

Michael Stebbins: *Sex, Drugs & DNA*

Researcher in a Rage

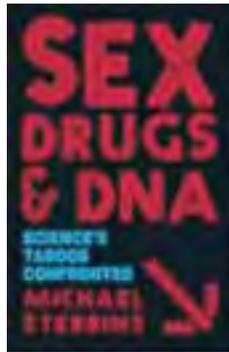
Many people, mainly in the USA, regard this book as the polemical rant of a “liberal scumbag”. This is not surprising. With a devilish pleasure, Michael Stebbins outspokenly presents his views on the most controversial topics in science.

To outsiders, America can seem plain weird. There are numerous curious phenomena that the folk back in “old” Europe don’t understand. Why do American fundamentalist Christians seem to display such a pathological fear of nakedness and sexuality? Why is it a crime for two-year-olds to frolic naked in the sandpit? Why shouldn’t adults kiss in public, and why does paying someone a pretty compliment constitute serious sexual harassment? And finally, why aren’t the modesty-preoccupied fundamentalists reassured by the fact that Adam and Eve themselves began life completely naked?

Or consider the gun phenomenon. Many, many US citizens display a certain weakness for deadly weapons. 200 million guns and pistols are kept in American homes, intended to make their owners’ lives safer. As Michael Moore’s films eloquently demonstrated, this protection isn’t always reliable: more than 11,000 people are shot every year in the USA – mostly by relatives or friends. In the European Union, which has more citizens than the US, this number is well under 1,000.

Funny and angry

Authors like Moore and Bill Bryson (both Americans) have written funny books on US-specific oddities. Michael Stebbins (also an American) has written a book about scientific oddities, entitled *Sex, Drugs & DNA*, which is partly funny, often angry and never politically correct. It sweeps the reader along for a polemical 350-page ride through the most controversial topics in modern science, including stem cell research, cloning, genetic engineering, contraception, bioterrorism, global warming and more.



Stebbins is the Director of Biology Policy for the Federation of American Scientists. Before that, he was a geneticist at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, senior editor at *Nature Genetics* and wrote for Reuters and numerous scientific journals. Throughout his career, Stebbins has accumulated a burning frustration about scientists’ daily scuffles with blockheaded politicians, ignorant citizens and fundamentalist religion. In many cases, US researchers’ daily struggle with bureaucracy and government has become almost Kafkaesque:

Avoid harmful terms like ‘transgender’ and ‘condom’

“[...] Program staff at the NIH warn grant applicants to avoid terms like ‘needle exchange’, ‘transgender’, ‘sex worker’ and ‘condom’ in their grant applications...”

For Stebbins, the origin of this common stupidity and conservative stagnancy is in no doubt. At the end of the book he notes:

“In case you’ve not worked it out yet, there is an underlying theme in this book: the public and the government do not understand science and medicine. That misunderstanding has led to widespread misconceptions about the way our bodies and environments work and a fear of progress.”

Political leaders: the biggest threat

Stebbins doesn’t mince his words. In an outspoken, revealing, and entertaining tone, he attacks what he regards as

pervasive American ignorance about science and public health. Asked in an interview for *SEED* magazine why he wrote this book, Stebbins answered that he “was pissed off”. He complains (in a short



Author Michael Stebbins (left) being “pissed off” by incompetent politicians (right). On his website www.sexdrugsanddna.com, Stebbins presents a lot of funny stuff around his book.

chapter on potential pandemics) that “our biggest health threat today is not any

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MICHAEL STEBBINS
IN *SEX, DRUGS & DNA*

particular virus or bacterium, but the absolutely incompetent actions of our leaders”.

He could be right. The US Government’s Assistant Secretary for Public Health Emergency Preparedness is (as Stebbins notes on page 239) – a lawyer.

Implications for Europe

Although *Sex, Drugs & DNA* deals with US issues, the Americans’ current problems have implications for Europe. Threats to scientific rigour include the growing influence of intelligent design theory, insufficient scientific education, collapsing healthcare systems and others. We Europeans shouldn’t be too smug! We moan about the USA bringing us plastic culture and fatty junk food but perhaps we should be more concerned about infection with the deeper, multiple problems that Stebbins describes in his book.

WEANÉE KIMBLEWOOD

Michael Stebbins: *Sex, Drugs & DNA. Science’s Taboos Confronted*. Maxmillan, 2006. 350 pages, €26.49.