

The return of Flat Earth, the grandfather of conspiracy theories

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Off the Edge is not a book about conspiracy theories, exactly. It does get there, but really it is a book about the history of the Flat Earth movement as the sort of original conspiracy theory. It is the second such book, in fact; Christine Garwood wrote *Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea* in 2007. But it is a whole different world now, conspiracy-theory-wise, so Kelly Weill thought an update was in order.

Weill covers extremism, disinformation, and the Internet for *The Daily Beast*, a website whose tagline is “a smart, speedy take on news from around the world.” (A previous editor-in-chief described it as a “high-end tabloid.”) Like the site, the book is well-researched and makes for quick and entertaining, if disturbing, reading.

The pull of conspiracy

Weill started *Off the Edge* when she noticed Flat Earthers repeatedly cropping up in the far and alt-right chat groups and websites she was covering. She said that she initially thought they were a joke because “how could anyone really

believe anything so ludicrous?" To find out, she entered their world; the book is in first-person, with Weill frequently recounting her misadventures meeting Flat Earthers and attending their conferences.

The underlying premise behind conspiracy theories is that "They" are hiding the truth for shady, nefarious purposes. But you—because you are so perspicacious, smart, special, or have access to privileged information—can see things as they really are. "They" can be the government, Russia, China, aliens, Democrats, Republicans, the CIA, the FBI, Big Ag, Big Pharma, Big Tech, and/or obviously, more often than not, the Jews. (Jewish Flat Earthers do not have it easy.) Some of these entities actually have hidden the truth at times, which makes it that much tougher to argue with conspiracy theorists.

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It is not hard to see the allure. It's especially appealing when people are already feeling alienated, like everything is spinning out of their control—as people tend to do in times of intense economic inequality and rapid technological innovation. They go looking for a scapegoat to blame for their troubles, and/or a small, close-knit community of like-minded people to welcome and accept them.

Contrary to what many Americans are taught in grade school, Christopher Columbus was not the one to demonstrate that the Earth is round. Pythagoras figured that out around 500 BCE. The Flat Earth theory that is currently having a popular resurgence started in the mid-19th century in the England of Dickens and Darwin. But it remained on the fringe until the vortex of social media, President Trump, and COVID brought it to the fore.

In the 1850s, England was industrializing at breakneck speed, and laborers feared the new machines would put them out of work. Newspapers were arising to disseminate interesting new ideas, like that fellow Rowbotham over in Cambridgeshire who

was claiming the Earth was flat. Even when the newspapers were covering it mockingly—which they usually were—all the media attention only lured more converts to the cause. As it still does.

Flat Earthers vary on the specific details of their theory, on things like if outer space and gravity exist and if the icy expanse they posit to surround the perimeter of the flat Earth is infinite or not. For a group of alleged skeptics, they are astonishingly gullible and hand-wavy when it comes to particulars. But the key aspect of any conspiracy theory is the conspiracy, not the theory.

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