Science, And Fear

"Parents who want to play it safe, but are not altogether sure how, should turn with relief to this reasoned, logical and comprehensive analysis of the facts."

—ABIGAIL ZUGER, M.D., *The New York Times*

Seth Mnookin

THE PANIC VIRUS

The True Story Behind the
Vaccine-Autism Controversy

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR



Synopsis

WHO DECIDES WHICH FACTS ARE TRUE? In 1998 Andrew Wakefield, a British gastroenterologist with a history of self-promotion, published a paper with a shocking allegation: the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine might cause autism. The media seized hold of the story and, in the process, helped to launch one of the most devastating health scares ever. In the years to come Wakefield would be revealed as a profiteer in league with class-action lawyers, and he would eventually lose his medical license. Meanwhile one study after another failed to find any link between childhood vaccines and autism. Yet the myth that vaccines somehow cause developmental disorders lives on. Despite the lack of corroborating evidence, it has been popularized by media personalities such as Oprah Winfrey and Jenny McCarthy and legitimized by journalists who claim that they are just being fair to “both sides” of an issue about which there is little debate. Meanwhile millions of dollars have been diverted from potential breakthroughs in autism research, families have spent their savings on ineffective “miracle cures,” and declining vaccination rates have led to outbreaks of deadly illnesses like Hib, measles, and whooping cough. Most tragic of all is the increasing number of children dying from vaccine-preventable diseases. In *The Panic Virus* Seth Mnookin draws on interviews with parents, public-health advocates, scientists, and anti-vaccine activists to tackle a fundamental question: How do we decide what the truth is? The fascinating answer helps explain everything from the persistence of conspiracy theories about 9/11 to the appeal of talk-show hosts who demand that President Obama “prove” he was born in America. *The Panic Virus* is a riveting and sometimes heart-breaking medical detective story that explores the limits of rational thought. It is the ultimate cautionary tale for our time.

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Customer Reviews

As I began reading, I was absolutely captivated by the introduction. It speaks about a mother who chose not to vaccinate her child, and the consequences of this choice. As a parent, I could relate to her situation of feeling helpless to do anything as she sat with her child in the hospital. I like how the author began the story, and then split into giving information about anti-vaccine activists movements. I like how he spoke about how the decision was more emotion based, the logically based on facts in Science. The introduction really pulled me into the book, and I was eager to continue reading. The Part One, was the easiest section to follow which went over the fast history of several disease's that there are vaccination's for now. Part 2 & 3, were a little bit harder for me to keep up with and read. The discussion was mainly over the mercury in vaccines, and Autism. The biggest part of the book was whether or not vaccines cause Autism. The author clearly shows that there is no Scientific evidence that shows that Autism is linked to children getting vaccines. I really liked the way the author showed both sides of the issues thoroughly, and not just his perspective. I really enjoyed learning about the histories and learned a lot of information that I didn't know. The most profound thing I noticed is how one person can seriously affect the public a whole, whether or not there theories are true. Overall, I think it was a really good book, i'm really glad that I chose this book.

Mnookin's book provides a comprehensive look at the history of public vaccination campaigns in the US and abroad. His examination starts as far back as smallpox and moves into other more recent vaccines such as MMR and DPT. The book gives the reader some insight into how vaccine programs were mishandled in the past, leading to public outcry over the safety of the vaccines. It then connects these public oppositions to the greater public suspicion regarding the overall intention of government vaccine programs. Overall this book is very informative and even humorous at times.

Mnookin presents both sides of the vaccination spectrum- those who are completely opposed and those who wholeheartedly support. He does a great job of explaining how certain groups of individuals could ignore current scientific data on vaccines in favor of listening to fringe doctors who appeal to their emotions. Autism research is discussed in great detail and there are several moving stories and families affected first hand by autism. I found Panic Virus to be very timely considering the news coverage given to relentless anti-vaccine groups in the U.S. For someone like myself who finds it difficult to deny scientific evidence, the book gave me insight into the tactics of anti-vaccine groups. I can now see how a parent desperately searching for answers as to how their child became suddenly autistic.

I read this book based on the recommendation of my sister who often finds very interesting non-fiction books. The book is about the anti-vaccine movement in the US and across the developed world. I knew of this movement, and of the attempt to link vaccines to other types of developmental illnesses - especially autism - and was often bewildered by the phenomenon. Mnookin (I think it's pronounced 'nook-in') starts by going back in history to one of the most devastating of infectious diseases: small pox. He then goes on to discuss the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the polio scare of the 1940s and 1950s and the race to develop a vaccine. Then there is the swine flu scare of 1976. What's most interesting about the history of immunization is that with each great breakthrough there is an accompanying wave of anti-immunization panic despite the mountains of evidence regarding the overall safety and efficacy of vaccines. In the 1980s and 1990s with a rise in autism many parents were desperate for answers as to why their children were suffering from such debilitating illness. Some physicians theorized that the battery of vaccines that children receive in their first two years might be responsible and the modern-day anti-vaccine industry was born. While Mnookin is far from unsympathetic to the suffering of parents and children with developmental and autism spectrum disorders, he does not hide the fact that he believes the harm of not vaccinating children (the loss of 'herd immunity') far outweighs the alleged risks. Mnookin also tries to explain in psychological and sociological terms the phenomenon for the attempt to link vaccines to the rise in developmental and autism spectrum disorders. He is unable to hide his contempt for the medical professionals who help to stoke the fears of parents, especially British doctor Andrew Wakefield. He also heaps plenty of scorn on Jennie McCarthy who uses her celebrity despite any training or expertise whatsoever to advance theories with no scientific basis whatsoever.

Seth Mnookin has produced a point by point refutation of the popular vaccine-autism link and done a good job of it. He is a bit of a pill about it, however. It is clear that the anti vaccine crusaders have gotten under his skin. Agree that there are many charlatans and fundamentalist irrational people involved, even excitable, unpleasant folks who leave death threats on answering machines. I'd still rather read the story of the science of vaccines without the overlay of hysteria. If you are a parent questioning the wisdom of vaccines, this is essential reading. As childhood diseases that were unknown for years come roaring back because of failure to vaccinate, it is essential to act with facts, not out of hysterical, unfounded fear.

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