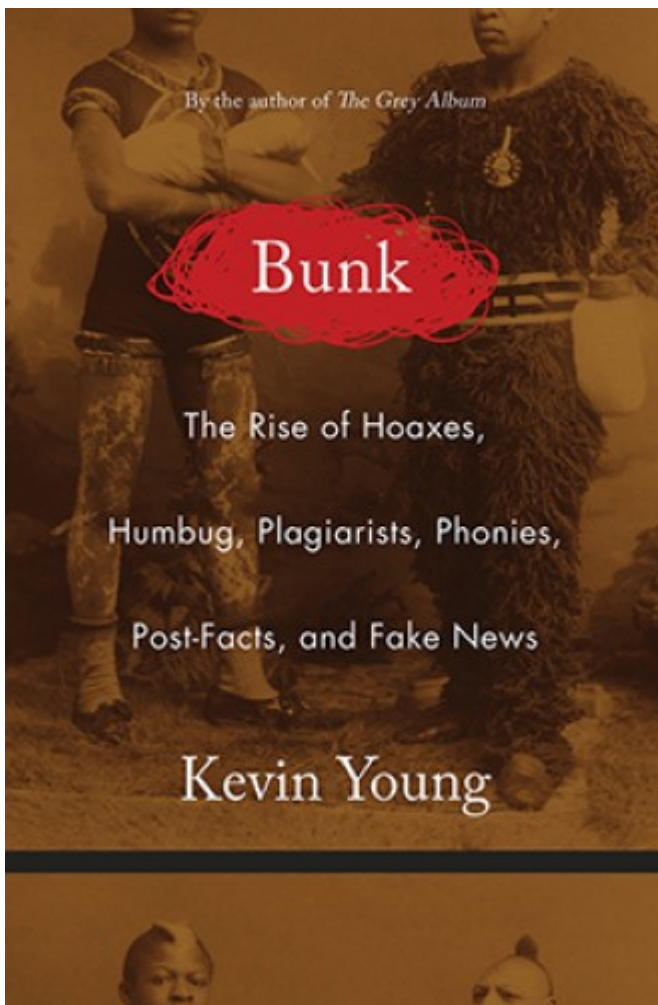


American lies and why we believe them

Kevin Young and Kurt Andersen each argue that fake news is nothing new.

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Bunk

The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News

By Kevin Young
Graywolf,

FANTASYLAND

How America
Went Haywire

A 500-YEAR HISTORY

KURT ANDERSEN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Fantasyland

How America Went Haywire— A 500-Year History

By Kurt Andersen
Random House

In January 2018, the *Washington Post* reported that President Trump had made 1,950 false or misleading claims during his first 348 days in office—an average of 5.6 per day. Trump's penchant for fabrication pushes into new territory—well beyond the measure of lying that even the most cynical among us have come to expect of politicians.

The president's disregard for facts is a key concern in two ambitious new books. Both Kevin Young and Kurt Andersen argue that Trump is the inevitable embodiment of Americans' long-standing indulgence in wishful thinking.

According to Young, poetry editor at the *New Yorker*, this wishful thinking is often rooted in ideas about race and the other. Young, director of Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, exposes the ugly tenacity of our stereotypes, fears, and biases. Hoaxes require not only a huckster but some willing suckers, too.

Young explores the relationships between hoax, huckster, and audience through an encyclopedic set of examples. *Bunk* opens with P. T. Barnum, whom Young said meant "to define humbug as an American idea and ideal." It continues with a litany of spirit photographs, freak shows, mesmerism, yellow journalism, fake journalism, forgeries, blood doping scandals, and plagiarism such that one is compelled to ask with Young: "Is there something especially American about the hoax?"

Unfortunately, Young doesn't really answer the question—at least, not directly. Young is a poet, and he often chooses wordplay over clarity. The book riffs on arguments more than it builds upon them, and when I reached the end I recalled the terse note one of my college professors made on a paper that I'd thought was brilliant: "Interesting idea. Needs better organization."

Nevertheless, Young's emphasis on the racial component of American hoaxes carries weight. "There is of course no larger mass hysteria in American history than the epidemic of racism." And his survey of hoaxes clearly illustrates the racial subtext of our current situation. "The hoax's haunting history of race was invoked by the likes of candidate Trump as a figure of horror: fake Indians, Mexican rapists, violent Negroes and their neighborhoods, invisible Asians."

In contrast, Andersen's book is such a tidy and fast-paced piece of revisionist history that it feels almost detached, despite the obvious fervor with which Andersen rails against the nation's seemingly irreversible tilt into relativism.

Andersen is a novelist and the host and cocreator of *Studio 360*, a weekly radio show about arts and culture. As he sees it, the main culprit behind our national delusion is not racism but the blend of individualism, belief, and practicality on which Americans pride ourselves. This attitude has fueled many of our greatest accomplishments, but it also distorts our thinking:

People tend to regard the Trump moment—this post-truth, alternative facts moment—as some inexplicable and crazy *new* American phenomenon. In fact, what’s happening is just the ultimate extrapolation and expression of attitudes and instincts that have made America exceptional for its entire history—and really, from its prehistory.

This prehistory, according to Andersen, can be traced back to the Reformation. When Martin Luther argued that clergymen had no special access to God’s truth, he established not only Protestantism but an emphasis on the power of belief that feeds directly into our current delusions. This “proto-American attitude” led millions of “ordinary people” to think they “had the right to decide what was true or untrue.” These Protestants believed that “passionate fantastical *belief* was the key to everything. The footings for Fantasyland had been cast.”

The early Protestants led to the Pilgrims, their voyages to America, and the rise of characters like Anne Hutchinson and George Whitefield whose passionate expression of belief made them leaders and celebrities. Their audiences wanted to believe as fervently as they did.

“I would give a hundred guineas,” said David Garrick, the most important English actor of the century, “if I could say ‘*Oh*’ like Mr. Whitefield.”

As Andersen continues forward through the centuries, he argues that the American desire to *feel* the truth has made the nation uniquely susceptible to the quackery behind miracle tonics, homeopathy, mesmerism, and phrenology. It led to the popularity of Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* show, the Chicago world’s fair, and Disneyland—all of which presented an idealized version of reality.

Problems arise when we give ourselves fully to our perceptions of reality—whether those perceptions are self-important or laden with paranoid beliefs about extraterrestrial abductions and global conspiracies. According to Andersen, the “Big Bang” for America’s tilt toward relativism came in the 1960s:

In America from the late 1960s on, equality came to mean not just that the *law* should treat everyone identically but that *your beliefs* about anything are equally as true as anyone else’s. As the principle of absolute tolerance became axiomatic in our culture and internalized as part of our

psychology—*What I believe is true because I want and feel it to be true*
—individualism turned into rampant solipsism.

These attitudes, Andersen notes, have been amplified by the recent proliferation of media channels, especially the Internet. Never before has it been so easy to find fiction masquerading as fact. And our desire to believe what suits us isn't restricted to either the politically right or left. Both sides embrace their own self-serving realities. For every gun fanatic on the right, he notes, there's a New Age spiritualist on the left who looks with disdain upon genetically modified foods, never mind the science.

Andersen notes that the national mood has swung many times from magical thinking to rationalism and back again. He worries that the pendulum has now swung too far toward relativism and there may be no going back to fact-based existence. Our "fantasy-industrial complex" might be too deeply ingrained to be uprooted, reinforced by the Internet, television, film, advertising, theme parks, themed conventions, and especially—as he sees it—Christianity.

Although Andersen directs his tirades primarily against Christian fundamentalists who want to read the Bible as a literal history book, he views all religious faith as perched on a very slippery slope. From any idea of a supernatural entity directing the world, Andersen suggests, it's a very short trip to the prosperity gospel and charismatics pretending to speak in tongues and cast out devils. And from there, evangelical Christians have to take only a short hop to believe that Trump somehow represents them and their values—despite all that he has said and done.

This portrayal of Christianity is the book's greatest weakness. Andersen does himself little service by blurring the lines between the different branches of Christianity. At times, he suggests there's a difference between the older, more established Protestant denominations and the newer charismatic branches, but instead of addressing this distinction to reveal the sort of rational thinking he would hope to see from people of faith, he focuses on the branches that trouble him, refers to them in general as "Christianity," and ends up slurring together nearly all belief structures.

So where do *Fantasyland* and *Bunk* leave Christians who try to be thoughtful, fair, and firmly engaged with reality? How do we avoid being deceived? How do we read the Bible? How do we find our way to a truth that isn't just our truth, but one that is

rooted in facts? These are the questions that have nagged me since I finished the books, and I expect I'll spend a long time pursuing my answers.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "American delusions."