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The Panic Virus: The True Story Behind the Vaccine-Autism Controversy

Seth Mnookin

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"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

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Seth Mnookin : The Panic Virus: The True Story Behind the Vaccine-Autism Controversy before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Panic Virus: The True Story Behind the Vaccine-Autism Controversy:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. I like how the author began the story By kelly 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.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Great book/controversial topic

By Micro240Mnookin'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.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Trying to explain the hysteria around vaccines

By Alain C. DewittI 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.

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.

From *Bookmarks Magazine* It might be possible to view Mnookins book as the final nail in the coffin for the contemporary antivaccine movement, given its recent scientific and legal setbacks. But Mnookins own conclusions would likely deny this; as several reviewers approvingly observed, *The Panic Virus* is just as much about how todays society deals with information overload as it is about how it confronts disease. Many reviews echoed Mnookins condemnation of the American media for allowing false antivaccine findings to flower. Yet they also praised him for avoiding heavy-handedness and unnecessary jargon, even if the book breaks little new ground in the vaccine debate. Critics strongly recommended the book to anyone interested in medicine and public health, as well as to parents who may fear that booster shot.

From *Booklist* Over the last three decades, the incidence of autism spectrum disorder, better known simply as autism, has risen dramatically in the U.S., from approximately 1 in 1,000 children to 1 in 110, arousing widespread concern among parents and psychiatrists alike. A few of the many potential possible culprits scientists have targeted are faulty genes and thimerosal, a mercury-laced preservative in vaccines. Former *Newsweek* senior journalist Mnookin focuses his masterful investigative skills primarily on the latter, highly controversial possibility, illustrating how the current, misguided anti-vaccine movement can be blamed almost equally on panic-driven parents, sensation-hungry media, and PR-challenged health authorities. In making his case, Mnookin covers a wide swathe of medical history, from polio outbreaks to the scare tactics of fringe British researcher Andrew Wakefield, who first forged the dubious vaccine-autism link. While Mnookin dismantles this link convincingly, his argument that multivaccine cocktails have been proven safe is ultimately less persuasive. Still, hes an able, engaging wordsmith, and this cautionary tale about misinformed medical alarmism is thoroughly compelling. --Carl Hays

Seth Mnookins *The Panic Virus* is a lesson how fear hijacks reason and emotion trumps logic. . . . A brilliant piece of reportage and science writing." (Michael Shermer *The Wall Street Journal*) "Mnookin deftly describes how the Internet has fostered new communities of people fiercely gathered around their own versions of truth. . . . Loaded with interesting anecdotes and historical tidbits, *The Panic Virus* is a fascinating read. The scope of the book is often impressive." (Susannah Nesmith *The Miami Herald*) "The *Panic Virus* is sure to attract attention. . . . Mnookin's book is an unsparing brief against the vaccine skeptics. But in a larger sense, this volume is less about the insurrection against inoculations than it is about the democratization of information. . . . Less about the contagion of ideas than about the contagion of misinformation and mistrust that metastasizes in the new technology." (David M. Shribman *The Boston Globe*) A must-read for parents and parents-to-be. (Trine Tsouderos *Chicago Tribune*) The definitive, infuriating history of the myth that vaccines cause autism. (Bill Wasik *The New York Observer*)