

Secular Women of the Triangle Book Club Discussion Questions

***The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe* by Steven Novella**

Discussion Questions

1. What did you find surprising, interesting, or enlightening about the subject matter of *The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe*? What is something new you learned or an “aha” moment you experienced while reading?
2. In the introduction, Novella recalls feeling betrayed as a child when he discovered the Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played the hyperlogical vulcan Spock in *Star Trek*, was peddling nonsense on the TV show *In Search Of...* which credulously explored UFO sightings, ESP, Atlantis, the Loch Ness monster, and similar phenomena.
 - a. Have you ever had the experience of finding out that parents or authority figures in your life were lying to you or misleading you? Did you feel similarly betrayed? Did it help push you on a path toward skepticism?
3. If you were formerly religious, can you identify any logical fallacies you used to justify your beliefs at the time? How did you come to recognize and confront those fallacies, and what role did skepticism or critical thinking play in that journey?
4. Throughout *Skeptics' Guide to the Universe*, the authors discuss and debunk a lot of misinformation and conspiracy theories including the JFK assassination, AIDS denialism, ghost hunting, health crazes, ESP, and climate change denialism.
 - a. Do you have any “favorite” conspiracy theories that were missed that you would like to have seen discussed?
 - b. Are there any conspiracy theories or supernatural phenomena that you believe in (if only a little) or that you’ve participated in for entertainment such as getting a psychic reading?
5. In Chapter 31: Cold Reading, Novella attempts to do a cold reading of you, the reader. “I see a person. Someone close to you, an older male figure, and the letter J or perhaps S... I see a uniform of some kind, and there is a strong distinctive odor about him. And why am I seeing a red door?...The number 3 is significant. It could be a day, or month, or part of a year. This person wants to connect to you, to let you know they love you and that they are all right.”
 - a. Did anything from this cold reading resonate with you? If you had gotten the reading from someone purporting to be a real medium/psychic, would you have been convinced?
6. In Chapter 56: Being Skeptical, the section “The Long Game” (p. 436), the authors outline a thoughtful approach to helping others shift away from misinformation.
 - a. Have you ever helped someone change their mind about a conspiracy theory or false belief? If so, did you use any of the strategies discussed in this chapter—or discover techniques of your own?
7. In the epilogue, Novella states that his book “may have even pissed you off in some sections, and that’s good. That means we successfully challenged something you care about, perhaps more than you thought.”
 - a. Were there any sections that “pissed you off”? Which sections and why? Did this book change your mind on those topics at all?
8. Novella discusses the fallibility of memories, how everyone has their own biases, and how we shouldn’t blindly trust experts or news sources (including him) as reliable.
 - a. With this in mind, how do you decide what to accept as truth/fact? What sources and resources do you use to come to this conclusion?
 - b. In a world increasingly full of misinformation and disinformation, how do you

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decide which claims are worth digging into and exploring fully and which you can dismiss more easily?

9. Throughout the book, Novella discusses the skeptical journey and being aware of your own biases. He implores the reader to “recognize that you have scared cows, ideas that are part of your identity and will cause you emotional pain to change. Rather than try to deny your humanity, embrace it and work with it.”
 - a. What are your “sacred cows”? What would it take for you to change these beliefs?
 - b. Have you let go of some sacred cows you previously had? What evidence or event changed your mind? What was the process like?
10. Can you think of something you’ve changed your mind about recently? What led to that shift, and what was the experience like? Are there any parts of that process that remind you of ideas or strategies from *The Skeptics’ Guide to the Universe*?
11. Since reading this book, are there any logical fallacies or other non-skeptical thinking that you have noticed in the world around you? Either in your own thinking or in that of the people or media around you? How have you combatted these fallacies?
12. Novella cites Carl Sagan’s tv show *Cosmos* as the first step on his journey to being a skeptic. What people or media have been important on your skeptical journey?
13. *The Skeptics’ Guide to the Universe* was published in 2018. If it were published today, are there any more recent topics or events that you think would be covered?