

BAD SCIENCE BEN GOLDACRE

Fourth Estate Ltd, 2008
PB, 252 pages, £12.99,
978-0007240197



I learned a new word today:

Polemic: 'The art or practice of aggressive debate, attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another'.

This is the best way to describe Goldacre's work most recently brought together in the book *Bad Science*. According to Sir Iain Chalmers, quoted on the cover, it arms readers with 'basic scientific principles to help everyone become a more effective bullshit detector'. Right on.

As a popular science text it is a breath of fresh, objective air written with style. Starting with cosmetics and the 'detox' industry, he then moves onto easy targets like Gillian McKeith. He tells a beautifully ironic anecdote about how he bought the same dubious doctorate as McKeith for his dead cat Hettie.

For those not familiar with Goldacre, he is a clinical fellow in psychiatry in London. He writes the column 'Bad Science' in the Guardian. He complements this work with his website, <http://www.badsience.net>, dedicated to his mission: the fight against pseudoscience. As the book progresses, the science becomes more complex, and the examples become more serious. He covers the more chilling topical medical and educational controversies of recent times. The MMR scandal, hysteria over MRSA, 'Brain Gym®'. He covers study structure, bias, cherry-picking; the list is comprehensive, if a little chaotic. He never claims to be an authority on the issues he examines; instead, he critically appraises

the evidence behind statements and persistently challenges incorrect information — an honourable attribute in a psychiatrist. He speculates on the reasons behind our society's current preoccupation with health, and the trend towards alternative therapies. His musings regarding alternative therapies are amusing but also direct our attention to services that need improvement. Waiting lists and the narrow biomedical approach discouraged in medical education can make patients dissatisfied leading them to seek alternatives.

An angry polemical approach is often required to make positive changes in a world where journalists are obsessed with quick fixes and miracle cures. However, every sentient being has the capacity for sensible thought if approached in the right way. Ranting is what blogs are made for and I wonder whether the tetchy tone of the book will alienate the people for whom it could be most useful. Regardless, I will be sure to recommend this book to friends, family, and patients as well as suggesting people keep badsience.net on their favourites. The only other criticism is that it could do with an index to find the statistics section when required. (This will be very useful for the AKT, those fellow trainees out there.)

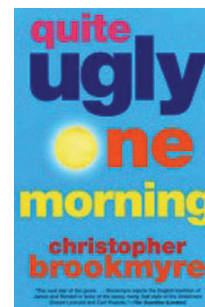
As a young woman this book has empowered me to remain impartial to the bewildering array of quick fixes advertised by the cosmetic industry. As a young doctor the book has reinforced my distrust of drug reps. It has given me refreshed confidence to challenge their claims, and refined my critical appraisal skills. Most importantly, it has given me accessible evidence-based language to help me enlighten my patients, offering a hand of guidance in a world full of confusing promises. For me, this is part of what being a good GP is all about.

Danielle Peet

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QUITE UGLY ONE MORNING CHRISTOPHER BROOKMYRE

Abacus, 1998
PB, 320 pages, £7.99,
978-0349108858



I found this book in the League of Friends coffee shop. The garish cover and even more garish title initially put me off. I am glad that I persevered; this is simply a brilliant book. In short, it is a novel about murder, greed and ... doctors. It is set in Scotland, specifically Midlothian, and sparkles with dark Caledonian wit. The characters are well-drawn and the story crackles along at a breathless pace, the dialogue is first rate. The language is often 'strong' and the action is often gruesome; however, it is all very much part of the plot and sets the tone of the whole book.

Christopher Brookmyre was a journalist. He has a huge insight into the NHS of Gordon Brown and the world of the junior doctor in the 90s. Where he got it from God only knows, but he draws a very real picture of the NHS in the throes of covert privatisation and the lengths that managers will go to achieve it. The picture the author draws is realistic enough to be frankly disturbing and highly plausible.

This book will not be to everyone's taste. Orthopaedic surgeons should approach with caution. It is possible that some may find offence in the language and gory scenes. Perhaps it sags a bit in the middle and maybe it gets a bit carried away by its own exuberance, but the book as a whole is hard to put down. Every one of the characters is a person that I would like to meet again (on paper that is!) and get to know better, no small praise. Read it and pass it on. Everyone who cares for the NHS needs to read it.

Neil A Hedger

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