
homicide book Book review: "The Culture of Fear" by Barry Glassner

Posted by Ellen Mercer - 2010/01/07 23:28

I bought this book a few years ago and got a few pages into it, then it got buried until 2 weeks ago when I read in on the plane. It is an easy, quick read (alas, too quick to cover me for my entire trip, to my dismay). I was intrigued by the concept behind this book, which is in principle as easy as shooting fish in a barrel: America as the home for a mountain of unfounded, overblown fears that blow through our culture like a Nor'easter but taking years to clear. Some of them, such as the oft-refuted child stranger-abduction scare, have never actually left us. For a wide variety of reasons, including the statistical illiteracy of the populace (ironically, one of the central reasons for the fear mentality that Glassner never mentions), we have the specter of hysterical over-reaction to the most minor threats while simultaneously ignoring far graver threats that are rarely if ever brought to the fore. Glassner does a good job in bringing forward the big scares of the mid-to-late 1990s (the latest data appear to be from ca. 1998, so rather outdated) and explaining how they evolved to the level of hysteria they elicited at their peaks, and, when applicable, how they declined out of the public eye. I really enjoyed the coverage, for example, of what Glassner calls metaphorical diseases such as Gulf War syndrome, flesh-eating bacteria, and his coverage of the child-abduction scares, including his descriptions of how profiteers and advocacy groups used these scares to cash in. The discussion of the successful personal intimidations of scientific investigators who exposed the fallacies behind the breast-implant scares was downright chilling, and I realized to my surprise that I had forgotten about these terrible events. Unfortunately, despite the brilliant idea that led sociologist Glassner to go after this too-easy-to-be-true polemic, in many ways he manages to blow it. Specifically, Glassner reveals himself to be a kneejerk liberal of the worst sort- someone who lets his arguments become riddled with hypocrisies small and large, and serious diminish the effect that his book should have enjoyed in influencing the national debate. This unthinking support for liberal causes comes through again and again, making it crystal clear that Glassner just couldn't resist the opportunity afforded by his revelations about national-hysteria episodes to insert a number of sometimes marginally-related diatribes against the transgressions of conservative politicians and personalities. For example, an early chapter was largely devoted to the horrors of reactionary anti-PC campaigns by the John Leos and Rush Limbaughs of the world, as though this particular campaign can truly be ranked among the likes of flesh-eating bacteria. Glassner goes on to mount spirited attacks on what he sees as selective highlighting of anti-Semitism by blacks while ignoring that of whites; his belief that female crime perps like Suzanne Smith are selectively demonized while male perps are not, etc. The most maddening for me was Glassner's tendencies to microscopically expose the statistical slights-of-hand by those who trumpet ills that he considers to be hysterical while a few chapters later, using the exact same techniques to buttress his liberal orthodoxy. For example, he carefully points out that certain categories of increases in crime by children, which he thinks overblown, are presented in terms of % increases rather than absolute numbers (which are small), yet later he uses the exact same strategy to try to prove that few men are killed or injured by their spouses, compared to the other way around. He cites the small fraction of male homicide victims that are killed by their spouses, compared to female homicide victims, completely ignoring the fact that the number of male homicide victims killed by non-spouses is an astronomically high number. There are many other such examples that contaminate Glassner's book throughout. So, on the plus side, the book is illuminating in many ways and says in one convenient place what many of us already knew about the various hysterias to which gullible Americans have been subject, and provides a substantial amount of supporting data that would take substantial amounts of time to dig up on one's own. On the downside, Glassner almost kills the goose that laid the golden egg by making no effort to conceal his huge secondary agenda- to wit, to promote a wide variety of liberal orthodoxies that end up shifting victimhood from patients with GWS to the usual cadre of liberal victims. The book is also quite out of date, but the principles behind it all still hold today. Rating: 3 out of 5. A buy, but barely.

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Posted by Mr. X - 2010/01/07 23:28

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Posted by Daran - 2010/01/07 23:28

The book sounds like a pathetic rip-off of Michael Moore's book. I'm not sure which of Moore's books you're referring to, but Moore cites Glassner as one of his sources.

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Posted by Laurie S. - 2010/01/07 23:28

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that the number of male homicide victims killed by non-spouses is an astronomically high number. Pardon me if I don't get it. If one is comparing the number of spousal murders, for whatever reason, the number of non-spousal murders would hardly seem relevant. I think (although I'm not sure) she's saying that while fewer men may be killed by their spouses, significant numbers of men are killed by female intimate partners who are not married to them. Laurie

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Posted by Baba Yaga - 2010/01/07 23:28

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Posted by David Lee Kollberg - 2010/01/07 23:28

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men and 20 women are killed in war, and in the same year 2000 women and 20,000 men are killed by spouses. Who has the bigger issue with spousal murder, men or women? Who has the lowest *fraction* of deaths caused by spouses? I beg your pardon. I thought you were referring to the horizontal ratios, rather than the vertical ratios (or vice versa, depending upon how you tabulate the data). This is an obvious fallacy. (Please tell me he didn't compare diagonal ratios!). What I meant was that if there was a *legitimate* reason for comparing the 2000 women with the 20,000 men, then the 20 women to 1M men ratio wouldn't be relevant.

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Posted by Ellen Mercer - 2010/01/07 23:28

On 16 Nov 2003 14:00:52 -0800 in talk.rape Ellen Mercer <EllenAMer...@aol.com wrote in message <e9d4487a.0311161400.3239...@posting.google.com... The most maddening for me was Glassner's tendencies to microscopically expose the statistical slights-of-hand by those who trumpet ills that he considers to be hysterical while a few chapters later, using the exact same techniques to buttress his liberal orthodoxy. For example, he carefully points out that certain categories of increases in crime by children, which he thinks overblown, are presented in terms of % increases rather than absolute numbers (which are small), yet later he uses the exact same strategy to try to prove that few men are killed or injured by their spouses, compared to the other way around. He cites the small fraction of male homicide victims that are killed by their spouses, compared to female homicide victims, completely ignoring the fact that the number of male homicide victims killed by non-spouses is an astronomically high number. Pardon me if I don't get it. If one is comparing the number of spousal murders, for whatever reason, the number of non-spousal murders would hardly seem relevant. I think (although I'm not sure) she's saying that while fewer men may be killed by their spouses, significant numbers of men are killed by female intimate partners who are not married to them. Wow, that's quite off from what I was trying to say. Let's take it from the start. Glassner notes that the fear of child criminals is overblown- and I agree. He points out that (I'm going to make up some numbers here, I left the book at work, but the point remains true) there might be (say) 25,000 gun murders in (say) 1997, with (say) 15 of those due to perps under 15 years old. Three years later, there are a sudden surge in childhood murderers and now there are 30 murders due to kids under 15. Again there are 25,000 murders considering all ages of perps. In other words, even with the increase from 15 to 30 child-perp murders, we still have only 30 out of 25,000 of all murders caused by kids. Meaning that kids are in fact much less likely to shoot you than is everyone else considered collectively. Glassner correctly points out how the media hystrionics given those kinds of data headlined that there was a 100% increase in murders by kids. There would be massive handwringing, and people would look over their shoulders every time kids are around, fearing that they were going to be the next victims of the epidemic of child murderers. All of that, Glassner appropriately notes, wildly misplaced and inappropriate. But back to the spousal homicide issue. We know that in the rougher neighborhoods in our big cities there are many homicides involving men killing men. Sometimes these murders are related to gang warfare, sometimes they're linked to drug deals, some occur in prisons, etc. This can be a very large number, 10k per year perhaps, at least in the US. These random or gang-related murders rarely tend to involve women, at least compared to the number involving male victims. Just the facts, no interpretation. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that in the year 2000, there were 20,000 guys killed in street violence and 200 guys killed by their spouses. Let's say that at the same time, there were 200 women killed by non-spouses, and also 200 women killed by spouses. (Please don't get hung up on the numbers, I'm making a statistical argument and not using real figures. We could say men and women are equally likely to be killed by spouses. I actually don't know the true ratio, which should have appeared, after all, in Glassner's book given that he directly addressed this topic. Instead, Glassner presented it thusly: only 1% of men were killed by their spouses (200/20,000+200) in my make-believe example), but compare that to *50%* !! of all murdered women (200/200+200). That is *exactly* what Glassner did. When it suited him to do so, after telling us how crucial it is to use actual numbers to put crime stats in perspective, he used the exact same kind of deceit to keep us from being able to make the relevant comparison. And yes, I believe that he did so deliberately- it is hard to argue that he could have done this by accident. Does this clarify what I'm saying? Hope so. _____ President Bush made a comment a week ago, and he said 'bring it on.' Well, they brought it on, and now my nephew is dead.

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Posted by Ellen Mercer - 2010/01/07 23:28

For some reason, I'm left a little dissatisfied by your review: interesting choice, however. You get what you pay for, Baba. I'm proud to have done as well in ~10 minutes and without having spent any time at all in editing. No, it is far from perfect and I especially regret using the liberal shorthand, which was immediately misintrepreted. My bad. _____ A lot of right wing-nuts believe Rush Limburger is a 'political analyst', when in reality he's nothing more than Jerry Springer in a fat suit. -Graham Payne, 8/03

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Posted by Ellen Mercer - 2010/01/07 23:28

On Sun, 16 Nov 2003 14:26:14 -0800 in talk.rape Mr. X <greenbabo...@cox.net> wrote in message <PRStb.3393\$Ue4.1556@fed1read01...> The book sounds like a pathetic rip-off of Michael Moore's book. I'm not sure which of Moore's books you're referring to, but Moore cites Glassner as one of his sources. Yesterday I went to one of the big chain bookstores to pick up a few new ones- and saw, to my surprise, that The Culture of Fear was prominently displayed face forward. One big difference with the copy I had stood out right away: right at the top, Michael Moore's references to Glassner's book in Bowling for Columbine was prominently displayed. So I think we've established who came first. _____ The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.

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homicide book Book review: "The Culture of Fear" by Barry Glassner

Posted by David Lee Kollberg - 2010/01/07 23:28

So I think we've established who came first. I bet you always come first. DLK <http://www.mybluenotes.tk>

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Posted by Daran - 2010/01/07 23:28

DLK

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DLK

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Posted by David Lee Kollberg - 2010/01/07 23:28

David you're trolling. Am *I* trolling now? Shouldn't you all discuss it first (muse over it, etc), before coming to this rather hasty decision? Am I not presenting myself as intelligent enough, perhaps? Should I start taking lessons from Ellen? DLK <http://www.mybluenotes.tk> I would never want to belong to a group that would accept someone like me as a member.

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Posted by David Lee Kollberg - 2010/01/07 23:28

For some reason, I'm left a little dissatisfied by your review: Trolls don't make reviews. They copy-paste. Plagiarism is a serious allegation. Do you have any evidence to support it? Plagiarism against fake people isn't such a serious allegation, I suppose? DLK <http://www.mybluenotes.tk> I would never want to belong to a group that would accept someone like me as a member.

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is a point about often made here, when discussion leads in that direction. However, with no information on the context in which Glassner made his point, it's impossible to tell whether he was guilty of statistical sleight-of-hand or not. Guess you'll just have to read the book. I can't help you with that without rewriting the book. Your comment that 'this is a point often made here' tends to suggest that I might indeed have picked a reasonable venue for my post. Indeed. If you remain here for long enough, eventually someone will come along and post some numbers 'proving' that black men 'target' white women for rape. They do no such thing, but exposing the statistical abuses can be instructive.

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DLK

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