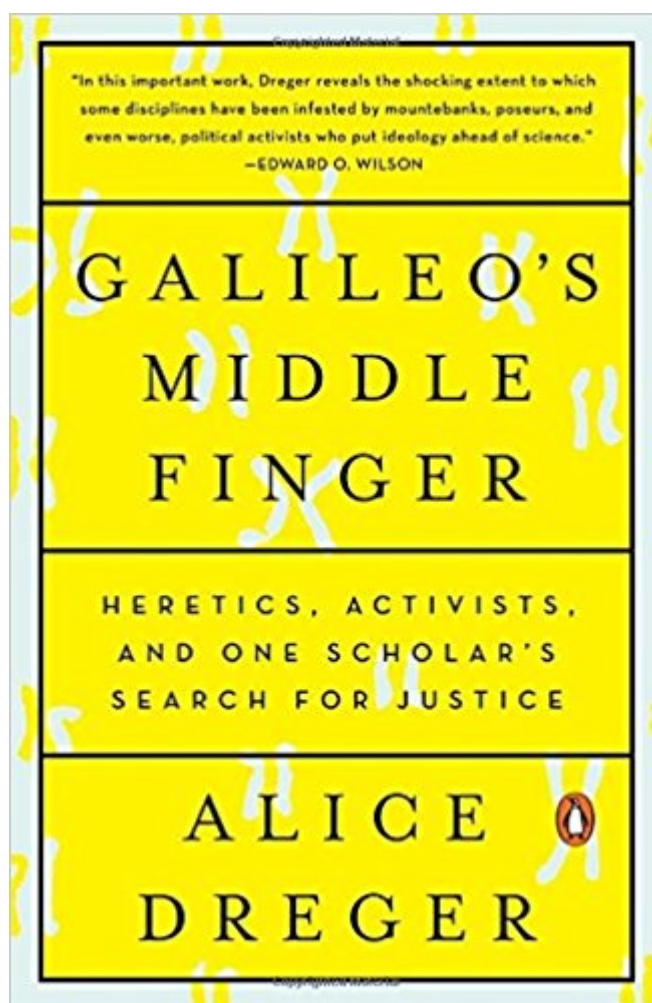


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Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, And One Scholar's Search For Justice



Synopsis

“Smart, delightful . . . a splendidly entertaining education in ethics, activism, and science.” • The New York Times Book Review (Editor’s Choice) An impassioned defense of intellectual freedom and a clarion call to intellectual responsibility, *Galileo’s Middle Finger* is one American’s eye-opening story of life in the trenches of scientific controversy. For two decades, historian Alice Dreger has led a life of extraordinary engagement, combining activist service to victims of unethical medical research with defense of scientists whose work has outraged identity politics activists. With spirit and wit, Dreger offers in *Galileo’s Middle Finger* an unforgettable vision of the importance of rigorous truth seeking in today’s America, where both the free press and free scholarly inquiry struggle under dire economic and political threats. This illuminating chronicle begins with Dreger’s own research into the treatment of people born intersex (once called hermaphrodites). Realization of the shocking surgical and ethical abuses conducted in the name of “normalizing” intersex children’s gender identities moved Dreger to become an internationally recognized patient rights activist. But even as the intersex rights movement succeeded, Dreger began to realize how some fellow progressive activists were employing lies and personal attacks to silence scientists whose data revealed uncomfortable truths about humans. In researching one such case, Dreger suddenly became the target of just these kinds of attacks. Troubled, she decided to try to understand more—to travel the country to ferret out the truth behind various controversies, to obtain a global view of the nature and costs of these battles. *Galileo’s Middle Finger* describes Dreger’s long and harrowing journeys between the two camps for which she felt equal empathy: social justice activists determined to win and researchers determined to put hard truths before comfort. Ultimately what emerges is a lesson about the intertwining of justice and of truth—and a lesson of the importance of responsible scholars and journalists to our fragile democracy. Praise for *Galileo’s Middle Finger*: “An engrossing volume that is sure to undo any lingering notions that academic debate is the province of empiricists who pledge allegiance to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth . . . Dreger’s clear and well-paced prose makes for a compelling . . . reading.” • The Chicago Tribune

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Customer Reviews

New York Times Book Review "[A] smart, delightful book. Galileo's Middle Finger is many things: a rant, a manifesto, a treasury of evocative new terms (sissyphobia, autogynephyllia, phall-o-meter) and an account of the author's transformation "from an activist going after establishment scientists into an aide-de-camp to scientists who found themselves the target of activists like me--and back again... I suspect most readers will find that [Dreger's] witnessing of these wild skirmishes provides a splendidly entertaining education in ethics, activism and science."

Chicago Tribune "Dreger tells the story in her new book on scientific controversies, Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice in Science, an engrossing volume that is sure to undo any lingering notions that academic debate is the province of empiricists who pledge allegiance to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth... Dreger's clear and well-paced prose makes for compelling and depressing reading. If you believe what you were taught about scientific method, about old ideas giving way under the sway of new evidence, you're an idealist and you probably know that already. The truth is sometimes closer to the much-repeated notion that a new idea can't truly take hold until the people who held the old idea die."

Salon.com "Galileo's Middle Finger offers a trench-level account of several hot scientific controversies from the past 30 years, told with the page-turning verve of an exposé." Forbes.com "Lying and deceit have been around for a long time--forever, probably--but what makes Dreger's book so compelling is where she dug them up: among health activists, academics and ethicists who we normally associate with honesty and integrity. Like her hero Galileo, Dreger believes that the real truth does exist and we are all for the worse when we don't

seek it out. It is an argument that deserves more of our

attention. **Nature:** “Dreger ends this powerful book by calling for her fellow academics to counter the astonishingly lazy attitude toward precision and accuracy in many branches of academia. In her view, chasing grants and churning out papers now take the place of quality and truth. It is a situation exacerbated by a media that can struggle when covering scientific controversies, and by strong pressures from activists with a stake in what the evidence might say. She argues, ‘If you must criticize scholars whose work challenges yours, do so on the evidence, not by poisoning the land on which we all live.’ There is a lot of poison in science these days. Dreger is right to demand better.” **Library**

Journal (starred review): “Accomplishing deft journalistic storytelling, [Dreger] pursues relentlessly her thesis that neither truth nor justice can exist without the other and that empirical research is essential to democratic society. She challenges readers to recognize that the loudest voice is not necessarily right, the predominant view is not always correct, and the importance of fact-checking and defending true scholarship. A crusader in the mold of muckrakers from a century ago, Dreger doesn’t try to hide her politics or her agenda. Instead she advocates for change intelligently and passionately.” **Kirkus (starred review):** “Let us be grateful that there are writers like Dreger who have the wits and the guts to fight for truth.” **Dan Savage, founder of It Gets Better Project; author of American Savage:** “If there ever were a book that showed how democracy requires smart activism and solid data—and how that kind of work can be defeated by moneyed interests, conservative agendas, inept governments, and duplicitous

activists—this is it. *Galileo’s Middle Finger* reads like a thriller. The cliché applies: I literally couldn’t put it down. Alice Dreger leaves you wondering what’s going to happen to America if our universities continue to turn into corporate brands afraid of daring research and unpopular ideas about who we are.” **Edward O. Wilson, University Research Professor, Emeritus, Harvard University:** “In this important work, Dreger reveals the shocking extent to which some disciplines have been infested by mountebanks, poseurs, and even worse, political activists who put ideology ahead of science.” **Elizabeth Loftus, Distinguished Professor, University of California, Irvine:** “*Galileo’s Middle Finger* is a brilliant exposé of people that want to kill scientific messengers who challenge cherished beliefs. Dreger’s stunning research into the conflicts between activists and scholars, and her revelations about the consequences for their lives (including hers), is deeply profound and downright captivating. I couldn’t put this book down!” **Steven Pinker,**

Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University; author of *The Blank Slate* and *How the Mind Works*: “In activism as in war, truth is the first casualty. Alice Dreger, herself a truthful activist, exposes some of shameful campaigns of defamation and harassment that have been directed against scientists whose ideas have offended the sensibilities of politicized interest groups. But this book is more than an exposé. Though Dreger is passionate about ideas and principle, she writes with a light and witty touch, and she is a gifted explainer and storyteller. Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *The World until Yesterday*: “Alice Dreger would win a prize for this year’s most gripping novel, except for one thing: her stories are true, and this isn’t a novel. Instead, it’s an exciting account of complicated good guys and bad guys, and the pursuit of justice. Human Nature “Galileo’s Middle Finger is not, ultimately, about scientists versus activists, but about the necessity of anyone interested in social justice primarily being concerned with truth. For a sustainable justice, Dreger argues, is impossible if we don’t know what’s true about the world. Liberal science, with its insistence on evidence and explicit rejection of arguments from personal authority, is the best system yet designed for distinguishing truth from falsehood. And for this reason, Dreger reminds us, Evidence is an ethical issue. From the Hardcover edition.

Alice Dreger is a professor of clinical medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine and the author of *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* and *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal*. Her work has been discussed in *the New York Times*, *the New Yorker*, and *Science* and on CNN, and her op-eds have appeared in *the New York Times*, *the Atlantic*, *the Washington Post*, and *the Wall Street Journal*. She has appeared as a guest expert on *Oprah*, *Savage Love*, *Good Morning America*, and NPR. Her TED talk, “Is Anatomy Destiny?”, has been viewed more than 850,000 times.

You just know that a book with a range of reviews from five stars to one has hit several nerves. This is a book about hitting nerves and I would strongly suggest that you set aside any review that pretends that it is “dull” or “off the point”. Its transparently trying to distract attention, in the manner of a playground bully who pretends that it doesn’t hurt when their tormentor turns round and finally hits them back. (You know who are and you are fooling no-one.) This is a book about the driving spirit in science--the Galilean one--and why this is intrinsically tied up with upsetting people. Why?

because the mix of evolved perceptions that could loosely be called "common sense" (e.g. respect for authority, tradition and intuition) are useless for doing science. Worse than that--they are systematically wrong. Telling people that these things are wrong gets up their noses. Doing this about sex and sexuality gets up their...well,...lets call its "noses" as this is a family show. And this book is not just about science--it's also about sex. Inconvenient sex. People who can't be conveniently sexually pigeon-holed, people who raise uncomfortable questions about the nature of human sexuality, people whose sexuality threatens others sense of personal identity, people who dare to apply scientific principles to the most intimate parts of human nature. Sex research, as the editor of the leading peer-reviewed journal in the field is fond of saying "is an outlaw discipline", and nowhere is that more clearly indicated than here. If Dreger hadn't been annoying people--she wouldn't have been doing her job. And the same goes for the people she documents. They need to be animated by the Galilean spirit--that spirit that allows people to take the threats, the lies and the pretended indifference, raise a middle finger and say "With regard to matters requiring thought: the less people know and understand about them, the more positively they attempt to argue concerning them." A great series of detective stories, told in breathless style. Should be required reading on all history and philosophy of science courses (and now is so on mine)

Both my husband and I liked it. We are impressed by Ms Dregers work and dedication. She writes with both a sense of humor and scientific insight. A very easy read, and now we are more informed on subjects we only had a vague bit of knowledge. Well worth the time, and it's a great way to gain knowledge on a subject we didn't know enough about. We recommend it to people who are interested in the human condition and mysteries.

This book is phenomenal! It should be required reading for anyone going into...well, for just about anyone...but particularly anyone interested in topics that social justice warriors tend to grasp onto. I've already experienced some of the attacks/doxing/no platforming Dreger documents in my own field of interest. It was encouraging (though frustrating) to read about how she and others have weathered the same.

Science is hard. It is of course hard because of the toil and frustration involved in eking out the occasional shred of truth from it. But it's even harder because it asks us to give up some of our most cherished moral and social beliefs in the face of its unrelenting facts. Nowhere is this conflict more apparent than in the social sciences where the wall of faith and ingrained morality

constantly runs up against the battering ram of scientific truths. And yet if we want to call ourselves an enlightened species we have to let ourselves be open to letting this wall be chipped and even broken down. The obduracy of this wall is what lies at the center of Alice Dreger's book. The title refers to Galileo who literally gave the church the middle finger in his search for the laws governing the heavens and the earth (as the photo below shows, the literal finger is astonishingly kept in well-preserved condition in a museum in Florence). The subtitle is "Heretics, Activists and the search for Justice in Science" and we may think that the age of scientific heretics who were burned at the stake passed with Galileo and Bruno. And yet as Dreger starkly reminds us through her own experience, heretics in science are still shunned and ostracized, thankfully not by being burnt at the stake but by being misrepresented, tarred and left out to wither. What is even more disturbing is that these heretics are often smeared by upholders of the same liberal establishment who claim to respect free inquiry and facts - and Dreger is as liberal as they come. Dreger made her career studying the history of cruel mutilations and "corrective" surgeries done on intersex people. She found out that forcing men and women to inhabit one sex when their sexual identity was not clear was a fundamental violation of their freedom to choose. She gathered scores of supporters and friends among the intersex community, authored both scholarly papers and popular articles and toured the country giving talks and seminars. In doing all this Dreger should have been regarded as almost the stereotype of an enlightened, liberal feminist intellectual: tough, caring, and willing to dedicate her entire career to the cause of disenfranchised minorities. And yet the truth is sadly more convoluted than we would expect. Dreger got into trouble when she championed a book by a researcher named Michael Bailey that put forth a controversial theory of why certain men choose to become females. This theory was not perfect but it was based on scores of interviews with intersex people. For some reason many members of the intersex community disagreed with it, which would have been fine and indicative of normal debate. But it's what happened next that was disturbing. Bailey was defamed in articles and newspapers, protestors picketed his house and university, demands were made to fire him and his family was threatened; it was an all too real incarnation of Twitter. The campaign against Bailey spilled over to Dreger and she became the target of similar attacks, which was astonishing given her longstanding support of minorities and the underprivileged. What was happening here was that preconceived notions of fairness and morality were causing people to behave in a distinctly immoral and distasteful manner. Dreger documents other cases of the assault on freedom of speech, and it's these cases that make the book such a valuable document. Among the most prominent ones are the attacks on biologist E O Wilson by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin and the attacks on

the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon by essentially the entire American Anthropological Association. Wilson was trying to put forth a new theory called sociobiology which said that social impulses and human behavior are governed by the same biological causes which govern the behavior of "lower" animals. Chagnon had spent his entire career among a South American tribe named the Yanomamo. His thesis - supported by meticulous observations and passionate intellectual inquiry - was that contrary to the idea of the "noble savage" which proclaims a peaceful, wholesome existence for native tribes which Europeans have corrupted, the Yanomamo practice some savage and violent rituals and can often be fierce warriors who kidnap women and keep them as slaves. Both Wilson and Chagnon's work went against the morality of Gould, Lewontin and other anthropologists who refused to acknowledge that human behavior could have a biologically ordained and sometimes violent foundation. Their opponents carried on a carefully orchestrated smear campaign against them in talks and articles and turned many academics against them simply because they dared to state controversial facts and offer their own explanations. Wilson had a pitcher of water dumped on his head by activists while Chagnon had a journalist named Patrick Tierney write a sensationalist account in which he claimed that Chagnon had used the Yanomamo as guinea pigs for experiments with infectious pathogens. These were lies and were resoundingly proven as such, but not before the American Anthropological Association decided to set up a task force to condemn Chagnon and try him in absentia. Not surprisingly, these attacks on Wilson and Chagnon came to nothing because of the essential rot of untruth at their core, but they exposed the shameful tactics that even supposedly liberal and intellectually open academics could indulge in simply because they disagreed with ideas and facts. Dreger had a chance to talk to both Wilson and Chagnon, and she found it hard to believe that especially Wilson - a famously mild-mannered and dignified genteel Southern intellectual - could have been painted as almost a quasi-Nazi by other purported intellectuals. Dreger's story itself has a sad coda and makes her point well: In 2015 she resigned from her position at Northwestern University because she published a controversial fact-based report of consensual sexual activity between nurses and patients. It did not matter that the study was true and raised some interesting questions about the social dynamic in hospitals; for the university faculty what mattered was that it was distasteful to their moral sensibilities. The book ends with a call for intellectual freedom, and it's hard to overestimate how important this call is in the era of trial-by-Twitter, trigger warnings and campus protests that stifle freedom of speech under the guise of supporting fairness. Whether it's studies of psychological gender differences or racial differences, we continue to be besieged by those who call themselves the upholders of truth, but only as long as the truth pleases them. Dreger warns us that if we continue to ignore inconvenient

facts simply because they run up against our ingrained sense of morality and notions of justice, not only will we fail to fathom the truth but we will also fail to be just. This is a trap that liberals especially should watch out for, since it is precisely their love of science and reason which can foster in them a false sense of objectivity and moral superiority and put on blinders. It is especially when we think that we cannot go wrong that we run the most risk of being wrong, and when liberals fall into this trap they ironically turn into staunch conservatives who don't want to know the truth. In Dreger's words, truth and justice go hand in hand. Ignoring truth dooms justice, and ignoring justice dooms the truth. It's a message we should all take to heart.

Favorite non fiction book! Seriously this book is so great!

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