

Annals of Gullibility

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Why We Get Duped and How to Avoid It

STEPHEN GREENSPAN

With Foreword by *Donald S. Connery*

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This book is dedicated to Richard Lapointe, an innocent man whose gullibility in believing lies told by his interrogators landed him in prison for life and started me on my journey to try and understand the phenomenon of gullibility. Like all of Richard's many friends, I pray that I will live long enough to see this nonviolent but too-trusting man regain his freedom.

Contents

Dedication	v
Foreword by <i>Donald S. Connery</i>	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Chapter 1 ∞ Introduction	1
Overview of the Book	1
Why a Book on Gullibility?	1
What is Gullibility?	2
What are the Causes of Gullibility?	3
Gullibility as a form of “Foolish Action”	5
Developmental Factors in Gullibility and its Diminution	6
Is Gullibility Unique to Humans?	9
Chapter 2 ∞ Gullibility in Literature and Folktales	13
Pinocchio was One Gullible Puppet	13
Dangerous Gullibility: Little Red Riding Hood and the Pied Piper	16
The Emperor’s New Clothes and the Power of Group Modeling	17
Mark Twain, Chronicler of a Credulous Age	20
Was Gulliver Gullible?	22
Gullibility as a Theme for Herman Melville	25
Othello and Other Shakespearean Dupes	27

Chapter 3	∞	Gullibility in Religion	29
		Samson and Other Bible Stories	29
		Belief in God and Supernatural Phenomena	32
		Satan as a Manipulator of the Gullible	35
		Believers in End-of-the World Predictions	38
		The Gullibility of Those Who Believe in Mediums	41
		Gullibility in Anti-Semitism	44
		Christian Science as a Magnet for Gullibles	47
Chapter 4	∞	Gullibility in War and Politics	51
		The Trojan Horse and Military Deception	51
		Groupthink in the Planning of the Vietnam War	54
		Gullibility in the Buildup to the Second Iraq War	56
		Gullibility on the Political Right	60
		Gullibility on the Political Left	63
		Many People who Accept Conspiracy Theories are Gullible	66
		Suicide Bombers are Super-Gullible	67
		Spin Doctoring and Believing Semi-Lies	70
Chapter 5	∞	Gullibility in Criminal Justice	73
		Gullibility among Murder Accomplices	73
		A Trial as a Test of a Jury's Gullibility	75
		Gullibility of Lawyers	78
		Gullibility Toward Crime Scare Stories	80
		Gullible Application of Redemptive and Mental Health Notions	83
		Gullibility in the Interrogation Situation	86
		Gullibility of Child Witnesses	89
Chapter 6	∞	Gullibility in Science and Academia	93
		The Sokal Hoax Exposed the Gullibility of Scholars	93
		Gullibility in the Art World	96
		Cold Fusion as an Example of Scientific Gullibility	98
		Academic Hiring Decisions	102
		Gullibility Among Psychotherapists and Their Clients	103
		Alternative Health Practices	106
		Rasputin and Facilitated Communication	109
Chapter 7	∞	Gullibility in Vulnerable Populations	113
		False Confessions of People with Brain Damage	113
		Social Vulnerability of Young People	116

Contents	ix
Frail Elderly and People with Alzheimer’s	119
People with Intellectual Disability	121
Gullible Crime Victims	123
Sexual Exploitation of People with Disabilities	124
Chapter 8 ~ Gullibility in Finance and Relationships	127
Choice of Entertainment and Vacation Purchases	127
Inheritance Scams	130
Tulipmania and other Investment Bubbles	133
Believing Rumors	135
People Interviewed by Journalists	138
Gullibility in Sexual Relationships	141
Falling for “April Fool” and other Practical Jokes	142
Believing Family Members	144
Chapter 9 ~ Questions About Gullibility	149
Is Gullibility a form of Stupidity?	149
How does Affect Contribute to Gullible Behavior?	151
Does Low Energy Contribute to Gullibility?	153
How does Self-Deception Affect Gullibility?	154
Should Gullible People be Blamed for Being Gullible?	156
Is Gullibility a Personality Trait?	158
Is Gullibility an Absence of Autonomy?	162
Is Gullibility Part of the Legal Definition of Incompetence?	164
Chapter 10 ~ Becoming Less Gullible	169
Make it a Point to Avoid Acting Impulsively	169
Engineer Situations that Reduce the Likelihood of Gullible Outcomes	170
Know One’s Limitations	171
Seek to become More Socially Intelligent	174
Develop a Repertoire of Disengagement Tactics	177
Help Young People to be Less Gullible	179
Cultivate Skepticism, but not Cynicism	181
Gullibility can Decrease as One Becomes Older and Wiser	182
References	187
Index	197

Foreword

by *Donald S. Connery*

Donald S. Connery, an author and former foreign correspondent for *Time* and *Life* magazines, is a long-time investigator of miscarriages of justice. His book, *Guilty Until Proven Innocent* described the conviction and rescue of a teenager, Peter Reilly, who was led by police to falsely believe he had killed his mother, while *Convicting the Innocent* told of a mentally disabled man, Richard Lapointe, still wrongly imprisoned for murder, who agreed with police that he must have committed the crime he couldn't remember. An advisor to Northeastern Law School's Center on Wrongful Conviction, Connery has been a leading advocate for mandatory recording of all interrogations.

Like a bunko artist, snake-oil salesman, or cult leader, I once gulled the gullible.

It was so easy. Perhaps because we are all too much inclined to believe what we read. Perhaps because World War Two was over and my fellow soldiers, eager to return to civilian life, were giddy and guileless as they headed home from the Pacific.

I was editor of the troopship newspaper. We were sailing from Tokyo to San Francisco. One day I reported that we would soon pass over the international dateline. Those troops wishing to see the fabled dateline in all its glory—a great, glowing, phosphorescent belt on the ocean bottom—should assemble at the stern at precisely 3 A.M. and stare into the sea.

The gathering of the gullible in the salty darkness was far greater than I anticipated. Hundreds of eyes searched the depths in vain. As disappointment turned to anger, I became The Man Most Likely to Be Thrown Overboard. How I managed to save myself, I know not, but I could have benefited by the knowledge provided by Stephen Greenspan in this remarkable book.

Instead of just pleading for mercy, I could have argued:

“Look, fellows, I’m not saying that gullibility is good, but it’s no disgrace. It only shows you’re human. Isn’t it better to be a hopeful, trusting person instead of a cynic who expects the worst in everybody? And isn’t life all about learning from experience? Actually, I think I did you a favor. You have learned the value of skepticism. From now on, remember the old saying: ‘Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.’”

What amazes me today, more than 60 years later, is that gullibility remains a subject set apart from normal conversation or serious examination. As the author says, it is “a very understudied phenomenon” despite the vital role it plays in human behavior. Is it just too embarrassing to mention?

Call it the part of our being that dares not speak its name.

Ask me about my bank account or my religious beliefs, if you must, but don’t make me reveal that I once lost big bucks falling for the pitch of a fleet-footed scam artist who claimed to have seats to a sold-out Broadway musical. Don’t remind me of the day in Bombay when I saw a street peddler selling Old Spice shaving lotion. Just what I need, I told myself. I discovered later that I had purchased an Old Spice throwaway recycled with ditch water.

Having read Professor Greenspan’s manuscript before publication, I now feel a lot less foolish about such jarring moments of innocence, naïveté, credulity and trust—or, more correctly—*gullibility*, which is not quite the same thing, as the author takes pains to inform us.

I now know that I am not alone. This book makes it clear that multitudes throughout history have been victimized by trusting the untrustworthy and believing the unbelievable. Great populations have succumbed to the wiles of charlatans. Hitler offers the worst-case scenario, bending the minds of Germany’s educated millions to his will. “Professor” Harold Hill of *The Music Man* represents the more common and less harmful rascals who charm us out of our socks.

As a young reporter covering Sen. Joe McCarthy, I had an up-close look at the great deceiver whose central role during the “Red scare” of the 1940s and 1950s puts his name on that noxious time in U.S. history.

One night in an American Legion hall in Appleton, Wisconsin (where the crowd roared as he began his speech with, “It’s good to be out of Washington and back in America!”), he claimed that his briefcase contained secret documents proving the disloyalty of dozens of State Department traitors who had “lost China” and were now scheming to deliver the nation to the Kremlin. Afterward, while admirers surrounded the senator, I sneaked a peek at the inside of his unlocked briefcase. It contained nothing but newspapers.

What amazes me is that no one before Steve Greenspan has so thoroughly and energetically opened the Pandora's Box of wonderments about a facet of the human personality that must first have been detected by a cave man con man. It appears to be true that, before this book, no substantial study of gullibility has appeared in the English language, and perhaps not in any language.

The answer may lie in the nature of the beast, making it slippery and mysterious, hard to nail down, even as it plays a significant role in our lives. Growing up, becoming truly adult, means putting aside our childish illusions—about Santa Claus and other fables—and taking care not to take things at face value. Yet we fail repeatedly to question our sources of information, we too often accept falsehoods as truths, and we take Google as gospel.

Gullibility is not generally seen as an affliction yet it can do us terrible harm: losing our life savings to a swindler, falling in love with a sweet-talking scoundrel, putting our health in the hands of a Dr. Feelgood. We are all at daily risk, although some of us far more than others, for reasons the author diligently explores.

It is no small achievement wrestling this subject to the ground because it encompasses so much as it serves as at least a partial explanation for real and fictional events of amazing global range and variety.

Indeed, what other topic encompasses—just for starters—Rasputin, Machiavelli, lobotomies, *Pinocchio*, UFOs, political spin doctors, the Trojan horse, “refrigerator mothers,” multiple personality disorder, William F. Buckley Jr. as a convict's dupe, the Dutch Tulip Bubble, and other all-time great scams, and the invisibility both of “The Emperor's New Clothes” and weapons of mass destruction as an excuse for invading Iraq?

(I choose not to offend the reader or devastate our vast advertising and public relations industries by mentioning gullible gulping on a massive scale—the billions of bottles of expensive water purchased by Americans who enjoy the best free water in the world.)

Professor Greenspan must have felt at times that he was wrestling with not just one octopus but also a whole family of octopi. Where in the world's literature is there not some occasion of gullibility? His reading has been prodigious. The voluminous references suggest an explorer reveling in his quest for revelations and finding, like King Midas, that everything he touches is gold.

At some point, the author surely realized that gullibility, as a subject, was so entertaining, despite the seriousness of it all, that the book he had in mind was in peril of being—perish the thought—readable! What would his fellow PhDs think?

I am reminded of my old professor (later ambassador), John Kenneth Galbraith, who was derided by fellow economists for writing books that dared to be popular as well as weighty. The reader should be warned that the foxy author evades such a fate by claiming that he is simply writing in a “semi-scholarly manner.”

As I see it, this is a ruse to give himself license to regale us with innumerable juicy stories about gullibility’s victims and victimizers while frequently confessing to the embarrassments of his own lifetime of insufficient skepticism. He feels free to venture into controversial areas, notably religion. Few things in these pages intrigue me more than his description of Jesus Christ, so often portrayed as dreamy and unworldly, as a figure of sharp intellect who was “nobody’s fool.”

For all the pleasures of these pages, the reader should know that the seed for the idea of this volume was planted during circumstances that demonstrate how a person’s gullibility can literally be a matter of life and death.

Before Steve moved to Colorado, the two of us in Connecticut were caught up in a valiant movement by ordinary (yet truly extraordinary) citizens seeking to expose and overturn a horrific miscarriage of justice. He tells here of the plight of the brain-damaged, mentally limited, family man wrongly convicted in 1992 of murdering his wife’s grandmother. State prosecutors came close to convincing the jury that he deserved the death penalty.

Lacking actual proof that he did the deed, the police had preyed on his vulnerability to suggestion. Nine hours of psychological battering produced a false confession. He lacked the ability to recognize the lies, ploys, and deceptions that detectives everywhere in America are routinely trained to use on suspects in the secrecy of high-pressure interrogation chambers.

Although his gullibility doomed the man to a life behind bars, where he remains today despite all rescue efforts, it is the gullibility of the cops, prosecutors, jurors, and judges—in this case and almost all false confession cases—that is even more striking. Despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary, they believe (or choose to believe) the old myth, convenient for closing cases, that innocent people, unless crazy or tortured, do not confess to crimes.

Thus was Steve, as a psychologist, propelled to probe deeply into the whole business of susceptibility to persuasion. For myself, as a journalist busy investigating our deeply flawed criminal justice system, the experience solidified my sense that far too little was known about why some people are not easily bamboozled and others seem to be sitting ducks for purveyors of baloney.

The findings of this book suggest that every field of endeavor, every profession, every set of human interactions, is replete with examples of people too willing to exploit the gullibility of others, and other people, even if aware of the value of exercising critical judgment, all too ready and even eager to be exploited.

In my own line of work, the picture is too painful to contemplate. A grizzled wire-service editor told me long ago to make sure of my facts. "If your mother tells you she loves you," he growled, "check it out!" Yet one of my childhood heroes, Lincoln Steffens, the great muckraker, was so bedazzled by the promises of the Soviet Union that he famously declared, in the face of rising evidence of vast communist cruelties, "I have seen the future, and it works!"

Even as I dedicated myself to avoiding such folly, I found that the flip side of serious journalism was a wild world of invention (think lurid tabloids sold in supermarkets) aimed at gulling credulous readers. The British "popular press" made it an art form long before I was born.

In 1959, as the New Delhi bureau chief for Time and Life magazines, I was one of a raucous bunch of competing correspondents waiting on India's northwestern border for the Dalai Lama to emerge from the mists of Tibet. Each of us wanted to be the first to greet the young "god-king" as he escaped the Chinese troops at his heels. Yet the Indian army forbade us from crossing the border by vehicle, elephant, rented aircraft or any other means.

That didn't stop London's multimillion circulation *Daily Mail* from splashing across its front page an utterly fictitious story by its intrepid byliner, Noel Barber, who claimed to have flown over the Dalai Lama's procession deep in Tibet. He told how he looked down on the saffron robes and burning incense of the brave Buddhists trudging toward the free world. Banging away at his typewriter in our tea plantation lodge, Barber knew that his editors knew that it was all make believe. But, as he told me without apology, "our readers must be served."

Nothing remotely so cynical would ever be contemplated by the editors of America's most respected newspapers. Nonetheless, such great dailies as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* have fallen victim in recent times to fake or colorfully embellished stories, including a Pulitzer prize-winning series of articles, by several of their star reporters. Some of the best editors in the world had allowed themselves to be suckered.

I tell myself: If this stuff happens in the field I know best, what must it be like in business, science, medicine, sports, the arts and everywhere else? Are we all living in a fool's paradise, being conned at every turn? Are some of us willingly

xvi

Foreword

gullible because it is delicious to imagine winning the lottery or greeting space aliens?

What I know for sure is that a deep look at this subject is long overdue. As encyclopedic as this work may seem, the author himself would say that it is by no means the last word on the subject. Okay, fine, but I can't imagine a better beginning.

—Kent, Connecticut,
July 2008

Acknowledgments

If I listed all of the people who have helped me throughout my career, including during my pursuit of the elusive construct of gullibility, I would need many pages. So I will here just limit myself to those who have directly assisted me with this manuscript. I wish, specifically, to express my deep appreciation to the following:

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