

Book Review

Eula Biss

On Immunity: An Inoculation

Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Since my first visit to Buffalo, New York in 1952, I have vacationed, studied and worked in the United States for periods of a few days to a full year on too many occasions to recount or recall. Still, I make no claim to understand American electoral politics better than any other foreigner. I do have some appreciation of its constitution, its two-party system and even its peculiar “Electoral College”; what I cannot quite grasp, however, is the tendency of its incumbent and aspirant office holders to begin campaigning for the next election before the dust has quite settled on the last one.

I also have some difficulty coming to grips with the American culture, especially when seemingly unconnected issues at least temporarily find their way to the centre of political controversy. For instance, I find it more than passing strange that the American scientific community has done singular work in almost every imaginable field from outer space to particle physics and that the far-famed American “know-how” has been in the forefront of innovation from large-scale industrial manufacturing to nanotechnology; nonetheless, the people of the United States and many of their congressional leaders remain astonishingly ignorant of even the most fundamental facts of science. The far-famed tendency of Americans to be, for example, Biblical literalists and to reject the fact of biological evolution is just one of the most glaring examples of what seems to me to be an extraordinary paradox—equalled only, perhaps, by the eccentric juxtaposition of advanced nuclear knowledge and the extensive use of social media that coexists in the thoughts and actions of Islamic fundamentalists who cling to religious convictions that are plainly analogous to the antiquated notions of those in their US “Bible-belt.”

“Older Americans are strong supporters of requiring childhood vaccinations — 79% say they hold that view, compared with 59% of those under 30.” (Anderson, February 2, 2015)
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These two phenomena—the apparent practice of continual electioneering and the pervasiveness of an anti-scientific ideology—has emerged already, almost two years before the forthcoming presidential elections of 2016. The current case in point concerns the public health measure of vaccination against communicable diseases—some of which had been fully eliminated in North America, but which are now staging a comeback thanks, in large measure, to the opposition that some people have to compulsory vaccination.

Having grown up at the height of the polio epidemic and having experienced such childhood diseases as chicken pox (varicella), red measles (rubeola) and German measles (rubella), I am baffled by the fact that American politicians feel compelled to take a stand on

whether or not publically mandated vaccinations should be compulsory. Most often, the case against vaccination is made on the basis of a uniquely American commitment to personal liberty and a preternatural distrust of anything having to do with “government.” Although quirky, this strain of American political thought at least has a pedigree of sorts and, when put in the language of contemporary “libertarianism,” it does represent a consistent and coherent, if not a cogent and convincing, political position.

More dumbfounding are the blatantly false claims made by political candidates who are too close to the “mainstream” for comfort and who have made in the past or may make in the future allegedly credible holders of high office. The most publicized was probably the (not-so-credible) presidential candidate Michele Bachmann who blurted out on Fox News (Weathers, 2015): “There’s a woman who came up crying to me tonight after the debate. She said her daughter was given that vaccine. She told me her daughter suffered mental retardation as a result.”

The more people know about it the better. Some people put faith and trust in their medical doctors, rather than put their faith and trust in God.”

- Donna Holman, Iowa state chair of Vaccine Liberation,
an American anti-vaccine group (Rosenfeld, February 2, 2015)

It is in this context that I chose to read Eula Biss’ book, *On Immunity*. Let me say from the outset that it is not the sort of book that I normally enjoy. It is also not the sort of book that is going to tell anyone with a passable understanding of science, medicine and public health much that they do not already know. It is, however, an important book and one that I think does a necessary job, especially for people who do not approach rigorous texts about disease, prevention and treatment. It is, that is to say, an emotionally moving and personally compelling book that is *also* valid on any scientific ground we might wish to name.

On Immunity is a “real-life” story. It’s attractive for the same reason that “human interest” stories in local newspapers capture the attention of readers who have tired of sports scores, stock market manipulations, self-serving celebrities and cynical photo-ops. It is actually about somebody who is real and not just a *persona* or a “brand.” On this measure, Eula Biss succeeds admirably. She is a mother and we follow her from the difficult birth of her son through some harrowing medical adventures, hardships and heartaches. But hers is a story with a purpose beyond dramatic and, often enough, comedic entertainment and beyond even making authentic emotional connections.

Before she is finished, she has managed to reveal aspects of the pharmaceutical industry that it would surely prefer not to be known. She has brought to bear the expertise of epidemiologists, some fascinating insights into the history of science and a pretty good introduction to the philosophy behind the “scientific method.” She does all of this and more, however, without a hint of lab-coated arrogance and without a single descent into the arcane language so often used to exclude the laity from the inner workings of what some people call the “modern religion.”

The use of language, however, comprises a large part of what Biss has to say. She is a student of metaphor and her narrative echoes Susan Sontag’s brilliant and emancipatory essay,

Illness as Metaphor (1978). Sontag wrote about the way in which society discourages, dismisses or even demonizes people who suffer from diseases—tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS being prominent among them (never mind the array of mental illnesses that have stigmatized people from time immemorial).

Biss does much the same thing; but, according to the perceptive *New York Times* reviewer Parul Sehgal, although both authors have a common goal, to “cool and console,” Sontag’s style was “imperious,” whereas Biss is “stealthy. She advances from all sides, like a chess player, drawing on science, myth, literature to herd us to the only logical end, to vaccinate” (Sehgal, 2014). Biss’ book is a passionate polemic designed to persuade people to do what is intuitively obvious and to do the responsible thing for your own children, for your society and for (I hope I’m not deemed hyperbolic for saying so) your species.

... sadly, there’s no mymeaslesiq.ca. If there were it would have just one question: Did you vaccinate your kids? If you said No, you’d go immediately to the result and it would say: You’re an idiot, do it now.” - Rick Salutin, 2015

The irony of the current outbreak of measles in America cannot be ignored. Disneyland was “ground zero” and the current outbreak has spread thanks mainly to young parents who decided that their children didn’t “need” to receive the MMR vaccine and for whom “the ‘happiest place on Earth’ has been transformed into something far more sinister” (Abrams, 2015, January 24).

Exposing the sinister is a task that is not limited to scientists, political activists and culture critics. There is an important place for inspired and inspiring creative writers with the capacity to weave many threads into a common cloth. Eula Biss skillfully crafts an argument that includes reference to mythological Greek figures Narcissus and Echo, Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Bram Stoker’s “*Dracula*,” and incorporates the work of contemporary epidemiologists and Umberto Eco’s studies of signs and symbols. Such a project could easily have descended into a confusing pastiche or a confused clutter of disjointed comments tangentially related to an important topic, but lacking coherence—perhaps in the quest to appear clever.

Eula Biss does not make such mistakes. Quite apart from the way in which she persuasively presses her argument in support of inoculation against contagious disease, *On Immunity* also does what many attempt, but few accomplish. She subtly removes the barrier between the private experience and public life. Her personal narrative blends with meticulous research, a poetic lilt and a guiding purpose which is to show people the way to act with conscience and consciousness, never suppressing doubt and fear but overcoming them by relentless questioning of the authorities, the sceptics and our own emotions.

Whether we choose to follow her to her almost metaphysical message about the continuity of life and the connectedness which we all share—like it or not, admit it or not—is perhaps a matter of personal taste or, better, preparedness. If, however, we are just looking for advice on the way in which medicine and health care work and how best to enjoy their greater benefits regardless of the dire nature of our circumstances, Eula Biss will give us practical guidance along with more wisdom that can normally be found between the covers on this or any

other topic. If, on the other hand, we allow her to take us on her own journey through her encounter with disease and her emergence from the despair that it can bring, she can help us, from her telling of her experience to add to the value of our lives.

About the Reviewer:

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