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BOOKS

It's a plot! No, it's not: A debunking

BY MICHIO KAKUTANI
New York Times Service

The principle of Occam's razor suggests that the simplest hypothesis is usually the correct one.

In his lively new book, *Voodoo Histories*, the journalist David Aaronovitch uses Occam's razor to eviscerate the many conspiracy theories that have percolated through politics and popular culture over the last century, from those that assert that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were actually a U.S. government plot to those that claim that Diana, Princess of Wales, was murdered at the direction of the royal family or British intelligence.

In most cases, Aaronovitch notes, conspiracy theories would rather tie themselves into complicated knots and postulate all sorts of improbable secret connections than accept a simple, more obvious explanation.

Of those who claim that the Pentagon was not hit on 9/11 by a terrorist-plotted American Airlines Flight 77, Aaronovitch sarcastically observes: "That there is always the possibility, however extraordinarily remote, that DNA might have been planted to the exact specifications of the missing passengers, crew and employees, that wreckage might somehow have been placed at the scene within minutes of the crash, and that the real occupants of the missing Flight 77 might have been spirited away to some unknown place, there to be butchered or to live in the world's weirdest witness protection program.

Although this book owes a

Voodoo Histories The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History By David Aaronovitch

VOODOO HISTORIES: *The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*
By David Aaronovitch.
388 pages.
Riverhead Books, \$26.95.

huge debt to the classic study on this subject — Richard Hofstadter's *Unholy Alliance in American Politics* — Aaronovitch, who is a columnist for *The Times* of London, deconstructs a dizzying array of conspiracy theories in these pages with unparalyzing logic, common sense and at times exasperated wit.

Some of the theories he examines are infamous for their malignancy and horrific consequences, like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Fabricated documents used to justify anti-Semitism in Russia, Nazi Germany and more recently in places like Iran and Gaza.

Some are theories of political conspiracies intended to shape the United States' foreign policy, like charges that former President Frank-

lin D. Roosevelt allowed Pearl Harbor to happen — or worse, that he had procured just such a Japanese attack — to bring the United States into World War II.

CONNECTING DOTS

Other conspiracy theories are just plain loony efforts to connect the dots between assorted scandals and dead celebrities, like the allegations of a writer named Matthew Smith. In *The Kennedy Conspiracy to Destroy a Dynasty* (2005), Aaronovitch writes, "Smith constructs an overarching theory that connects the deaths of Marilyn, JFK, RFK and Mary Jo Kopechne, the girl who died in Edward Kennedy's car at Chappaquiddick in 1969. It was all — all of it — the work of elements within the CIA.

They saw JFK as being too left-wing and bumped Marilyn off to discredit the Kennedy, both of whom were having affairs with the star at her bugged bungalow in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, that didn't work, so they killed JFK the next year, and then, for some reason, waited another five years before getting rid of Bobby.

The next year they drove his car, complete with a young woman, off a bridge, thus destroying his chances of the presidency.

So why do conspiracy theories flourish? Though some of the conspiracy-mongers described here appear to be simple crackpots or people out to make a fast buck with one of those laughably titled books that aspire to clutter up the best-seller lists (*Hen-*

ry Kissinger: *Soviet Agent, Diana: The Killing of a Princess, Rule by Secrecy: The Hidden History That Connects the Trilateral Commission, the Freemasons, and the Great Pyramid*), Aaronovitch tries to provide the reader with a reasoned anatomy of the phenomenon in these pages.

He not only notes the appeal of narrative and causality in a frighteningly random world but also argues that overarching theories tend to be "formulated by the politically defeated and taken up by the socially defeated."

These losers "left behind by modernity," he writes, "can be identified in the beached remnants of vanished European empires; the doomed bureaucrats, the White Russians and the patriotic German petit bourgeois.

They are the U.S. firsters, who got the war they didn't want; the Midwest populists watching their small farms go out of business; the opponents of the New Deal; the McGovern liberals in the era of Richard Nixon; British socialists and pacifists in the decade of Margaret Thatcher; the irremovable U.S. right during the Clinton administration; the shattered U.S. left in the time of the second Bush.

"If it can be proved that there has been a conspiracy, which has transformed politics and society, then their defeat is not the product of their inherent weakness or unpopularity; let alone their mistakes; it is due to the almost demonic ruthlessness of their enemy."

It's not surprising, then, that conspiracy theories thrive in times of uncertainty and economic stress, and that the designated villains often conform to enemies in "American populist folklore." Of the era of McCarthyism and the venom aimed at supposed Communist sympathizers, Aaronovitch writes: "They were East Coasters or Hollywooders; they were educated; they liked art and fancy music; they were separate from — and unsympathetic to — the daily travails of the American little man."

ENEMIES OF OBAMA

These days a similar sort of antipathy is directed at President Barack Obama, the Democratic Party and the mainstream news media, by the Tea Party movement and by so-called bloggers, who question whether Obama was born in the United States.

In the case of the bloggers, Aaronovitch says, many of the individuals and organizations involved are the same ones who tried to torpedo Bill Clinton's presidency, denouncing Clinton as morally corrupt, even criminal. "It is as though," he writes, "they had been on vacation through the eight years of the George W. Bush presidency, only to rediscover, on arriving home, that there was yet another slippery liar in the White House."

Does the Internet, with its increased democratization of information, help spread conspiracy theories or help expose them? Aaronovitch says that it is obvious that "since endorsing 9/11 conspiracy theories and

those subscribing to them in passing far outnumbered sites devoted to debunking or refuting such theories."

He writes that the Internet has enabled the "release of a mass of undifferentiated information, some of it authoritative, some speculative, some absurd," and that "cyberspace communities of semi-anonymous and occasionally self-invented individuals have grown up, some of them permitting contact between people who in previous times might have thought each other's interests impossibly exotic and even mad."

Polls cited in this book suggest that an alarming number of people now subscribe to forms of 9/11 revisionism. "In August 2004 a poll conducted by the Zogby opinion research company found nearly two-thirds of New Yorkers under 30 agreeing with the proposition that the administration 'knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around Sept. 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act,'"

He adds that a Scripps Howard poll in July 2006 "had 36 percent of respondents suspecting government participation of some kind in the attacks, while 40 percent believed that explosives had been used to bring down the twin towers." The same poll, notes, "measured belief in a Kennedy conspiracy at 40 percent."

It's enough to make characters from *The X-Files* and Ian Brown nervous feel completely at home.

Love story blends tea and hearts

BY JANET MALIN
New York Times Service

On the first page of the first chapter of her first novel, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, Helen Simonson invites her readers to experience love at first sight. A starchy retired British army officer named Maj. Ernest Pettigrew has just learned of his brother Bertie's death. Distracted by grief, he happens to be wearing a red, flowery housecoat when he answers a ring at his front door. He opens the door and casts a tearful eye on the dignified, elegant, foreign-looking woman who will win his heart.

Pettigrew dimly knows this woman as Mrs. Ali. She has been blending tea specially for him at the local convenience store. Since these two are not strangers, they cannot be experiencing love at first sight, even if discreet sparks fly between them. It's the reader who is apt to be susceptible: Read this one page, and you may find you've fallen head over heels for Simonson's funny, barbed, delightfully winsome storytelling. Don't say you're not warned.

That *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* opens at a moment of heartbreak has no sobering effect whatsoever. Grief is what it took to make the rigidly correct major notice Mrs. Ali, or anything else around him.

This 68-year-old widower, a man who has taken some of his greatest satisfaction in reading and rereading his will and is proud to grow a type of clematis vine that his neighbors think is worth stealing, has long been immune to human companionship.

He has preferred a style of such extreme correctness and gimlet-eyed detachment that all it takes to give this book its comic perspective is to present his point of view.

Set in the kind of tiny, bigoted backwater where Mrs. Ali is understood to be either Indian or Pakistani even though she has never been further abroad than the Isle of Wight, *Major Pet-*

tigrew's *Last Stand* sounds British to the bone. It isn't. Simonson was born in East Sussex but has spent two decades in the United States, a stint that has only heightened her ability to make jokes about U.S. excesses as they are registered by Pettigrew.

The book has a couple of broadly vulgar U.S. characters, and they turn up in the major's village in what he regards as disturbingly rapid succession. For him "two Americans in as many weeks," Simonson writes, was something "approaching a nasty epidemic."

As the story hums along, it contrasts change for the better with change for the worse. In the first category there is the major's extremely correct yet warm friendship with Mrs. Ali, who is 10 years his junior, is also conveniently widowed and shares many of the major's tastes, including a love of reading.

He is duly impressed to find her carrying plastic-covered library books. He's even happier when he learns that she shares his love of *Killing in the Kitchen*, a category is Roger, the major's hilariously obnoxious son, a striver who lives in London and once suggested that the major get rid of books to make room for an enormous television, so that he "would have something to do in the evenings."

Roger also once gave his father the Christmas gift of a sweater so chic it had to be obtained from an Italian designer's waiting list.

"The Major, who had bought Roger a waxed-cotton rain hat from Liberty and a rather smart leather edition of Sir Edmund Hillary's account of Everest, thanked Roger gratefully for the wonderful fall thought," the book says, offering up a particularly good example of father-son culture clash.

Now Roger has started spending weekends in a country cottage in Little Puddletown with a brash U.S. girlfriend ("Good heavens, is

Major Pettigrew's Last Stand

MAJOR PETTIGREW'S LAST STAND
By Helen Simonson.
358 pages. Random House, \$25.

"a Christmas in Hades!" the major asks, upon seeing the black brush-shaped fate tree that constitutes their idea of clever holiday decor) and has pretentious tastes in everything, including cuisine. "Is your jacket smoldering," the major asks Roger, "or are you just cooking something made of tweed?"

There are many such screwball ingredients to keep *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* ever-bustling and tirelessly bright. Among them: The threadbare local aristocrat whose love of shooting and need for income cold-

ly keeps him from the rest of Mrs. Ali's family, which turns out to be as small-minded and unhelpful as the major's. There he was divided between the Pettigrew brothers and were supposed to have been reunited once a brother died; scheming over the major's ownership becomes a major plot element.

There is never a dull moment but never a discordant note either. Still, this book feels fresh despite its conventional blueprint. Its main characters are especially well-drawn, and Simonson makes them as admirable as they are entertaining. They are traditionally built, and that's not just McCall Smith's euphemism. It's about intelligence, heart, dignity and backbone. *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* has them all.

Of Russian literary icons and a million other things

BY DWIGHT GARNER
New York Times Service

Early in *Elif Batuman's* funny and melancholy first book, *The Possessed*, she describes her disillusionment, as a would-be novelist, with the culture of creative writing. "The problem with creative writing programs," she says, is their obsession with craft.

"I had did craft every try to say about the world, the human condition, or 'two Americans in as many weeks' Batuman asks. "All it had were its negative dictates: 'Show, don't tell.' 'Murder your darlings.' 'Omit needless words.'"

Batuman's search for something more from literature than "brisk verbs and vivid nouns" led her, swooning but alert, into the arms of the great Russian writers: Tolstoy, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Babel.

And it led her to write this odd and oddy profane little book, one that's ostensibly about her favorite Russians but is actually about a million other things: Grad school, literary theory, translation, geography, love affairs, the making of King Kong, working for the Let's Go travel guidebook series, songs by the Smiths, even how to choose a nice watermelon in Uzbekistan. Crucially and fundamentally, it is also an examination of this question: How do we bring our lives closer to our favorite books?

Batuman is a young writer whose family background is Turkish, not Russian. Born in New York City, she grew up in New Jersey before graduating from Harvard University in Massachusetts and earning a doctorate in comparative literature from Stanford University in California.

Her career, thus far, has been mixed. Her first piece of journalism, a profile of a former *Time* kickboxing champion, ran in *The New*

Yorker. The lengthy essays in *The Possessed* first appeared in that magazine.

In one of these essays, Batuman delivers a paper at a Tolstoy conference in Russia. In another, she picks up Babel's daughter for a conference at Stanford. In yet another, she travels to Uzbekistan to learn his language. Each of these essays unfolds both comically and poignantly, even criminal. Batuman was channeling Janet Malcolm by way of Woody Allen.

Among the charms of Batuman's prose is her fond, funny way of describing the people around her. One Uzbekistan to learn his language and mobile eyebrows give him "the air of a 19th-century philanthropist." A boyfriend steps off an airplane looking "as philosophical and good-humored as Snoopy."

Even the Tolstoy scholar who becomes incognito on a chartered bus trip and refuses to throw out his soiled pants becomes, in her hands, a comic figure out of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Batuman lets her opinions fly freely. She describes feeling "deeply, viscerally bored" by an Orhan Pamuk novel.

THE POSSESSED
ADVENTURES WITH RUSSIAN WRITERS BY ELIF BATUMAN
AND THE PEOPLE WHO READ THEM
By Elif Batuman.
306 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$25.

After reporting on Turkey for a *Let's Go* guidebook, she bemoans the "exasperating 20th-century discourse of 'shooting travel.'"

She explains: "The worst part of this discourse was its specious, twisting rhetoric, as if it were a form of sticking it to the man to reject the chain motel in favor of a cold-water pension complex filled with owtz." Perhaps Batuman's best quality as a writer, though — beyond her calm, lapidary prose — is the same: an infectious delight she feels in the presence of literary genius and beauty.

About Chekhov's story *Lady With Lapdog*, Batuman writes, "I especially remember the passage about how everyone has two lives — one open and visible, full of work, conversation, responsibilities, jokes, and the other 'running its course in secret' — and how easy it is for circumstances to line up so that everything you hold the most important, interesting, and meaningful is somehow in the second life, the secret one."

She describes two historical types of Uzbek writers: "The aristocrats, who loved beautiful women, nature and kings; and the democrats, who loved mud and head colds."

Batuman is almost helplessly epigrammatic ("Air travel is like death: Everything is taken from you.") and it's tempting to keep quoting from her book forever. There are moments in *The Possessed* where plot summary or historical precis ring on too long. But these data-dump moments are rare.

Elif Batuman is clearly one of those people whom Babel described, in one of his *Older Stories*, as "spectacles on his nose and autumn in his hair." Her autumn is taken from you, balanced by jumpy, satirical ones. It's a deep pleasure to read over her shoulder.