

Book Review

Hoax Springs Eternal: The Psychology of Cognitive Deception, by Peter Hancock, Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 2015, pp. 254, £20.99, Paperback (ISBN 978-1-107-41768-7)

What struck me first with this book was the clever titular pun, but what lured me into its pages were the words *Cognitive Deception*. They have a certain rhythm with the “shun” owning an iambic quality that feels rather like a palate cleanser. Reading this book, I was perpetually refreshing my mouth after consuming a glut of syllables.

Hoax Springs Eternal is all about understanding the *sleights of mind* woven into the fabric of our world, and the key aspects of our cognition that induce us into accepting them. The ideas are strategically sewn throughout the book around a unified theoretical framework of cognitive deception. Hancock explains how such deceptions are an intrinsic part of the *human behavioral repertoire* and how we as receptacles and suggestible creatures are wired up to (dis)believe them. The subject matter of this book is not only relevant for those who identify as “ergonomists,” but for people of any disciplinary persuasion. Flicking through the pages may have the effect of deterring would be readers though, and I make specific reference to the connective chapters; you may see Hancock’s spiral models of human information processing and assume the book to be heavy, overly complicated, or filled with *gobbledygook* not worth your time, but that would be inaccurate—and foolish. You see, the book provides historic and concrete artefacts (or *McGuffins* if you will) as exemplars for cognitive deception in a way that eases the reader into its technical content. The whole thing is a sort of *Da Vinci Code*-like

experience with the artefacts themselves existing as part of a “shared Hancock universe.”

Hancock himself slips effortlessly into role of scientist-come-historian-turned-sleuth, with the written word leaping of the page in his own crisp and inimitable style. So, to the artefacts, we have what are referred to in rather poetic and heptametric enjambment as *the Cross, the Plate, and the Stone, the Shroud, the Map and the Bone*. In the sequence of the book they are:

1. The Cross of King Arthur;
2. Drake’s Plate of Brass;
3. The Kensington Rune Stone;
4. The Vinland Map;
5. Piltdown Man; and
6. The Shroud of Turin.

Quite a line up. I think there are few methods for reading the book, depending on your predilections. The first is that you will devour it, somewhat greedily. No sooner have you completed one artefact and reached Hancock’s own verdict will you be pining for the next in line. I wouldn’t be surprised if you binged the whole thing over a weekend. The second method is to savor it; like a connoisseur of fine wine, you will “chew” on each page as if it’s a piece of bread, reading sections over and over, letting it sink in slowly, ever aware that the journey will end. And then like me you may fall somewhere in between. I devoured the first two hoaxes, reached the Stone and then switched pace, thinking “oh my! there are only three more to go!”

Hancock indicates that you can read the book by dipping in and out of the different chapters and the cases for each artefact. I wouldn’t advise this for first time readers. I think you’ll get most out of it by reading in the order presented—there’s a reason for it being this way, a symbiosis between the ordering of the artefacts and overarching narrative of Hancock’s

theoretical framework, which culminates with the one that every reader will have heard of. As I was reading it, I kept thinking, “what’s his verdict on the Shroud, what’s his verdict on the Shroud?” I had to resist the temptation of zipping forward to that chapter many times, eager to know yet fearful of encountering spoilers. Because of what the Shroud is purported to represent, the build-up felt quite climactic and by the time I reached the end of this particular artefact, I learned two things. First, my knowledge of the Shroud going into the book was less than rudimentary—laughable really. I learned there was so much more to it than the prospective photograph of Christ and I was more intrigued by the anatomy of the narrative surrounding it over whether or not it was a hoax. Second, reading to the end of the Shroud felt anticlimactic, and it dawned on me that I had been more invested in the forgoing hoaxes. I was particularly fond of the Plate, with the Map a close second; those chapters were read a few times over, especially the Plate. There’s a fabulous photograph in the book of Hancock himself standing next to it, with an expression highly suggestive of the proverbial cat that got the cream.

The cover design of the book is a master stroke. I thought it was a little tacky and a bit of an eyesore at first—regular Times New Roman printed onto an unremarkable, decidedly bland stone-effect background with a glossy finish. But part-way through the book it took on new meaning and became part of the experience. Just looking at the marbling effect started to evoke a certain feeling, a kind of meta-awareness of what it was that I was reading and learning about. At times it seemed an altar, and at others, the slab of a mausoleum. Like the eponymous pun, it was a clever simulation of something familiar and brought me closer to the cases.

A word of warning—do ensure you use a couple of bookmarks as you read, one for the current page and another for the references at the end of your chapter. The references are more endnotes but this isn’t the sort of text where you ignore them or take them for granted—there’s a

wealth of information to be had there—and some deliciously wry humour. On that note, the book is hilarious in places and I laughed out loud many times. I mean, in the glossary we have the following disambiguation: *Cock a snook – A derisive gesture accomplished by bringing your open hand up to your face and touching your thumb to your nose.* Need I say more?!

To conclude then, the book worked for me in that I thought about the cognitive deceptions I'd encountered in my own life, and continued thinking about them long after it was finished. I reflected on its contemporary relevance to the post-truth/"fake news" era we live in, and to other myth structures like a certain popular portmanteau that's currently doing the global rounds, causing consternation within the "United" Kingdom and the European Union. Hoax does spring eternal. The funny thing is that, in addition to the learning of cognitive deception, I remembered a lot of things about the individual artefacts themselves. I've done a few mental audits of what I could recall since finishing the book and realised that I've retained much of the detail—the timelines, the melodrama, even the obscure names of some protagonists and hoaxers. Such is the story telling.

The amount of effort and research taken to produce this book is dizzying, my palate is well and truly cleansed, but I am left wanting to consume more—wanting more and more Hancockian analyses and verdicts. The book is so much more than a scientific Fedora-fueled foray into intriguing artefacts. It is a gift of knowledge and long-bottled passion, something everyone should read for work or for pleasure, and a text that would not be out of place next to other great tomes on your bookshelf.

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