

# Book Review

**“the metanarrative of suspicion in Late Twentieth century america”  
by Sandra Baringer**

Reading a work as scholarly as Sandra Baringer’s “The Metanarrative of Suspicion in Late Twentieth Century America” is a little like watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark* -- you start out at 60 miles per hour and catch up on the backstory as you go. For a general reader like me, Prof. Baringer’s short but powerful book is packed full of ideas. She is writing for other scholars, so she does not particularly care if the general reader is up to speed or not, and that is part of what makes the reading so thrilling.

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Her subject is a fascinating one: the role that suspicion plays in all the stories we tell. By “metanarrative” she mostly means “master” narrative – that is, the dome of a larger or overarching story that we all buy into when tell regular stories. Prof. Baringer’s first three sentences are typical of her extremely idea-rich and (to me) extremely high-speed prose:

Acceptance of the beast within as a given of millennial America achieved as sort of official status in popular discourse by the turn of the century. These narratives are beyond asking who killed JFK. Rather, they operate on the common ground of an assumption that our government conceals profound and terrible secrets from us.

*Whoa! What?* By “the beast within,” she seems to mean a dark heart within our democracy, an inherent suspicion that ours is not a democracy at all but some kind of puppet show in which higher powers are pulling the strings (for nefarious purposes). This is the “common ground” or master narrative that appears and reappears in so much of our fiction. You will be surprised by how wide-spread stories of suspicion can be.

In the next paragraph, she goes on to mention “panic over the external manipulation of memory.” Once I read this phrase, I began to pile up all the books and film which feature a common motif among schizophrenics – that someone is in your head, inserting phony

memories and scamming you with false sentiments. Leonardo DiCaprio's characters in both *Shutter Island* and *Inception* kept seeing memories of a dead wife that were not to be trusted. The femme fatale in *Blade Runner* gazed at photos of a childhood that never existed. The protagonist of *Total Recall* unhappily discovers that his loving wife is actually a spy, pretending to know and love him while secretly planning to do him in (haven't we all felt this way?).

Agency panic is well-featured in mainstream stories that do not really fall into a paranoid genre – *Independence Day*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Conversation*, roughly a quarter Stephen King's works, *The Truman Show*, *Men in Black*, *The Rock*, *National Treasure* -- but which routinely feature elements of government conspiracy. Maybe *The Matrix* was so powerful partly because it delivered the most sweeping paranoid tableau of all.

She links agency-panic stories to goings-on in twentieth century American society, in this passage to a specific government agency, the FBI:

The practices of the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover and the predilections of the press for sensationalist reporting worked together to fuel a continuing moral panic in the United States over social disintegration and crime that tripled the American prison population between 1970 and 1985.

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## These films exhibit a state of panic in the popular imagination ...

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All of these narratives of suspicion are perhaps best understood – this is me talking now, not Prof. Baringer – as a subset of identity paranoia, the fear that we are not really who we think we are. What the heck is that – why do we have this fear? Did people have this fear in colonial America, or during the Middle Ages? I doubt it. I chalk it up as another spinoff of the mass confusion of modernity.

Suspicion, I think, is healthy. How do we actually know that our bank statements are tallied correctly, or that the mechanic actually fixed the serpentine belt? It is good to be cautious in this modern world where few of us really, truly know one another. Prof. Baringer guides us through the apparently ample literature on the topic. Among the intriguing titles that she mentions (and that I will be looking up):

- *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* by Timothy Melley
- *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* by Stephen Paul Miller
- *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* by Mark Lester

I am not learned enough to really understand how good this book is. When Prof. Baringer writes that “the metanarrative of suspicion is grounded in Frederic Jameson’s ranking of history over psychology,” I am lost. How can you rank history over psychology? What does that even mean? She spends a good deal of effort in this book breaking down three specific works – William Pierce’s *Day of the Rope*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*, and Leslie Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* -- and linking their elements and themes to parallel themes in the larger social order.

One such parallel she finds is that between our popular narratives and what historian Richard Hofstadter calls “the paranoid style” in American politics – prominent examples being the Salem witch trials, the 19<sup>th</sup> century wave of Indian tribe demonization, McCarthyism and the Communist scare of the cold war, and now terrorists. A second connection she makes is between the literature of suspicion and prisons. “It is no coincidence,” she writes, “that the birth of the prison was followed by the birth of the detective novel. The ‘private eye’ Sherlock Holmes novels accompanied a privatization of the ‘eye’ of the police, contributing ... to a ‘spy mania.’”

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The metanarrative of suspicion tells us that people with power will lie to us.

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When she discusses “the postmodern libidinal economy,” it suggests to me the network of contemporary love enterprises (both legal and illegal) ranging from *The Bachelorette* to Match.com to the bridal industry and beyond. I am dead wrong – it actually refers to a 1974 book by Jean-Francois Lyotard expressing disappointment in the Marxist response to French riots -- but just picking up the trail of crumbs in a work like this is pretty exciting.

In Chapter Six she discusses “The Foucauldian Complex.” I remember reading about Foucault in graduate school, but I had to brush up to arrive at the following simplification: Foucault represented a pessimistic view of the relationship between knowledge and power – specifically, the notion that “scientific reasoning” is neither scientific or necessarily reasonable, but a form of social control. I’m not sure I buy this, but when Prof. Baringer refers to a “Foucauldian complex,” I know a little about what she means.



**Philosopher Michel Foucault,**

The great value in Prof. Baringer’s book, to me, is for the general book reader and movie viewer to begin to see these patterns of paranoia in the stories that surround us. Sometimes appearing ridiculous, sometimes surprising and genuinely subversive, these deep streaks of American suspicion lend a bite to some of our best narratives. I treasure it as a gateway to an entire field of study in which the landscape can never truly be trusted.